

The Concept of Flourishing in Relation to Marriage as a Good, and the Question of Gay

Partnerships

When Archbishop Vincent Nicholls celebrated a thanksgiving Mass for marriage (June 2011), he stressed the need for society to support marriage, as opposed to cohabiting relationships. He argued that marriage is not merely a private arrangement or something created by the Church. Rather it is something that “expresses our deepest longings and expectations for ourselves, for our children and for society”. It is of our nature, he said, and good for human nature, rooted in mutual “acceptance of the other for who they are.”¹

So, the Archbishop seems to indicate, for those of us who are not called to celibacy and who are in a sexual relationship, marriage best provides the discipline and structure for a long-term, loving commitment to another. It helps us to grow into full personhood in *imago Dei*, in terms of our deepest desires for ourselves, our families and the wider community. Or to put it another way, for a loving couple in pursuit of human becoming towards divine fulfillment, marriage is the best environment in which to flourish.

When we talk about love and marriage, the notion of flourishing is a useful one, because it naturally embraces the somatic in the creaturely movement toward fulfillment. We aspire to reach for the divine that is within ourselves, and mediated within and between people, the fruit of which is the flourishing of all creatures. Luce Irigaray and Grace Jantzen, among others, have shown how traditional thinking has tended towards a lack of focus on the actual needs of the embodied, material world.² It has overlooked materiality and difference of sex and sexual difference, despite the fact that the reciprocal relationship between our understanding of human selfhood and of the divine is intimately related to our gendered, embodied subjectivities. Intrinsically corporeal matters are at the heart of the current debate on gay partnerships: so I suggest that it may be helpful in this discussion to make a contribution from the perspective of the concept of flourishing.

Jantzen’s concern for the material and embodied leads her to call for a shift in the philosophy of religion away from intellectual justification and towards material justice in the present world. She argues for “a positive attitude to bodies and materiality, to the flourishing of this world in all its physical richness.” (2004:37) The notion of flourishing entails attention to the body in all its diversity – its variety of being, needs and desires. It considers the body’s relationship to the divine, including individual and

1 <http://rcdow.org.uk/att/files/archbishop/homilies/11+06+2011+thanksgiving+mass+for+the+sacrament+of+marriage.pdf>

2 See, for instance, Irigaray, Luce. 1993 *Sexes And Genealogies* trans. Gill, Gillian C. Chichester: Columbia University Press; Jantzen, Grace. 1998c *Becoming Divine: Towards A Feminist Philosophy Of Religion* Manchester: Manchester University Press

communal experience of the numinous: the immanence, the now-ness of God embodied in the universe, in humanity and in the community of faith. The psalmist praises the creator God who bids all living things flourish according to seasons governed by the sun and moon (Ps.104); and the writer of Ecclesiastes teaches that all people are subject to the framework of times and seasons that God has determined for the world's wellbeing (Ecc 3). The woman in childbirth becomes a vivid metaphor for the whole cosmos, the body of God, groaning in labour as it anticipates the advent of the new heaven and new earth (Rom 8:22; Rev 21:1).

Flourishing in pursuit of human becoming might be compared with the picture of the true vine that Jesus gives (John 15: 1-8). It involves human interconnectedness, compassion and nurturing love so as to promote growth, well-being, and justice for all people. It points to the notion of an inclusive, liberating, welcoming community, resisting the historic tendency towards mind/body, spirit/matter dualism. It is concerned with themes of identity and relationship, characteristically starting from the perspective of our embodied nature, the form of our bodily-being-in-the-world as members of the Body of Christ. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King call this a “new religious politics of the flesh, a language of the body that is only just being formulated.”³ Our current discussion about gay partnerships, then, takes place within a culture that has been increasingly recognizing the embodied process of all thought, and paying attention to the way human bodies, and somatic processes, influence and mould our desire, knowledge and decision-making. A commitment to the promotion of human flourishing requires extensive changes in material as well as discursive conditions, in actions as well as in thought.

