

# Notes for a Theology of Same-sex Relationships

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Abstract: The author argues that a positive teaching concerning committed same-sex relationships is possible; that it can be defended according to natural law arguments as well as faithful biblical exegesis; and that, properly understood, it is a legitimate development of Christian doctrine, specifically, alongside the sacramentality of Holy Matrimony. Furthermore, the theology of marriage and Holy Matrimony, which has traditionally been weak, must be re-considered in order to grasp the deep meaning of covenanted same-sex unions. This essay seeks to present an outline of such a theology.

## *Introduction*

Gay and lesbian Christians have long wondered how to live holy lives, and therefore what their status is in the churches<sup>1</sup>. This question is perhaps most sharply expressed by the availability and type of services for blessing their relationships. In the gay community, as it has evolved from the closet toward openness, there has been intense debate about the value of marriage or marriage-like commitment. This reflects a wider argument in Western societies about the institution of marriage itself. For gay people, the question for a time was whether a series of relationships or even casual encounters is not preferable to trying to imitate what many – not just gays – see as a failed rite that only perpetuates stereotypical gender roles and power relations among straight people, and commends these in even more ersatz ways to gays.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay, I use “church” or “churches” to signify specific denominations, and “Church” to mean the whole of the Christian Church.

<sup>2</sup> As an example of rhetoric of the past, here is Camille Paglia’s comment on the Presbyterian Church’s Report of the Special Committee on Human Sexuality entitled “Keeping Body and Soul Together” (1991): “It reduces the grand tragicomedy of love and lust to a Hallmark card. Its unctuous normalizing of dissident sex is imperialistic and oppressive. The gay world is stripped of its outlaw adventures in toilets, alleyways, trucks and orgy rooms. There are no leathermen, hustlers, drag queens. Gay love is reduced to a nice, neat, middle-class couple moving in next door on Father Knows Best. It’s Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? all over again, with Sidney Poitier, Mr. Smooth and Perfect, recast in gay form.” In “The Joy of Presbyterian Sex,” *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 30; first appeared in the *New Republic*, Dec 2, 1991; 205:23 p. 24-27.

As various states in America have ventured to make (or forbid, or unmake) civil marriage available to gay couples, the debate has shifted in recent years to guaranteeing the rights of couples to avail themselves of the advantages of civil marriage: inheritance, health insurance, legal rights (especially concerning medical matters), and lower taxation for married couples. In other countries, this has been accomplished either by extending marriage to same-sex couples, or by creating separate legal entities such as civil unions. In a parallel development, it has become a propaganda tool of many African politicians to claim that homosexuality is not African but a Western colonial importation, from which these men, if elected, will supposedly protect their countries.

The question arises of the theological nature of such relationships. In nations that require separate civil and religious marriages, the issue is clearly theological. In America, however, and those other countries where a member of the clergy can function as an agent of the State, combining civil and religious marriage in one rite, the properly theological matters raised by this question become obscured by the debate over civil rights. Because of real concerns about social justice, especially against violence in many forms, both personal and communal, against gay and lesbian people, the theological question is often thought to be settled when the justice concerns are satisfied — and not just among partisans of same-sex unions<sup>3</sup>. It is just as possible to argue that same-sex unions are damaging to the body politic and therefore the question of marriage in church is settled, as the other way around. In fact, either position avoids the deep questions that arise around marriage, Holy Matrimony, and same-sex unions. The urgent need to consider these remains unchanged.

This is not to say that there has not been a great deal of thinking on the question done across the spectrum.<sup>4</sup> By and large, however, most churches have avoided making decisions

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<sup>3</sup> The question of whether to call such unions “same-sex” or “same-gender” is a complex one. In choosing “same-sex” I do not mean to exclude transgendered people.

<sup>4</sup> There has emerged an entire subset of theology known as “queer theology”, created by gay theologians. There are large bibliographies on the matter available online, such as

about the value of various theories put forth, although there are notable exceptions, such as the United Church of Christ, the Swedish Lutheran Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and conversely, the Roman Catholic Church.

### *The Episcopal Church*

In March 2010, the Theology Committee of the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops presented a document to the House entitled "Same-sex Relationships in the Life of the Church".<sup>5</sup> The document consists of an introduction, a "traditionalist" essay with a "liberal" response, a "liberal" essay with a "traditionalist" response, and an epilogue.<sup>6</sup> The origin of this effort lay in a resolution of the House of Bishops passed unanimously first in March 2004, and again at its March 2007 meeting.

