

What Next? Some thoughts following the rejection by the General Synod of the Church of England, of the report issued by the “Bishop’s Reflection Group on Sexuality”

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On the 15th February 2017 the General Synod of the Church of England voted down a “Take Note” motion on a report issued by the “Bishop’s Reflection Group on Sexuality”³. This directed future discussion to take place in the context of “Interpreting the existing law and guidance to permit maximum freedom within it, without changes to the law, or the doctrine of the Church”. That is despite inputs from the “Shared Conversations” process and other investigations. A consequence of the vote means that the Church of England is now forced to consider a more fully inclusive approach. This is also a situation where the traditional teaching of the Church can be tested by science and psychology and this is an area where I have been active in my own research. In this work it is shown that there is a fundamental contradiction between science and the traditional teaching of the Church⁴.

This research programme involves a neurophysiological and psychological study into the early development of personality and self-identity. It is conducted in purely scientific terms, without any constraints of religious belief. A new approach is adopted which links the neurophysiologically driven processes of early development to the psychologically determined ones in later life. This approach confirms and supports the considerable amount of experiential evidence and professional opinion that has previously been available. The identity driven nature and the moral duality inherent in gender and sexually variant behaviour is also established. It likewise affirms the lived experience of gender and sexually variant people. In this context, these results are particularly significant because, for the first time, they establish why the contradiction between science and theology occurs. Furthermore they demonstrate in scientific terms why the traditional teaching of the Christian Church on gender and sexual variation cannot be correct⁵. It is demonstrated that this contradiction comes from traditions the Church has created and not from the Gospel itself⁶.

¹ Personal Biography <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/SusanBiographyPapers.pdf>

² Issued 17 February 2017: This paper is available online at: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/229P-WhatNext.pdf>

³ Church of England (2017): “*Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations. A Report from the House of Bishops*”: General Synod Document 2055 <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/3863472/gs-2055-marriage-and-same-sex-relationships-after-the-shared-conversations-report-from-the-house-of-bishops.pdf>: See also: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/229P-GS2055.pdf>

⁴ Probably the most accessible account of this can be found in the paper: Gilchrist, S. (2017): “*No, Pope Francis: Gender Identity is not a Choice*”. <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/227P-No-PopeFrancis.pdf>

⁵ This article summarises an extended programme of neurophysiological and psychological research. For more detailed descriptions, (with references to sources) see: Gilchrist, S. (2016): “*Science and Belief. A New Approach to Identity and Personality Formation in Early Life*”: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/218P-PaperPersonality.pdf> also Gilchrist, S. (2016): “*A New Approach to Identity and Personality Formation in Early Life*”: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/218P-InfluencesPersonality.pdf>: Gilchrist, S. (2013): “*Personality Development and LGB&T People: A New Approach*”: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/201P-PersonalityDevelopmentAndLGBTPeople.pdf> and Gilchrist, S. (2015): “*Personality Development and Gender: Why We Should Re-think the Process*”: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/209P-RethinkPaperFull.pdf> (copy under revision available on the web). Also Gilchrist, S. (2013): “*A Reassessment of the Traditional Christian Teaching on Homosexuality, Transsexuality and on Gender and Sexual Variation Using a New*

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I take note of clauses 32 and 33 in the Bishop's report. Clause 32 notes that: *"It would also need to be acknowledged that some deep-seated questions are likely to come to the fore in addressing these matters. In particular, issues of identity that are both controversial and profoundly personal would need to be faced..... Can the Church of England establish a consistent tone and culture when it encompasses those who hold to some sharply differing moral judgments about those choices in this case?"* Clause 33 notes: *"This is therefore a critical and highly challenging area for further work. Tackling it well will be crucial for everything that follows"*. Yet despite these caveats it is made clear in Clause 22 that: *"There was a clear (although not unanimous) weight of opinion in favour of the option framed in the following terms: Interpreting the existing law and guidance to permit maximum freedom within it, without changes to the law, or the doctrine of the Church"*.

It would be presumptuous of me to assume that clauses 32 and 33 refer directly to the work I have undertaken. However I also have reason to believe that the Bishop's Reflection Group have been aware of it. Not only have its results been fed into the Church of England at the highest possible level from before the Shared Conversations process⁷, at least one of the Bishops who is a member of the Reflection Group is personally aware, and has knowledge of my research⁸. A written submission⁹ was also made by me during the consultation phase for the Pilling Report¹⁰, and other transgender people contributed. However clause 38 of the Pilling Report states *"This report focuses on questions concerning same sex relationships. However, the group believes that the experiences of those with transgender and intersex conditions raise important theological and pastoral issues. Some of these issues were outlined in chapter 7 of the 2003 House of Bishops report Some Issues in Human Sexuality and the Church of England needs to address them"*. Neither is there any mention whatever of bisexual, transgender people whatever in the report of the 2017 Bishop's Reflection Group on sexuality, except (perhaps) in clauses 32 and 33, where it states in relation to issues of identity. *"This is therefore a critical and highly challenging area for further work. Tackling it well will be crucial for everything that follows"*. My own research work has been made available to the Church of England at the highest possible level from the beginning of all of the consultation processes. Nevertheless this refusal to listen, not just to my work, but to that of others still continues: I have recorded the history of these refusals in a separate publication¹¹.