Bodies, Sex and Justice

The Genesis story reveals that God imparts selfhood – that strand of identity individual to each human being that distinguishes us from every other created being. Each individual whom God creates is of a particular race, age, social background, gender and sexual orientation – all interacting characteristics of every person. Each bears a particular, embodied personal reality, or selfhood. Each body is unique and precious, a “sacred text within the larger text of creation”, as Philip Newell puts it.⁴ Collectively, each body becomes part of the Body of Christ, which is necessarily involved in the embodied reality of existence, because this is where God is. And this is where the Church has to be committed to the redemptive process of justice-making, overturning unjust discrimination, engaging critically and prophetically with the world in order to bring in God's kingdom.

³ Carrette, Jeremy and King, Richard. 1998 'Giving Birth To Theory: Critical Perspectives On Religion And The Body' in *Scottish Journal Of Religious Studies* 119 (1) Spring: pp123-143

⁴ Newell, J. Philip 2000 *Echoes Of The Soul: The Sacredness Of The Human Body*. Norwich: Canterbury Press p xv

Although the Body of Christ features strongly within our pantheon of religious images, the Church has always found actual bodies rather a challenge - as witnessed by some extreme ascetic practices of the desert mothers and fathers, and still evident in debates over such issues as priestly celibacy and the ordination of women. If bodies are challenging, then bodies and sex together are downright problematic, especially in relation to the divine. Jim Cotter reflects on the difficulties we feel in reconciling sex with spirituality and holiness. These qualities, he maintains, are best expressed from the 'within' of the human, the sexual, the earthed:

“To pretend otherwise is to court the danger of the supposedly asexual, ‘spiritual’, ecclesiastical functionary who cannot relax with ordinary humanity and whose voice shows that he has lost touch with his own deeper self and with God.”⁵

Concerns around the body and its physiological function form the substrate of the Church's discomfort about gay relationships and their sexual expression (as witnessed, for instance, by the prospect of candidates for the episcopate being quizzed about their private sexual habits). Sex and sexual orientation continue to be among those issues where the Church's attitude has been found by many to be antithetical to their flourishing – they have not found hospitality, liberation or justice. The Church's notion of community has actually not been experienced as truly communal for all persons, and many have experienced forms of discrimination that they have found unjust and contrary to their expectations of the all-embracing Body of Christ.

The earliest church struggled to understand the obligations of inclusivity required by its Master – then, in terms of the Pauline discussion about Jews and Gentiles (Gal 6). Our history has been punctuated by intolerance between Christians of different confessions that we now find shocking. In our lifetimes we have seen similar struggles in terms of ecumenism, race, physical and mental ability and gender. Now, non-heterosexual people are similarly challenging the Church and calling it to account on its track record. Sexual orientation is such a defining aspect of one's identity that being sequestered to the outskirts of 'proper' sexuality leaves many such individuals feeling that there is no room for them in Christianity. Is sexual orientation another item on this caravan of challenges that requires of us a fresh insight into how the community of the Church can enable all to flourish?

Becoming Divine

Sarah Coakley argues that (to invert Freud's argument that God talk is about sex), we should think of sex as about God, about the deep desire we feel for God, the final and ultimate union that we seek.⁶

5 Cotter, J. 1992 *Yes...Minster? Patterns of Christian Service* Sheffield: Cairns Publications p105

6 Coakley, Sarah. 2003 'The Trinity, Prayer And Sexuality' in Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton, eds, *Feminism & Theology* Oxford: Oxford University Press: pp258-267

(Soskice + Lipton 2003) If sexual love is to be godly as well as bodily, it must involve fundamental respect for the other, equality of exchange, and attention to the other's needs. Coakley borrows from Luce Irigaray the description of such a relationship as a “shared transcendence of two selves toward the other”. It is “the spiritual task most adapted to our age...to search for the way of a human flourishing still to come.”⁷

