

The Care of Souls

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Pastoral theology is about the care of souls, and no matter where one stands on the current debate in the church about homosexuality, it is widely agreed that one's sexuality is intimately related to one's spiritual health. There are vast differences of opinion about the ways homosexuality and spirituality affect each other, and in particular the extent to which the intimate physical expression of sexuality by homosexual persons is healthy or harmful to them. Pastorally the question is whether the relationship between two persons of the same gender helps their growth toward wholeness in Christ, or obstructs, through sin and unhealthy sexual engagement, wholeness and spiritual health.

As the reader is aware there are very many approaches to the question of what cultivates virtue or wholeness in a person or persons. In the present age we are faced with extraordinary change and a resulting sense of unease and loss of control. "The sky is falling, the sky is falling" is a frequent cry of distress combined with an appeal to return to basic biblical teaching. But which biblical teaching? Do we follow the letter or the spirit of the Bible? In his approach to biblical prohibitions about homosexuality, Richard Norris considers the most obvious of the prohibitions, and claims there are no more than five such statements. There is much more in Scripture about how a Christian is called to deal with differences of understanding, and even more about how Christians should respond to those who are the target of public disdain and hatred. The pastoral theologian who is diligent will consider the effect on the larger community of prohibitions that contribute to misery, possible violence, and isolation. For example, the pastoral considerations that led to the change in Anglican teaching about divorce and remarriage in some parts of the Anglican Communion were based in part on the negative impact to family life when a violent marriage, or a marriage torn apart by addictions, was expected to continue no matter the personal cost. And subsequently when the innocent victim of a violent and dysfunctional marriage wished to marry a second time, and provide stability for the most vulnerable members

of the family unit, permitting remarriage was believed to be in keeping with the spirit rather than the strict letter of Jesus' teaching. This change in emphasis in the interpretation of Scripture, which continues in some places to be controversial, is what is under consideration in the recent debate about homosexuality and same-gender unions.

What best cultivates wholeness in the Christian? Can adherence to the letter of the law be detrimental when a person experiences the law as disabling and suffocating? We know that there are Christians of a homosexual orientation who are deeply committed disciples of Jesus Christ and yet who question whether the church's admonition and expectation of celibacy for them is truly a wholesome discipline. An increasing number of heterosexual Christians are also challenging the status quo for the same reasons. Mindful of the importance of the experience of gay and lesbian persons, the Anglican Communion has called for a listening process to give a respectful hearing to the life stories of homosexuals across the Communion. It must be remembered that large numbers of Anglicans have never knowingly met gay or lesbian persons, let alone heard their personal pains or their experiences of discrimination and sometimes violent prejudice. This was not true when the other two great Anglican debates were raging in recent years—the remarriage of divorced persons and the ordination of women. The divorced population and women have not been hidden from the public eye in the same way as the “closeted” homosexual in Christian communities has been.

Richard Norris's unfinished manuscript, “Some Notes on the Current Debate Regarding Homosexuality and the Place of Homosexuals in the Church,” issues a challenge to the widespread assumption that the moral question raised here is to be answered by Scripture. Indeed, he states there are many who believe the question is answered firmly and finally by the statement “The Bible condemns homosexuality.” Such an approach assumes one can get from the Bible black and white clarity as well as clarity “universally and for all eternity” (B.2). This approach looks for clear commandments and prohibitions in the Bible to chart the course of moral living.

“Against this assumption, however, there stands the undoubted—but invariably unacknowledged—fact that people have regularly differed—honestly, knowledgeably, and frequently—about scriptural counsels or injunctions . . . ; and when disagreement occurs, the matter is unlikely to be settled by appeal to the *prima facie* meaning of the bare text” (B.2.1). Such an approach overlooks the fact that many texts

of Scripture allow for more than one sort of reading and interpretation. This approach is consequently reluctant to search for or offer an interpretation beyond the obvious or apparent meaning of the words.

Norris notes, “There are five statements in the writings of the Old and New Testaments that have commonly been taken to express a condemnation, on one ground or another, of sexual relations of some sort between persons of the same sex” (B.3), these Scriptures are either misused or misunderstood when used as the basis of universal teachings in the name of the Christian faith. It must be said that, while Norris makes this point eloquently, it is not original.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 offer excellent examples in Norris’s view of prohibitions lifted out of context and turned into universal teaching: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (18:22). While frequently cited as a prohibition against all homosexuality, this passage can be read to suggest it is wrong for heterosexuals to engage in homosexual acts. Otherwise why does the prohibition have the words “as with a woman”? The correct reading is not certain and more than one interpretation is possible.

