Homosexuality: The Norris Manuscript's Pastoral Dimensions

BARRY MORGAN

Norris rejects the idea that homosexual relationships are sinful or unnatural. He first refutes an interpretation of Scripture that condemns such relationships as "morally impermissible." He then explains why he thinks Aquinas's view that homosexuality is against natural law is untenable. Norris is not alone in these opinions.

They are not, however, universally shared. Many individual Christians and churches insist homosexual relationships are against God's law as revealed in Scripture and contrary to nature. The 1998 Lambeth Conference rejected homosexuality's compatibility with Scripture in Resolution 1:10. This is no academic argument about the interpretation of texts. It has torn the fabric of the Anglican Communion in a way no other topic has. As well as doctrinal, juridical, and biblical questions, it poses the acute pastoral problem of how the Anglican Church lives with different opinions, both globally and locally. Differences of opinion arise on many ethical issues but this one has become much more divisive than, for example, divorce and remarriage. As Martyn Percy wrote, "in Anglican disputes about doctrine, order or faith . . . the means . . . matter more than the ends—politeness, integrity, restraint, diplomacy, patience, a willingness to listen and above all, not to be ill-mannered—these are the things that enable the Anglican Communion to cohere."[1] These qualities, however, have been in short supply.

For the global as well as local church, the pastoral issue is how to hold together faithfulness to Scripture and tradition with the wider New Testament call to love our neighbor. Within a local congregation, homosexual people and their partners form an uncomfortable mismatch with what some in the church regard as a lifestyle condemned

[1] Quoted in Martyn Percy, "On Being Stretched," in *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Richard Kirker (Winchester, UK and New York: O Books, 2005), 219.

in Scripture. How does the church still offer them pastoral care? For some, the answer is a call to abstinence. For others, the starting point is care for individuals. The danger with the first approach is that homosexual people feel uncomfortable and unwelcome, and sometimes leave for a more accepting church. Their doing so might solve the tension within that particular congregation, but further heightens the tension between so-called conservatives and liberals in the church. It also raises Norris's question: If the moral aim of the gospel is to encourage love of neighbor, how can that happen when people are made to feel unwanted, unloved, and sinful? This is no theoretical issue, but concerns how Christians relate to and treat one another. In short, how is the gospel good news for homosexuals?

This leads to the issue of discrimination of individuals on the grounds of sexual orientation. Lambeth 1:10 recognized homosexual orientation and the need for the pastoral care of homosexuals. It went further and committed the church "to listen to the experience of homosexual persons" and to give them the assurance that "they are loved by God and . . . are full members of the Body of Christ." Lambeth 1:10 also condemned irrational fear of homosexuals. Gays and lesbians, however, claim they are still treated as second-class citizens, tolerated at best and vilified at worst. The Church of England House of Bishops document *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*[2] acknowledges greater understanding is needed since the church's attitude has often been one of prejudice, ignorance, and even oppression. The Royal College of Psychiatrists, in a recent report, stressed the need to support gay people and expressed concern that continued attention to this one section of the population unwittingly promotes mental illness among gay people.[3] Very often homosexuality is talked about as if real people were not involved; and gays and lesbians complain of being talked about rather than talked to in church.

Lambeth 1:10 seems to accept homosexual orientation—what Norris calls "a natural attribute for some people," that is, a natural predisposition toward people of the same sex—of which the Bible and pre-modern cultures were unaware. The pastoral question then is what accepting homosexual orientation means. For some, it means pastoral care extends to orientation and not practice, and therefore to

[2] London: Church House Publishing, 2003.

[3] Royal College of Psychiatrists, *Submission to the Church of England's Listening Exercise on Human Sexuality*, 2007.

individuals and not couples. Gays and lesbians, therefore, either feel guilty and hide their relationships, causing huge strains within them, or are too fearful of reprisal to enter faithful, stable partnerships and have secret, furtive, and transient ones instead that risk their physical and mental well-being. Homosexuals are often torn between the strictures of the church, on the one hand, and their own inner convictions and experience as contemporary people, on the other. This tension raises in an acute form how God's will can be discovered in their daily lives. Is God revealed merely through Scripture or through new insights and discoveries in our world? It also poses a huge pastoral problem for the church: When homosexual people and civil partnerships are acceptable in the wider society, the church seems both out of step and unable to minister to people at the point of deepest need.