Irigaray was writing from a feminist perspective, arguing that the divine horizon is inseparable from one's gendered subjectivity: “Having a God and becoming one's gender go hand in hand.”⁸ She is interested in the potential for the flourishing of women, and arguing from the perspective of woman as the voiceless, the unheard, the discounted, the ‘blindspot’ in the dominant (heterosexual) male imaginary - an argument applicable not least to the clerical hierarchy of the Church. But I wonder if her argument might be extrapolated beyond differences of sex and gender to sexual orientation. She suggests that to become divine men and women, our great obligation entails a refusal to ‘allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfillment.’⁹ It seems to me that such an obligation might be applicable for sexual relationships other than heterosexual ones. Homosexual individuals and couples, like women the world over, have been largely marginalized, overlooked, discriminated against or regarded as inferior. So in this sense they might usefully be compared with women, whom Irigaray describes as being deprived of the language and desire that would allow them to gain their identity within the divine economy.¹⁰ Both need to be freed from those constraints that deprive them of finding their true identity and symbolic representation.

The way we have theoretically positioned the body has not been a static process. If we accept the notion of unfolding divine revelation incarnated in Christ and continually inspired by the Spirit, then that positioning of the body – including the bodily expression of love - need not be sedimented unnecessarily and unhelpfully by aspects of cultural tradition and history. If Irigaray’s arguments hold true for homosexual people as well as women, then might homosexual people similarly be able to mediate the divine through their embodied and sexuate nature?

Following this argument, sexuate ‘otherness’ would not be ignored or exiled into an identity-less ‘blind spot’. For those who desire to enter into a committed, loving relationship, it should not necessitate a commitment to celibacy, or to a secular form of cohabitation not requiring the rigorous commitment and

7 Irigaray, Luce. 2003 ‘Introduction: On Old And New Tablets’ in Morny Joy, Kathleen O’Grady & Judith Poxon, eds, *Religion In French Feminist Thought* London: Routledge pp1-9

8 Irigaray, Luce. 1993 *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*. trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, London: Athlone Press Ltd p67

9 Ibid p68

10 Irigaray, Luce. 1974/1985 *Speculum Of The Other Woman*. trans. Gill, Gillian.C. New York: Cornell University Press

constancy of Christian marriage. Rather, it should be accepted and welcomed because both heterosexual and homosexual desire for the sexuate other can express most potently the desire for becoming, the initiating of “a birth into transcendence, that of the other...still in the world of the senses, still physical and carnal, and already spiritual.”¹¹

Natural Law and Taboo

Supporters of marriage may uphold it as a key instrument in promoting the common good for all people, married or not. Bishop Richard Malone of Portland, Maine wrote in a pastoral letter (Mar 2012):

“Everyone has a stake in a stable, flourishing, and loving society created and sustained in no small part by marriage between a man and a woman.”¹²

It is, then, a vehicle for human flourishing that enhances human happiness for all. An argument from traditional natural law that regards homosexual conduct as a perversion of human desire and capacity would see gay partnerships as necessarily disordered, whether or not society approves or supports it. Same-sex marriage would be damaging because it would lend a spurious status to a disordered relationship. It might be argued that the happiness of an individual or a couple does not depend on any acceptance, status or honour given by society, but rather the proper functioning of the human soul. Same-sex marriage would therefore be nothing more than a needless addition to what might be a personally fulfilling, but wrongful and disordered relationship.

We all have relationships with things and with people that at times are disordered, and which we need to rectify in order fully to flourish. We would all recognize the sound wisdom of the discipline of non-attachment which comes from awareness of these disordered desires and which promotes personal inner freedom and spiritual maturity. The question with regard to sexual relationships is: which desires are disordered, and therefore antithetical to the common good? Recent developments in natural law have begun to push at the boundaries in approaching natural law, for instance in terms of an ethics of responsibility. This approach emphasises the aspect of character that is about caring effectively for others in real, concrete circumstances. It seems to me that this form of ethics might usefully be juxtaposed with the notion of flourishing, which upholds the reciprocity of caring and well-being in a praxis of compassion for all people.