The foreword thanked this writer for initiating the project. While I am grateful for the work of the eight theologians who wrote the essays, and to my episcopal colleagues for overseeing their work, the document did not in my opinion greatly advance our church's need for adequate theological reflection and rationale on the spreading practice across the church of blessing same-sex relationships, as well as ordaining those who are in such relationships. The original intent of both the 2004 and 2007 resolutions was that our scholars would focus on the common ground that underlies various positions, so as to clarify the real points of division that must be grappled with if we as a church are to move out of being stuck.<sup>7</sup>

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<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/lgbathbib5.html>. Accessed 26 June 2010. For Episcopal Church materials developed since 1976, see *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 2005, pp. 63-122. Available at <http://bit.ly/afoLsH>. Accessed 26 June 2010. For Anglican Communion resources, see *The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality*, ed. Philip Groves (London: SPCK, 2008), a series of essays growing out of the "Listening Process" to which the Lambeth Conferences of 1978, 1988, and 1998 committed the Communion. A recent contribution by an Episcopalian is Tobias Haller, BSG, *Reasonable and Holy* (New York: Seabury, 2009), notable among other things for its engagement with the rabbinical tradition.

<sup>5</sup> Available at [www.collegeforbishops.org/assets/1145/ss\\_document\\_final.pdf](http://www.collegeforbishops.org/assets/1145/ss_document_final.pdf). The whole text, with commentaries from various Anglican and ecumenical observers, is printed in the *Anglican Theological Review*, Winter 2011, 93.1.

<sup>6</sup> The panel chose these labels.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the Observers' comments are more positive than I about the progress "Same-sex Relationships" makes.

James Alison posits that church documents should be read in the best possible light: “imagining and interpreting something positively is actually a creative act which tends to make it more likely that things develop that way.”<sup>8</sup> It seems better therefore to make some arguments that can become part of the dialogue of which this particular document is a part: what is the teaching of the Episcopal Church on same-sex relationships, and how do we arrive at it? Officially our teaching on sex and marriage remains unchanged: “the teaching of the Episcopal Church is that physical sexual expression is appropriate only within the lifelong monogamous ‘union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind’” (A104 General Convention 1991). But that is obviously a dead letter, for at the 2009 Convention, the following language was adopted:

Resolved, That the 76th General Convention affirm the value of “listening to the experience of homosexual persons,” as called for by the Lambeth Conferences of 1978, 1988, and 1998, and acknowledge that through our own listening the General Convention has come to recognize that the baptized membership of The Episcopal Church includes same-sex couples living in lifelong committed relationships “characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God” (2000-D039); and be it further

Resolved, That the 76th General Convention recognize that gay and lesbian persons who are part of such relationships have responded to God's call and have exercised various ministries in and on behalf of God's One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and are currently doing so in our midst; and be it further

Resolved, That the 76th General Convention affirm that God has called and may call such individuals, to any ordained ministry in The Episcopal Church, and that God's call to the ordained ministry in The Episcopal Church is a mystery which the Church attempts to discern for all people through our discernment processes acting in accordance with the Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church...

It should be evident that this is more a description than an explanation. The continuing absence of an official teaching despite ordinations of partnered gays now to all three Orders,

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<sup>8</sup> James Alison, *Undergoing God* (Continuum: New York, 2006), p. 216.

and various locally-developed forms for blessings their unions will, if not remedied, eventually call the teaching offices of the Episcopal Church completely into disrepute, if the church as a whole cannot with any authority teach what it is doing and why. Worse, its faithful will continue to wonder how to live holy lives as disciples of Jesus in the current situation. As such practices have formed the rationale for schisms and ruptures both within and without the Episcopal Church, arriving at a defensible position is urgent, not only for the dioceses of the church, but also for the global Anglican Communion and beyond. Bad theology calls out for better theology,<sup>9</sup> but no theology at all presents a very different challenge.

The 1976 General Convention's resolution A-69 that proclaimed that gay and lesbian people are indeed fully members of the Church — “children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church” — rested more on a corporate intuition than a carefully-argued position. It was only seven years after the Stonewall riots in New York City, generally recognized as the start of the gay liberation movement, and the same year as the publication of the first widely-read work of theology calling for the Church's full acceptance of gays, John McNeill's *The Church and the Homosexual*.<sup>10</sup>

Concerning her own field, Agnes Heller writes, “In philosophy we can rely upon good intuition as a final resort. Of course, good intuition is not a gift of heaven, it presupposes knowledge of the field we intuit. [...] Good intuition does not, however, make a philosophic

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<sup>9</sup> This is the conclusion of a study commissioned by Presiding Bishop John Hines to reflect on the issue of a heresy trial in the Pike affair. See *Theological Freedom and Social Responsibility*, Report of the Advisory Committee of the Episcopal Church (New York: Seabury, 1967), p. 21f. Besides Bishop Stephen Bayne, who chaired it, the committee included John Macquarrie, Paul Minear, Albert Mollegen, and Charles Price, among others. Contributors to the Report included J. V. Langmead Casserley, John Know, Eric Mascall, Paul Moore, John Courtney Murray (his article, “A Will to Community,” was written a week before his death), James Pike, John A. T. Robinson, Theodora Sorg, Albert Stuart, and Arthur Vogel.