Norris goes on to say that commonly held understandings of scriptural teaching often mix Bible verses with cultural traditions.

Much of the opposition to homosexuality grows, after all, out of what Augustine and Pelagius alike called *consuetudo*—social custom—or out of a perception that it is simply *tabu*, or out of fear and contempt directed toward a phenomenon that comes across as shockingly unfamiliar and “abnormal.” What is more, much of the popular defense of it amounts to little more than militant assertion of a vague “right” to be whatever one is. To the extent that this is the case, however, moral considerations and arguments, of whatever sort, are bound to seem irrelevant, laborious, and superfluous. (A.1.4)

Here Norris is reminiscent of the excellent paper delivered by Rowan Williams, then Bishop of Monmouth, at the 1998 Lambeth Conference: “Making Moral Decisions.” Christians make moral decisions just like anyone else, using the material at hand to the best of their ability. The material at hand is to a large extent cultural and environmental, and often it is difficult to separate out cultural leanings from revealed truths: “Decisions are made after some struggle and reflection, after some serious effort to discover what it means to be in Christ; they are made by people who are happy to make themselves

accountable, in prayer and discussion and spiritual direction. Yet their decisions may be regarded by others as impossible to receive as a gift that speaks of Christ.”¹

Norris provides examples of Christian teaching that have wide acceptance and draw on more than biblical content. One example is the “just war” principle expounded by Augustine, which states believers should distinguish between just and unjust warfare, and not participate in unjust wars. But there is a very thin scriptural basis for this teaching. “The principle St. Augustine evolved seemed to contravene values stated or implied by many scriptural passages. In any case, he could not, in formulating the ‘just war’ principle, appeal to scriptural texts that explicitly indicated the circumstances under which war-making is permissible or impermissible” (B.4.2.1).

Norris gives other examples, such as slavery, genetic research, and even global warming, for which there is no clear teaching in Scripture. “One cannot treat the Scriptures as offering specific regulations for all the normal occasions of human life in all times and places. Scriptural injunctions respond to questions or issues that arise, or have arisen, or once arose, in consequence of the circumstances of the people who formulated them” (B.4.8). One should, instead, lift up principles from Scripture that assist “a process of moral inquiry” (B.4.3). One must consider the commandment to love God and neighbor and be conscious of the calling to live in Christ, understanding that all scriptural teaching is meant to lead to the new creation and the kingdom.

If Scripture is not exclusively the law textbook it is often thought to be, and is instead “a library through which the Spirit has spoken” (B.4.8), to what and to whom are we to turn to try to understand homosexual behavior better?

Norris turns to philosophy and in particular Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and Kant, and asks, “In the mind of Christian tradition, then, what has been taken to be wrong about homosexuality?” (C.1). His consideration of some of the great Christian philosophers leads to the question, “What makes a form of behavior ‘good’ or ‘bad’?” (G). Norris reminds us that “a moral question is a question about the rightness or wrongness of an action or a class of actions” (G.1).

¹ www.lambethconference.org/1998/news/lco35.cfm.

Norris prefers the Aristotelian tradition distinguishing nature₁ from nature₂ as that which grows toward perfection and excellence.

These traditions have long been wedded as a result of the work of Christian thinkers of the patristic and medieval periods; and whether or not one sees this marriage as a Good Thing, it must be conceded both that there are significant differences between them and that there is no logical inconsistency in identifying “virtue,” materially if not formally, with conformity to the divine will; for the human “nature” that determines people’s perception of what constitutes an “excellent” human being is, after all, a creation of God, and to that extent must be taken as expressive of God’s intentions for humanity. (G.2)

An ethic based on divine law, even if much of the teaching is negative, e.g., “Do not bear false witness” considers behavior. But Aristotle concerned himself with virtue and growth in excellence. Furthermore, the ethic of virtue focuses upon the individual while laws are designed to keep the community safe and harmonious. Both the law ethic and the virtue ethic accept and uphold a degree of freedom, rational freedom, and responsibility.

After discussing some complications and interpretive problems with appealing to law, Norris concludes by turning to Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative. What if each person ruled his/her life by doing only what could be considered a universal law? Just “as the Stoics asserted that virtue alone is truly good, so Kant asserts that the ‘will,’ the decision-making faculty, is all that matters morally. Hence for him the word ‘good’ is used primarily to qualify decisions, policies, and actions—and not, as in the case of Aristotle, to qualify a state of affairs that is sought as *the* (or *a*) Good Thing” (G.3.1.1.1). For Kant, every and all human beings are ends in themselves and not means to an end. The ideal society would be made up of such persons to form, “as Kant put it, a ‘kingdom of ends’” (G.3.6.2).