If we see part of our Christian role as creating a just and caring society in which all can flourish, with the benefits and rigours of marriage near its heart, then on what grounds can we exclude non-heterosexual couples who long for their union to be so recognised? If their relationship is not

11 Irigaray 1993 p82

12 <http://www.marriageuniqueforareason.org/2012/03/06/pastoral-letter-on-marriage-from-maines-bishop-malone/>

antithetical to their own or to the common good, then on what grounds is their relationship disordered? And if it is not disordered, then on what grounds should the discipline and support of the public institution of marriage be denied them?

There are of course some forms of sexual desire and relationship that are widely considered disordered, not to the common good, and which are proscribed to various degrees in each culture (rape, polygamy, incest, bestiality, paedophilia etc). Many of these sexual proscriptions arise from cultural taboos that have revolved largely around ancient notions of impurity, and property rights. Avoidance of defilement is a recurring theme in religion and, as Paul Ricoeur has shown: “Dread of the impure and rites of purification are in the background of all our feeling and all our behaviour relating to fault.”¹³ Hence many Hebrew purity codes paid close attention to bodily orifices and sexual behaviour. The notion of ownership also influenced sexual behaviour and marriage: the violent reaction of Dinah’s brothers after her rape had much to do with the family’s loss of a valuable possession – Dinah’s marriageable state of virginity (Gen. 34). These days, cultural taboos are more concerned with a current understanding of human rights of free will and consent: for example, when is someone old enough to decide whether they want a sexual relationship? At what point does sex or marriage become non-consensual?

The struggle that women have experienced - especially in the Church - has at base been about the deep-seated discomfort that the normative male feels about otherness, largely expressed in terms of impurity and inferiority (nowadays politely masked in such notions as ‘complementarity’ in natural law). There still lurks in many heterosexual people a similar atavistic dread or revulsion of those whose sexual orientation is other. But our society is coming increasingly to accept homosexual people for who they are, and is finding that committed homosexual relationships can be loving, constant, faithful and self-giving.

Every society sets boundaries that reflect an interpretation of what is to the common good (or against it) for that community. Those boundaries change from one culture and age to another (for instance, the raising of the age of consent in Britain from 12 to 16 in 1885). Where there are such boundaries, we might ask whether these are based soundly on what is for the common good, and whether they promote the flourishing of both individual and community. Or might some boundaries be based on historic notions that we no longer accept as true or relevant? Are some present proscriptions based on age-old fear and shame around bodily otherness, hedged around with cultural regulations and traditions (as in, for instance, taboos around menstruating women, still evident in some church communities?) Is the Church’s current response to homosexual people coloured by deep-seated, atavistic fears, taboos and

13 Ricoeur, Paul. 1967/69 *The Symbolism of Evil*. trans. Emerson Buchanan, Boston: Beacon Press p25

prejudices? Do these attitudes spring from a heterosexual, masculinist religious imaginary that has feared and suppressed otherness and ignored differences of sex and sexual orientation? If so, might these boundaries and proscriptions be justifiably moved as we overcome innate anxieties and gain fresh understanding in accordance with continuing divine revelation?

For Whom is Marriage a Common Good?

Would gay marriage benefit society as a whole? Would everyone – the couple concerned, and the large community - be more likely to flourish when marriage for gay couples is recognized and supported by the Church? Any argument that views the homosexual relationship as a purely private affair might assert that a gay couple can gain personal happiness by disregarding the views of wider society. Such an argument does not take into account the idea promoted by Archbishop Nichols of marriage as a *common good*, something in our nature that is good for individuals, loving couples and society as a whole, where the recognized framework for the relationship is widely accepted as important both to the couple and to the community. Co-habitation does not enjoy the advantages of marriage as a public institution. It cannot provide the ascetic discipline of marriage as a school for virtue, with the attendant obligations of life-long commitment, cooperation with and protection and nurture of family members, including children.