<sup>10</sup> Boston: Beacon, 1976. Initially this book received permission to be printed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which was rescinded only a year later. The first such argument was made by an English Anglican, Derrick Bailey, in *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green, 1955).

system, for the new insights have to be properly conceptualized, and all assertions have to be argued rationally.”<sup>11</sup> The same is true in theology. A lot of work has been done since 1976 by official bodies of the Episcopal Church, as well as by theologians outside those bodies, to give a carefully-argued defense of that 1976 intuition: why is it right?<sup>12</sup> So far, none of this work has received official acceptance.

I shall argue that such a teaching is possible; that it can be defended according to natural law arguments as well as faithful biblical exegesis; and that it is a legitimate development of Christian doctrine, specifically out of the sacramentality of Holy Matrimony. Furthermore, I will argue for a much greater distinction to be made between civil marriage and Matrimony than has usually been the case in Anglican reflection. Finally, simply expanding existing matrimonial liturgies to include same-sex couples misses the deep meaning, I believe, of covenanted same-sex unions.<sup>13</sup>

As an active bishop, time does not allow me to present more than the lineaments of such a theology—thus, I am presenting only “Notes.” Even stated with relative brevity, this argument will, I hope, elicit disagreement and debate, leaving room both for improvement and development, and conversation about how Christians seeking to follow Jesus Christ and become holy people should live in same-sex relationships. Hopefully, however, this process will not remain mired in the bipolarities that characterize “Same-sex relationships in the Church.”

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<sup>11</sup> Agnes Heller, “Sociology as the Defetishisation of Modernity,” in *Globalization, Knowledge and Society*, edited by Martin Albrow and Elizabeth King (Sage Publications, 1990), p. 37. I am grateful to Philip McShane for pointing me to her.

<sup>12</sup> See Pierre Whalon, “Toward an Adequate Moral Evaluation of Homosexuality” *Anglican Theological Review* (Fall 1997), pp. 527-549.

<sup>13</sup> A good deal of this paper makes use of previous work done on developing a theology of marriage. Unpublished MS: *Made in Heaven?*

### *Starting at the Beginning*

Bishop Paul Marshall, in his book *Same-sex Unions: Stories and Rites*<sup>14</sup>, examines the rites Episcopalians are developing and rationales for them. He points out:

Some insist that the name of ‘marriage’ not be invoked because of the absence of civil status for the union in most jurisdictions; others insist just as strongly that same-sex unions are sacramentally the same thing as marriage. Others ... believe the two acts are essentially different.<sup>15</sup>

He also gives an extensive review of various rites of same-sex blessing that he has collected, and he concludes:

When trying to make a point about what a ritual actually is, teachers of liturgy habitually refer to ‘the anthropologist from Mars’, an investigator who knows nothing of our languages and simply watches what happens and classifies the big picture. Thus the anthropologist from Mars who see couples of whatever composition enter an assembly of friends in a sacred or special place, make promises, join hands, exchange tokens of commitment, and then embrace would say that all of them are specimens of an earth-person ritual about a joining together of two people usually called marriage, regardless of the sex of those being united.<sup>16</sup>

The Martian, however, cannot do more than classify this ritual as anything more than a local version of the symbolic bonding rites that characterize all human societies. If it is an astute observer, it will at least make note that the genders of those involved is almost always male-female. Assuming it is a thorough anthropologist, the extraterrestrial will also ask what is going on, in terms of the specific religion of the participants. Then the variation of gender matches will become significant to its eyes (eye? sonar? radar?).

The theological question remains therefore, even for E.T.

Nor is it resolved by reference to resolutions voted or rites being tried out. To get some clarity on this question was my original intent in presenting a resolution to the House of Bishops creating an investigative commission, first in 2004 and again in 2007. That decision eventually led to “Same-sex Relationships in the Life of the Church”.

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<sup>14</sup> New York: Church Publishing, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Marshall, *Same-sex Unions*, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Marshall, *Same-sex Unions*, p. 37.