Some churches go further and see homosexual orientation as a condition to be cured by aversion therapy, something the Royal College of Psychiatrists vehemently opposes. Others say homosexuals must be celibate. But can celibacy be imposed? Shouldn't it be freely undertaken as a personal vocation by heterosexuals and homosexuals alike? As Rowan Williams puts it, "anyone who knows the complexities of the true celibate vocation, would be the last to have any sympathy with the extraordinary idea that sexual orientation is an automatic pointer to a celibate life; almost as if celibacy before God is less costly, even less risky to the homosexual than the heterosexual."[4]

All this makes some people think homosexual orientation and practice are indistinguishable. Some see homosexual relationships as less than the ideal of marriage, a deviation from the norm. For others, homosexual relationships are part of the diversity of the created order and a means of God's grace. Professor John Riches, in a submission to the Scottish Episcopal Church's Study Guide on Homosexuality, puts it like this:

> We are faced, with a situation, where Christian experience of gay lives and ministries forces us to think very hard whether there are serious theological arguments against what we experience as gracious in our midst. If they manifest the fruit of the Spirit (against which, says St Paul, there is no law [Galatians] 5:23) on what basis do we condemn them and again what of the continuing work of

[4] Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace," lecture given to the Gay and Lesbian Christian Movement, London, 1989, 10.

God's grace in transforming and fitting God's church to the developing needs of God's work?[5]

The Church in Wales's Bench of Bishops issued a statement in 2005 acknowledging the variety of viewpoints held by Christians with integrity. These ranged from the view that the only proper context for sexual activity is marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, so that homosexual practice of any kind is rejected, to the view that, in the light of a developing understanding of the nature of humanity and sexuality, the time had arrived for the church to affirm committed homosexual relationships.

Norris argues one cannot regard homosexuality as sinful simply on biblical grounds, because the Bible has no concept of a loving relationship between two people of the same sex. Moreover, homosexual like heterosexual sex has a relational not just procreational function. (Most Anglican liturgies, indeed, now emphasize the relational as opposed to procreational aspect of marriage.) For Norris as well, a homosexual orientation, just like its heterosexual counterpart, should be given sexual expression to the extent it deepens relationships and brings joy and pleasure. The question then arises as to the pastoral response of the church to gay and lesbian people who wish for a stable, faithful, lifelong union. If Norris's theology and premises are accepted, what does that mean in practical terms?

The Anglican churches of the British Isles are in communion with the Nordic and Baltic churches since the Porvoo Agreement. One of these churches—the Church of Sweden—reflects the theological premises advanced by Norris and others in its liturgical provision for same-sex relationships. It believes that an order for the blessing of registered partnerships is compatible with its faith and doctrine.

The Lutheran Church of Sweden has, in fact, been discussing the issue for decades. Its Theological Committee, in a document entitled "Homosexuals in the Church" (2002), said this: "the experience of love is as important and identity creating for homosexuals as it is for heterosexuals and by this we mean love in all its various meanings. If, in theory or practice, we want to prevent or discourage homosexuals from entering into enriching loving relationships that also have a sexual expression, then this is to deny homosexuals an important area of

[5] *Human Sexuality, A Study Guide* (Edinburgh: Scottish Episcopal Church, 2001).