In terms of flourishing and the common good, arguments based on natural law uphold marriage as the best environment in which to bring up children. The same argument may find marriage for same-sex couples inconceivable since offspring through natural procreation is not possible, and (it is argued) children need both a mother and a father in order best to flourish. Yet we now have many examples of stable family homes where gay couples are successfully caring for children. Perhaps what is more important for the child is not the sexual orientation of their parents but the security of public recognition of and support for their family which is provided by marriage. Families headed by gay couples may be showing us that there is a variety of forms of relatedness between parent and child that promote flourishing. Perhaps also there are varieties of forms of gender expression that lead to good fathering and good mothering. After all, the pattern for parenting has hardly remained static over the years, certainly since biblical times when, for instance, corporal punishment was normative.

If marriage is a common good, then denial of the possibility of marriage for same-sex couples who long for it disregards the legitimacy of their identity and experience. If you do not fit the privileged position in a binary valuation system, then you are silenced and voiceless. If you identify as other, then you are effectively being told that your life, your love, your desire and experience do not exist. From the perspective of queer theology, at least, the sin attaching to otherness is not in non-heterosexuality but rather in the failure of entrenched cultural traditions and organisational practices to accept the original

goodness of each person and to welcome them as they are: whole, and worthy of love. Failure to offer that hospitality is a failure of love, a bar to the flourishing of all members of society, a challenge to the notion of marriage as a common good. Is our faith community really celebrating the diverse complexity of bodily living, enabling each member to flourish so that we can all encounter the gracious favour of God; or is it suppressing (some experiences and aspects of) the body as an obstacle to what is ‘truly’ (normatively) holy and spiritual?

Learning from Gay Experience

Despite spiritual emancipation, the earliest believers were urged to heed societal constraints as far as these might lead to social harmony and not contradict matters of faith. So, for instance, 1 Peter includes direction on the submission of wives to their husbands as part of a strategy for the Church’s continued existence during difficult times (1 Pet 3:1-6). Today, the situation might be seen as inverted. Secular society has, as with the issue of women’s equality, run ahead of the Church, leaving it struggling to catch the coat-tails of new insight which, on reflection, many Christians would now read as Spirit-led and truly Biblical. If we are looking for social harmony and cohesion within the wider strategy of mission and survival, then gay marriage may similarly prove to be an issue where many Christians no longer find any contradiction in matters of faith.

Indeed the experience of non-heterosexual people gives them a particular insight into the understanding of sex, love, relationships and marriage, and their experience might usefully inform debate within the Christian tradition. Gay couples, having no opportunity to enter into marriage, have only ever been able to look on as bystanders – quite a useful standpoint where perhaps you are more able to see the wood as well as the trees. An onlooker might well notice in Christian history the cultural tradition of a patriarchal marriage code that has been informed and reinforced by the theological paradigm of subordination and inequality of the relationship between the Church and Christ. So an asymmetric marriage relationship was taken as divinely ordained, with a male head and subordinate wife, whose biological function was associated with defilement, shame and ontological impurity. If a concept of flourishing is concerned with relationality, life and nurturing, then what can be said when the original blessing of loving, mutual relationship is distorted into oppression, violence and abuse? The patriarchy that has ignored sexual differences and valued dominance and hierarchy above mutuality and connectedness has allowed tragic injustices of exploitation and abuse of women, homosexuals and other vulnerable people.

