Editorial: Let's Talk About Sex

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Issues surrounding human sexuality continue to be at the forefront of the Church's life, across both the Church of England and the Communion as a whole. The energy surrounding disagreements and discussions has been heightened following the recent publication of the Pilling Report (compiled by the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality).¹ As the Report makes clear, however, the challenges that the Church faces relating to this issue are numerous and go far beyond the ethics surrounding same sex attraction.

For example, at the root of disagreements lies the foundational issue of Biblical interpretation: How are we to read Scripture, individually and as communities of readers? What place does Scripture play in informing contemporary ethics in contexts far outside those experienced by the biblical writers? To what extent does the reader, as someone who comes to the text with a whole raft of preconceptions and presuppositions, create meaning in the very act of reading (authorial intention, to whatever extent that is available to the reader, is not all that matters)? And what role does the Holy Spirit play in continuing to breathe life into acts of faithful reading of an inspired text?

Second, there are pastoral issues relating to how the Church should engage positively with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Regardless of the ethics surrounding what can be considered right expressions of human sexuality (for all people, not just those who might identify as LGBT), there is the need to 'warmly welcome and affirm the presence and ministry within the Church of gay and lesbian people, both lay and ordained.'² Rather than being known for its inclusivity and acceptance, however, the Church of England is often accused of homophobia. In part this accusation has come unjustly as a result of the chasm between popular views on sexuality and the Church's adherence to the traditional understanding of marriage (a lifelong union between one man and one woman), together with its refusal to offer formal ceremonies to same sex couples. Yet, as the Pilling Report also makes clear, there is a need for the Church to 'repent for the homophobic attitudes it has sometimes failed to rebuke and should stand firmly against it whenever and wherever it is to be found.'³ The extent to which this accusation of homophobia is appropriate is itself a divisive issue, but still the challenge for the Church to be a community of grace and to advocate for social justice for all people remains.

¹ Church of England (2013). *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality*. London: Church House Publishing.

² Church of England (2013). *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality*. London: Church House Publishing, p. 149.

³ However, it also states that, 'No one should be accused of homophobia solely for articulating traditional Christian teaching on same sex relationships.' Church of England (2013). *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality*. London: Church House Publishing, pp. 149-150.

Third, this gracious welcome to all people includes a welcome into leadership within the Church, yet in the Church of England ordination is only a possibility for those who agree to abide by the teaching set out in the 1991 House of Bishops report, *Issues in Human Sexuality* (which essentially sets out the traditional understanding of marriage as the only right context for sexual activity). However, it is clear that not all Church of England clergy hold to this commitment. It is also the case that, 'The Church's present rules impose different disciplines on clergy and laity in relation to sexually active same sex relationships', a stance which itself has been questioned. Clearly there are here important issues pertaining to Church order, and the theological and practical understanding of ministry and leadership within the Church – all of which are key to its mission and life.

In all, the issues are numerous; the way forward uncertain. An argument simply to hold to the Church's traditions offers no solution, since tradition itself, rightly understood is something dynamic. Alasdair MacIntyre describes Tradition as,

an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject... those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.⁴

This definition is a reminder that the Church was not once reformed but needs to go on being reformed (*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*) as it seeks faithfully to understand and enact Scripture, and is so through both internal disagreement and by engaging with wider society. While it seems clear that the Church is currently experiencing a heightened period of ongoing 'reformation', it can be argued that such times of disagreement and discomfort are necessary for the Church to continue to seek faithfully to fulfil the purpose for which God has called it out. This is how we refine our understanding of who we are and what it means to live faithfully before God, as recipients of his Word, and in the context in which we find ourselves today.

All of which leads to a fourth issue pertaining to the wider debate on human sexuality, and the one at the heart of this issue of ANVIL. During this period of deliberation and disagreement there is the question of how we are to strive to maintain (or to rediscover) a quality of relationship and communion with those from whom we differ, a relationship which seeks the unity of John 17:21, a unity that is to communicate to the world the truth of the good news of Jesus Christ. To this end, the Pilling Report states among its key recommendations that,

The subject of sexuality, with its history of deeply entrenched views, would best be addressed by facilitated conversations or a similar process to which the Church of

⁴ MacIntyre, A. (1988). *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, p. 12.

England needs to commit itself at national and diocesan level. This should continue to involve profound reflection on the interpretation and application of Scripture.⁵

How we listen to and talk to one another (and do so while consciously reflecting on Scripture) in the face of such entrenched disagreements is of the utmost importance. To this end, ANVIL offers four papers which seek either to offer opinion for reflection and discussion, or assessment of potentially useful models for such facilitated conversations.

First, come two deeply personal (yet still theological) accounts from different sides of the sexuality debate, but both of which identify as coming from within the Anglican and Evangelical tradition. Sean Doherty's article, 'A Theological and Pastoral Reflection On My Journey Away From A Homosexual Identity' argues that faithfulness to the classic Christian teaching about sex and marriage is liberating rather than homophobic. In support of this view the paper includes an assessment of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's critique of anthropocentric construals of 'love'. Then follows Benny Hazelhurst's article, 'Cracking the Binary Code', which critiques and rejects what the author believes to be the either-or nature of much biblical interpretation and ethical belief. Instead there is offered an interpretation of key biblical texts through the lenses of *circumstances*, *needs* and *motivation*. It is argued that, when these factors are taken into account there is no longer a substantive biblical case against the acceptance of faithful, loving same-sex partnerships.

Then follows two articles on the mechanics of 'facilitated conversations'. Evan D. Garner's 'Learning to Take Scripture Seriously' is a reflection on an international conference on sexuality and scripture that was held in Limuru, Kenya, during the summer of 2013. This paper identifies the Contextual Bible Study method as a promising hermeneutical tool for finding agreement in the interpretation of scripture among individuals from diverse backgrounds and from competing theological positions. Finally, Andrew Goddard and Francis Bridger's 'Learning From Indaba: Some Lessons For Post-Pilling Conversations' assesses the suitability of *indaba* as a means of facilitating productive conversations across the Communion. The authors, who were members of an independent ecumenical team that observed at first hand the work of Continuing Indaba over a period of three years, offer a critical assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, and argue that although *indaba* undoubtedly offers valuable insights and practices, it must learn from a wider body of knowledge and resolution approaches, and must be complemented by methodologies that give a sufficient place to theology.

The issue concludes with the ever popular book reviews.

⁵ Church of England (2013). *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality*. London: Church House Publishing, p. 149.