human existence."[6] The document saw a need for the church to protect and support pastorally faithful, stable relationships in order to encourage human values such as love and fidelity; and also recognized the need for a social, public side to such relationships, not only a private one. When the state of Sweden passed the Registered Partnership Act in 1995, the bishops issued pastoral guidelines allowing prayers for those who had registered such a partnership to be said privately. In 1999 the guidelines, however, were revised; relatives were invited to participate. Then in 2005 the General Synod approved the creation of an official church rite for the blessing of registered partnerships after producing a document on the theology of such partnerships entitled *Life Together*.[7] In December 2006 an official rite was produced consisting of prayers and a blessing, similar to the Order for the Blessing of a Civil Marriage in church with the possibility of repeating the vows made to one's partner at the civil registration. It saw the blessing "as a means of living in, and by, God's grace through Christ"[8]—in other words, of receiving God's grace and support. At the same time, the Church of Sweden decided that a registered partnership in itself was not grounds for refusing ordination. In other words, the Church of Sweden saw these relationships as offering the chance to express love, patience, kindness, and generosity in order to enable the partners to live creative and fulfilled lives. Rowan Williams, writing long before this was possible in the Church of Sweden, said: "To be formed in our humanity by the loving delight of another is an experience whose contours we can identify most clearly and hopefully if we have also learned or are learning about being the object of the causeless loving delight of God, being the object of God's love for God through incorporation into the community of God's spirit and the taking on of the identity of God's child."[9] It raises too, as Richard Harries does, the gay Christian's relationship with God: "If I am a gay or lesbian Christian person, that is the nature with which I come before

[6] *Homosexuals in the Church*, a document for discussion from the Theological Committee of the Church of Sweden, 2002.

[7] *Life Together, Deliberations and Proposals of the Church of Sweden Central Board*, 2005, document presented by the Church Governing Board to the General Synod.

[8] *Life Together*.

[9] Williams, "The Body's Grace," 9.

God who in Christ cherishes me."[10] Rowan Williams echoes this viewpoint: "We have shied away from really thinking through the erotic images that the Bible and tradition so freely use about the human relationship with God. . . . It is a lot harder now to ignore questions about bodies and genders, when we examine aspects of our language for ourselves in relationship to God."[11] By publicly blessing such unions, the Swedish Church recognizes homosexual partnerships and the fact that "those entering a partnership see their lives and their union in the light of communion with God."[12] This important event in their life is linked by the service of blessing to their relationship with God.

What then of the relationship between marriage and registered partnerships? The Church of England has sought to differentiate between the two on the grounds that civil partnership is not predicated on sexual relationship. The Church of Sweden distinguishes between marriages and civil partnerships as two different legally regulated forms of living together; given that distinction, civil partnerships are not conducted in church. But the Church of Sweden does recognize similarities. Both emphasize mutual fellowship as their chief purpose, both have vows, both have blessings. The pastoral question then arises: Since the church blesses such partnerships, could it not also conduct them in future? The Church of Sweden, indeed, in *Life Together* sees the love between two homosexual people as a reflection of God's love in the same way as the love between a man and a woman and therefore both can be interpreted sacramentally. One must remember that Anglican churches once blessed the marriages of divorced people. It now remarries divorced people in church.

The pastoral question also arises of whether the same rules apply to laity and clergy as far as sexual practice is concerned. Some Anglican churches permit lay people monogamous faithful relationships with people of the same sex (without actually blessing them), while denying that to the clergy, on the grounds that clergy exercise a public ministry and are representative figures who ought to uphold the traditional teaching of the church. Sean Gill writes: "I have a sense of re-

---

[10] Richard Harries, "Same-Sex Relationships," *Theology Wales 2004* (Church in Wales Publications): 11–19.

[11] Rowan Williams in *Sexuality and Spirituality*, ed. Heather Snidle and Paul Ballard (Cardiff Academic Press, 2000), i.

[12] *Life Together*.

gret that I was unable even to test whether I had a vocation to the priesthood unless I was willing to deny the importance and value of the deepest relationship in my life."[13] The Church of Sweden makes no distinction between clergy and laity and is therefore prepared to bless all civil partnerships, but Anglican churches, which do make such a distinction, must be prepared to face a big pastoral issue: How can clergy, denied sexual wholeness for themselves, effectively minister to gay parishioners for whom sexual relationships are a possibility? In Britain both clergy and laity are allowed by law to enter civil partnerships; while admittedly not predicated on sexual relationship, those partnerships nevertheless raise for the clergy the meaning of faithful friendships.