The notion of flourishing for all people invites us to ‘read between the lines’ of biblical narratives concerning marriage, sex and gender. For example, (to borrow a term from Ricoeur), such a hermeneutics of suspicion can be applied to the stories of Gomer and other Biblical bride and whore

figures, taken to symbolise the unfaithfulness of God's people. A fresh insight prompts reflection, not only on the wrong actions of the woman, but on the unfaithfulness of a society that has allowed discrimination, abuse and violence to be perpetrated with impunity on those regarded as 'other'. A recognition and loving acceptance of the human variety of gender and sexual orientation would render such injustice inconceivable.

Only in relatively recent times have we come to understand that culturally-given symbols of inequality or impurity should not be taken as prescriptions for marriage, any more than for gender or race relations. Same-sex couples have not been constrained in the same way by these cultural traditions and customs, reinforced and upheld by Church teaching and practice. It may be that gay couples (both partners subject to 'shame', neither accorded superior status by society) have gained some valuable experience in equality, mutuality and reciprocity in relationships that the Church might usefully listen to with regard to the institution of marriage. From this viewpoint, gay partnership may give marriage as a whole more to mean. It might, for instance, help us not to repeat the error of previous generations in diluting the radical message of equality before God and inclusivity inherent in Jesus' ministry and teaching.

At the Wedding

The redeemed Bride of Christ pictured in Revelation is at home in her body, prepared and adorned for her husband (Rev 21:2). From the perspective of attention to the corporeal and concern for flourishing, the Bride figure can be understood as witnessing to the celebration rather than to the disparagement of human beings as embodied, sensual, sexuate, spiritual people. The reclaiming of the Bride by Christ speaks of the redemptive liberation of all members of the Body of Christ from unjust power structures and pejorative symbol systems, into a relationship that affirms that they are created in the image of God. The Bride of Christ, according to Revelation, is also the Temple in which Christ lives, the City whose gates are never shut; yet nothing shameful or impure will enter (Rev 21:25-27). She affirms the imperative of working for liberation from structures that promote injustices, deny full human dignity and diminish human well-being. The Bride, through the redemptive work of Christ, is liberated from the shame of a patriarchal system that has kept 'others' from flourishing and the potential of full personhood. The work of the saints that is woven into the wedding linen of the bride (Rev 19:8) entails the task of seeking full subjectivity for all people, including their sexual orientation, so that all can find their true sexuate identity as children of God.

The universal Church that is Christ's Body and Bride is made up of human beings created in endless diversity and distinctiveness. In the Wedding all members of the Body can affirm their own identity and hope in God as bodily, sexed beings with a shared spiritual ethos expressed in diverse ways according to

individuals' ways of being in the world. All worshippers can flourish at the Wedding banquet in the presence of God beyond language, embodiment and gender, because every member will know that they are truly a human person created in the image of God.

In anticipation of the Wedding, where all people are free to flourish, we are called to critique and challenge any current ideologies or social and cultural structures that militate against an eschatological hope and vision for a coming kingdom conformed to the prophetic command of Jesus demanding not sacrifice but mercy (Matthew 9:13). Should our normatively heterosexual society, in prohibiting same-sex marriage, be demanding such self-sacrifice from gay couples? Or would such a continued proscription in itself be antithetical to the common good? Would the extending of marriage to gay couples add to the common good by providing them with the discipline of constructive self-sacrifice that seeks to serve others? Would it not in fact serve for the edification and mission of the Church and the promotion of flourishing to the common good? Would Christian same-sex marriage extend a sacred space in which gay people can practice sanctification and potentially achieve true subjectivity through and not despite their experience as members of the Body of Christ? Would they thus be better able to aspire towards a divine horizon in accordance with their calling as people formed in *imago Dei*? Letty Russell wrote the following in support of the full recognition of women; but perhaps her words might equally apply to the desires of many non-heterosexual people to be married, so that:

“in God’s sight I am not marginal but...I came created by God and called by the biblical word of promise to become what God intends me to become: a partner in the mending of creation.”¹⁴ (Russell 1985:139)

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¹⁴ Russell, Letty M., ed. 1985 *Feminist Interpretation Of The Bible*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press p139

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