The details of my own investigations can be found at <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/articles/index.htm>: It is well understood that the results of this research may cause difficulties in maintaining the unities of both the Church of England and the Catholic Church. However any credible report on these issues must contain two key elements. The first is a description of what should happen, and the second

Neurophysiological and Psychological Approach": <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/207P-ReassessmentPsychologyExtended.pdf>

⁶ For an account of the social, historical and theological studies, see the following papers: Gilchrist, S. (2016f): *"Influences of Gender and Sexual Variation in the History and Traditions of the Christian Church"*:

<http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/220P-InfluencesChurch.pdf> Gilchrist, S. (2016e): *"Influences of Gender and Sexual Variation on the Life and Teaching of Jesus"*: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/219P-InfluencesJesus.pdf> Gilchrist, S.

(2016j): *"Sex and Gender Variation in the Christian Church: Is it Not Time to Consider the Science?"*:

<http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/226P-ConsiderScience.pdf> Gilchrist, S. (2013a): *"An Unfinished Reformation"*:

<http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/016B-UnfinishedReformationArticle.pdf>

⁷ Gilchrist, S. (2014): *Articles Offered to The Church of England for use in its Process of Shared Discussions on LGBTI Matters*: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/020B-OfferedPapersIntroduction.pdf>

⁸ For more information see: *"A Response to the 2017 "Take Note" Report of The Church of England Bishop's Reflection Group on Sexuality"*: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/227P-ResponseToThe2017CoEBishopsReport.pdf>

⁹ Gilchrist, S. (2012): *"Personal submission to the Church of England House of Bishops Working Party on Human Sexuality"*: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/004B-SGSubmissionToHoBSexualityReview2012.pdf>

¹⁰ Pilling Report: (2013): *"Report of the House of Bishops' Working Party on human sexuality"*, GS 1929, Nov 2013 https://www.churchofengland.org/media/1891063/pilling_report_gs_1929_web.pdf

¹¹ Gilchrist, S. (2014): *"Controversy and Challenge: Issues of Gender and Sexuality in the Present Day Christian Church"*: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/018B-ControversoryAndCrisis.pdf>

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concerns how to obtain it, and what may be possible at the present time. That is absent in the current report, and the continuing failure to face up to these issues is destroying the credibility, not just of the Church of England and the Catholic Church, but also Christianity itself at the present time.

The Bishops and you, the readers, may agree or disagree with the results of this research, but that is not the point. By declaring that there are to be no change to the traditional teaching of the Church, while at the same time noting that challenging work still needs to be undertaken already identifies an inconsistency in the report. It also enforces preconditions on the future direction of work. Three years of listening in the “Shared Conversations Process” should have told the Bishops that there is a moral duality inherent in gender and sexually variant behaviour, whereby gender and sexually variant people who express their true attractions and identities in ways that conform to the highest moral standards of their own societies are to be highly regarded, while those who misuse these relationships should be severely condemned for their acts. It should also have told them that much gender and sexually variant behaviour is about the search for love and identity: it is not for sex. The scientific studies carried out in this research also confirm that the same moral duality must exist: and they further affirm the identity driven nature of these conditions. Since that moral duality is inherent to gender and sexually variant behaviour it must be present in all societies at all times. Therefore changes in culture and doctrine can only reveal or hide the duality that is found. For much of the last two millennia that moral duality has been hidden from view by the criminalisation and condemnation that has been enforced by secular society and the Christian Church. The social changes in the last sixty years have again allowed this moral duality to be observed. The same duality could be seen at the time of Christ.

While cultural and theological issues are extensively discussed in the Bishop’s report there is no reference to science or experiential evidence whatever. The mass of evidence from the major professional medical and psychological institutions is ignored. Indeed the use of the words “same-sex attracted” and “choices” in the report suggest a mind-set which seeks to dismiss these developments in science in an attempt to produce a continued justification for the traditional teaching of the Church. Sadly this denial is not new. The thrust of the 2017 report of the Bishop’s Reflection Group continued, and sought to strengthen that process. The refusal to sanction this report in the “Take Note” debate demands that change must be faced.

You will I hope understand the great level of anger and betrayal felt by LGBTI people when the Bishop’s Reflection Group, which does not contain (at least as far as we know) even one person who identifies himself or herself as LGBTI, gives a verdict on these issues which dismisses, ignores or fails to understand the message that many of the LGBTI participants in the Shared Conversations process have sought to give. This is often been at a considerable cost. At issue are the fundamental contradictions between science and the traditional teaching of the Christian Church which presumes that gender and sexually variant behaviour is invariably a falling from grace, and a lifestyle choice which forsakes the pursuit of committed loving and fulfilling relationships for the likes of sex.

On the 16th February 2017 the Archbishops of Canterbury and York wrote a letter to members of the Church of England following the decision by the General Synod not to take note of the report of the Bishops Reflection Group¹². There are two concerns about this letter. The first is the statement in it that the teaching shall continue to be as the Church of England has received it, and the second is the continued emphasis on the use of a teaching document which is described in the report. From

¹² Church of England, 2017: “Letter from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York following General Synod”.