The place of change in both pastoral and theological decisions is at issue here. Churches are of course often averse to change on the grounds of Scripture and tradition. But in a world full of change, the church risks being seen as irrelevant and outmoded, and fails to meet the pastoral needs of the day when it simply avoids the challenges of new situations.

It must also be said, however, that homosexuality only recently ceased to be a crime in Great Britain; before 1968 even consenting adults could be punished. And it was only in 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association removed its diagnosis of homosexuality as a mental illness. Even in so-called liberal Western societies, tolerance is a fairly recent phenomenon. In the end, what changes attitudes is not so much doctrine or the view of Scripture but people's experiences. The most hard-line people on divorce and remarriage begin to change their minds after they experience it in their own families. Some priests against the ordination of women begin a conversion process when they experience women's ministry. The same may prove true on this issue. In the end the question is whether theology alone informs pastoral reaction, or whether pastoral insight and the need for understanding have the capacity to change our theology and give us fresh, new perspectives.

[13] Sean Gill, "We Have Been Here Before," in *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism*, 296.

William Stacy Johnson is the Arthur M. Adams Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary. Among his publications are *A Time to Embrace: Same Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006) and *Crisis and Call to Leadership in the Abrahamic Traditions*, edited with Peter Ochs (forthcoming). Professor Johnson is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church.

Mark D. Jordan is Asa Griggs Candler Professor of Religion at Emory University, Atlanta. His many books include *Blessing Same-Sex Unions* (University of Chicago Press, 2005) and *Rewritten Theology: Aquinas after His Readers* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006). He joins the celebration of the mysteries at St. Bartholomew's Church in Atlanta.

Dale B. Martin is Woolsey Professor of Religious Studies at Yale University. His books include *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (Yale University Press, 1990); *The Corinthian Body* (Yale University Press, 1995); *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Harvard University Press, 2004); *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Westminster John Knox, 2006); and *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (forthcoming). He is a member of Christ Church (Episcopal), New Haven.

Victoria Matthews is the Bishop-elect of the Diocese of Christchurch, New Zealand. She previously served as Suffragan of the Diocese of Toronto and as Diocesan of Edmonton in the Anglican Church of Canada. At the time of writing she was Bishop in Residence at Wycliffe College, Toronto.

Barry Morgan has taught theology and church history at universities in Wales, as well as being responsible for ordination training and continuing ministerial education in the Bangor Diocese. After holding a variety of posts, among them Bishop of Bangor, he is now the Bishop of Llandaff and the Archbishop of Wales. Among his publications are *Ministry in the Church in Wales: The Shape of Things to Come?* (2002) and *Strangely Orthodox: R. S. Thomas and his Poetry of Faith* (Gomer Press, 2006). He is the Pro-Chancellor of the University of Wales.

Christopher Morse is the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Professor of Theology and Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, New York. His books include *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Trinity Press International, 1994), and *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News* (in progress). He is an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church.

W. Mark Richardson is Professor of Theology at The General Theological Seminary in New York. He is co-editor of and contributor to an award-winning textbook, *Religion and Science: History, Method and Dialogue* (Routledge, 1996), and editor of several other publications. Richardson is Chair of the Editorial Committee of the *Anglican Theological Review*, and Senior Theological Fellow of Trinity Institute, a program of Trinity Church Wall Street in New York.

Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His books include *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources outside the Modern West* (Eerdmans, 2005), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Blackwell Publishers, 2002), and *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Blackwell Publishers, 1999). He attends St. Mary's House, the Episcopal Chaplaincy at UNCG.

William Schweiker is Edward L. Ryerson Distinguished Service Professor of Theological Ethics at the University of Chicago. He is also the Director of the Martin Marty Center at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. His most recent books are *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds* (Blackwell, 2004) and *Religion and the Human Future: An Essay on Theological Humanism* (Blackwell, 2008) co-authored by David E. Klemm. He is an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church.

Kathryn Tanner is the Dorothy Grant Maclear Professor of Theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Among her books and articles are *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (Fortress, 2001) and *Economy of Grace* (Fortress, 2005). She is a member of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church.