What then does this tell us about homosexual relations and behavior? It tells us that any decision is going to involve environmental and cultural factors. It is not a tidy process. While there are many ways to assess the moral question, Scripture alone is unable to give definitive answers. Moving out into broader philosophical considerations, one must ask whether homosexual relations can add to the worth of human relations. Can they be virtuous? Can they bear the fruit of

holiness? Do they permit responsible moral agents to act freely in response to one another, calling upon one another to live lives of moral obligation, and to grow closer to and more like the Creator, whose image they each bear?

The insistence of Immanuel Kant that the end and not the means is vitally important could contribute to an evaluation of sexually intimate same-gender relationships as moral because the understood end of every such relationship is a deepened shared humanity that better reflects the Divine Creator in whose image we are all made. This possible approach, however, runs into difficulty when Genesis 1:27–28 is considered. “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” It is the importance of gender complementarity for the purpose and end of humanity that weakens the argument for the blessing of same-gender unions. It surprised me that Norris’s work fails to consider these two verses of Scripture, given their historical importance for theological anthropology.

Let us now step back and ask how this discussion of moral decision-making assists or detracts from the care of souls. We do well to remember the times in the history of Christianity when Christians have claimed revelation as the source of their right to kill, maim, and torture brothers and sisters in Christ—to say nothing of non-Christians. Homosexuals have been the focus of violent prejudice and so have gypsies, Protestants, Anabaptists, and many others. Fear of “the other” is often allowed to express itself by violence. Such activity is not conducive to the care of souls and the building up of the Body of Christ.

Gardeners know when planning a garden that it is imperative to consider the type, constitution, and needs of the soil. Not all plants thrive in every type of soil. Sometimes the response is as easy as adding fertilizer, or addressing the way the soil holds water. Those whose calling is the care and cure of souls know that the community is the soil in which persons or souls thrive or wither. The pastoral caregiver therefore needs to be attentive to the religious community, be it parish or diocese, which we might designate as soil; and the larger more diverse community in which the parish or diocese resides, which

we might designate as the ground. If the parish and diocese are lacking in the necessary nutrients, souls will not be able to grow in ways that give glory to God. And if the larger community is particularly arid or fertile, eventually the more localized religious community will be affected.² The debate presently splitting the Anglican Communion is whether it is possible for the Anglican garden to thrive with or without the presence and full acceptance of same-gendered couples in our churches. There is very little common soil shared by the two extremes. One side sees the presence of same-gendered couples as essential to the well-being of the garden, while the other believes the garden will not thrive or even survive should the blessing of same-gendered unions be approved. It is worth noting that one perspective sees the health of the garden as dependent on the presence of thriving same-gendered couples. The other view believes that the garden cannot flourish if there is the introduction and acceptance of same-gendered blessed unions. Pastorally the question is clearly whether the whole can ever be healthy at the expense of a few, or whether it is an imperative of the gospel to make room for and actively welcome those who are not welcome elsewhere.

In conclusion, I find Richard Norris's work intriguing and thorough. It is a great pity he did not live to complete it. While helpful, it fails in the end, however, to offer much that is new. Rowan Williams in his 1998 Lambeth address spoke about every moral decision being a gift offered to the Christian community. Not all gifts have the community's appreciation and gratitude. As helpful as Norris's essay is, his argument, that Scripture alone cannot answer moral questions definitively, is likely to fall on deaf ears. Scripture is immensely important for Anglicans and it is imperative that we find common ground on the authority of Scripture. In many ways Norris's work strengthens the arguments of those already convinced both that homosexual relations are an acceptable way of expressing sexuality for people with a homosexual orientation, and that there is nothing damaging spiritually or eternally for those so engaged. But Norris offers nothing compelling to change the minds of those who come to his essay unconvinced. For

² Margaret Kornfeld uses the image of the pastor as gardener in *Cultivating Wholeness* (London: Continuum, 2004), although she does not specifically address issues of homosexuality.

those with a conservative evangelical mindset, Norris's views are unlikely to be considered seriously until a door is opened by Scripture to them. Until made scripturally, the case, even when articulated with the elegance of Norris's work, will be neither heard nor heeded. This essay is a fine piece of work, but it does not change the battle lines that have been drawn in the name of the authority of Scripture within the Anglican Communion.