<https://staging.churchofengland.org/media/3878263/abc-and-aby-joint-letter.pdf>. See also:

<https://churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2017/02/letter-from-the-archbishops-of-canterbury-and-york-following-general-synod.aspx>

the letter it appears that the Archbishops are telling everyone they should keep to the same old policies but try harder. They either have not got the message, or are refusing to listen to it: that these old policies, doctrines and teaching have failed, and what is now needed is a radical new approach

That need for that change is additionally supported through the contradiction with science and the encounters with the lived experiences of gender and sexually variant people. Currently a great majority of professional institutions in the Western World regard gender and sexually variant identities and behaviour as being naturally expected variations of the human condition which are intrinsic to the personality created, that arise very early in development, and which cannot be changed by the individual concerned or by the actions of others in subsequent life. (Nevertheless it should be noted that considerable gender fluidity may exist as overlays on what has already been formed). This is the position taken for example by the British Royal College of Psychiatrists¹³, the British Psychological Society and parallel United Kingdom organisations¹⁴. Equivalent positions are taken by the American Psychiatric Association¹⁵ and the American Psychological Association¹⁶. Other international mental health organizations, including the World Health Organization have followed. Against this is set minority conservative organisations such as the American College of Paediatricians¹⁷ and the might of the Christian Church.

This is not just a matter of theology. Discrimination against gender and sexually variant people is also a socially led phenomenon and it would be a mistake to identify its cause with religious belief. The transformation needed to gain acceptability in the Greco/Roman culture brought the Church to collude with these secular demands of society rather than to challenge them. Not only has this consent reinforced the secular prejudices of such discriminatory societies; it gave and it still continues to give religious legitimacy to them. In many African countries extreme penalties against homosexual behaviour are being advocated or applied. There is no doubt that there was a great deal of sexual abuse in first century society, where the blatant abuses of power gave permission for extreme abuses of same-sex acts. However to condemn all gender and sexually variant behaviour for the abuses of some, is akin to saying today that all members of a minority community are terrorists because some engage in terrorist acts. In the United States at the present time, senior members of the Catholic Church have been using its traditional teaching to collude with the conservative Christian right when they condemn all transgender people as invariably being in pursuit of illicit or depraved sex. The actions of the present president of the United States illustrate how easily this scapegoating can occur. Instead of recognising the moral duality which is inherent in gender and sexual behaviour, without exception all of these people have been made the scapegoats for abusive sex. Since this article was first released the administration of Present Trump in the United States has removed the federal guidance which protected transgender children from some of these attacks. Harm has also been done by the medical misdiagnoses that have been, and continue to be made. The persecution and slaughter of gender and sexually variant people, not only in Christianity but in Islam, Judaism and all other religions, states and cultures which have drawn their teachings from this has been enormous, and repentance is needed for these acts. The aspiration by the Church of England to atone for past injustices is fully accepted. The desire expressed in the Bishop's reflection group of "Interpreting the existing law and guidance to permit maximum freedom within it, without changes to the law, or the doctrine of the Church" is welcome within the limits it sets. However repentance and a change of tone is not enough. If there is no move

¹³ Royal College of Psychiatrists' statement on sexual orientation http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/ps02_2014.pdf

¹⁴ British Psychological Society and other organisations: Conversion Therapy: Consensus Statement.

http://www.bps.org.uk/system/files/Public%20files/conversion_therapy_final_version.pdf

¹⁵ APA Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Statement: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/sexual-orientation.aspx>

¹⁶ APA Policy Statements on LGBT Concerns <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/policy/>

¹⁷ American College of Paediatricians <https://www.acped.org/> : 'Transgender' Conditioning Is 'Child Abuse': <http://www.cnsnews.com/commentary/j-matt-barber/american-college-pediatricians-transgender-conditioning-child-abuse>

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to reconsider the Christian doctrine which has led to or supported this discrimination, the same misuses will continue to occur.

My concern is therefore not just about LGBTI issues, it is about how the Church of England and the Catholic Church in particular are destroying the credibility of the whole of Christianity through their resolute pursuit of a doctrine which has been disproved in scientific terms, rejected by the great majority of the relevant professional institutions, the lived experiences of LGBTI people, and by others who know how LGBTI people live their lives.

I welcome the rejection of the Bishop's Sexuality Report in the "Take Note" debate in the Church of England General Synod on the 15th February 2017. This is because it totally ignores many of these issues. The arguments it presents are based entirely on theology and culture, without reference to the other concerns. If the Synod had voted to accept this report it would have been putting a straightjacket on any further discussion of these serious matters, which by the report's own admission still need to be addressed. To people outside the Church its acceptance would have been seen as yet another refusal of the Christian Church to face up to the self-evident problems of its own creation, and an act of unjustified discrimination against a group of people, many of whom are trying to live open, honest, faithful and committed Christian lives.

Bibliography

Full references to sources are given in the more detailed papers referred to in the text. A full bibliography is available on: <http://www.tqdr.co.uk/articles/bibliography.htm>

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