The document did make some progress, however, toward this goal, at least for Episcopalians. The authors agreed despite their significant differences that the extension of the Church's blessing to same-sex unions requires a development of Christian doctrine. They located the argument in the third article of the Creed, the action of the Holy Spirit. And they defined the parameters for judging the success of such a development, albeit negatively: science, moral arguments, and personal experience are insufficient grounds for changing received doctrine. New insights into the "deposit of the faith" are required, insights that are supported and developed by fully accounting for the scriptural evidence within an internally coherent argument.<sup>17</sup>

That we can dispense therefore with some of the usual stays of arguments for the legitimacy of same-sex unions in our dialogue is salutary. While science is important, it cannot substitute for authentically theological work. A case in point is Thomas Aquinas' sexual theology, which he based upon Aristotelian biology—the best he had to work with in his day. So he could logically conclude in the same paragraph that masturbation and homosexuality are inherently sinful, since they destroy potential human beings—for until the seventeenth century, no one suspected that women contributed anything more to reproduction than "fertile soil" for the man's "seed" which "flowered" into a baby. The "sin of Onan" (Gen. 38:9) gave him biblical warrant to back this up. With the discovery of the human ovum, however, this argument collapsed completely.<sup>18</sup>

Moral arguments that rest upon social justice are important, of course, but to change the received doctrine of the church requires more than the desire to reform society, even beginning with the church itself. The struggle to free gay and lesbian people from the traditional stigma and discrimination against them is often assimilated to the struggle to liberate African-Americans and women from similar social opprobrium, and the resulting

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<sup>17</sup> "Same-sex Relationships", pp. iv-v. *Anglican Theological Review* 91.1, p. xviii.

<sup>18</sup> See *Summa Theologica, Secunda Secundae*, Quest. 154, Arts. 11 and 12.

unjust and dehumanizing restrictions. But the doctrinal insights that ground these moral developments are obviously not the same. Doctrine grounds moral judgment, not the other way around. It is formal—that which is true “everywhere, at all times, and held by all.”<sup>19</sup> Moral judgments, on the other hand, are always related to their context, apart from the formal norms that we are to love God completely, love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and in the same manner that Jesus first loved us. Social justice does not tell us how and why same-sex couples should live holy lives as disciples of Jesus—just that they be allowed to live without fear.

Personal experience is, as Bishop Marshall argues, critically important. However it is in itself not sufficient to change doctrine. Anglicans routinely appeal to Richard Hooker’s trinity of Scripture, interpreted by communal Reason informed by tradition. While this must perforce include personal experience, communal reflection on its common experience is the stuff of “Reason” properly understood.<sup>20</sup>

So the questions surrounding same-sex relationships indeed raise matters which touch upon creedal doctrine—the Church’s most basic interpretation of the Holy Scriptures’ essential message. And specifically, the work of the Spirit who is “the giver of life” and active in the sacraments, such as Holy Matrimony, is the locus for the development of doctrine necessary to legitimize, if possible, the acceptance of same-sex couples in the life of the Church, including their fitness for ordination when all conditions of discerning a vocation are met.

#### *The problem with marriage noted*

One great issue that arises as soon as one considers possible theological arguments for blessing same-sex relationships is that the theology of marriage —blessing “different-sex”

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<sup>19</sup> Recognizing of course that this “Vincentian canon” is always incompletely grasped by the Church, always *in fieri*, in the making—which is, of course, the bread and butter of systematic theologians.

<sup>20</sup> Egil Grislis, “The Hermeneutical Problem in Richard Hooker,” in *Studies in Richard Hooker: Essays Preliminary to an Edition of His Works*, ed. W Speed Hill (Cleveland and London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1972), p. 179ff.

relationships — has historically been so unconvincing. It is worth remembering that the definition of Holy Matrimony (not just “civil” marriage) that was operative from the High Middle Ages until the twentieth century in all the churches of the West was Duns Scotus’ dictum:

Marriage is an indissoluble bond between a man and wife arising from the mutual exchange of authority over one another’s bodies for the procreation and proper nurture of children.

The contract of marriage is the mutual exchange by a man and wife of their bodies for perpetual use in the procreation and proper nurture of children.<sup>21</sup>

How the Subtle Doctor came up with this unsubtle, if not to say unholy, notion of marriage is a long story, which I have described elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> Suffice it to note that this specific definition carried the day for theologians of the Western churches from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to our era, shared even by those who considered marriage a sacrament and those who did not. No wonder that the church’s teaching on marriage has carried so little weight with most people as they lived out what society demanded of them. In order to arrive at a faithful position on same-sex relationships, a clear understanding of marriage and Matrimony is a prior necessity.

And therein lies the rub. Is Holy Matrimony a sacrament, and if so, how does it differ from the universal practice of marriage? I will present some initial biblical reflection and historical review, followed by a theological analysis of the present situation, before turning to the question of same-sex unions.

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in John Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1997), p. 25. The central focus of Scotus’ theology was the development of *amor amicitiae* towards God (a detached love), not just loving God out of *amor concupiscentiae*, which marriage would seem to foster. See John Bonansea, *Man and His Approach to God in John Duns Scotus*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 88.

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Whalon, “*Contractus, non consensus: the degeneration of marriage in the medieval period*” unpublished MS.

### *Notes on marriage and same-sex relationships in the Bible*

At one level, this section could be very short. No same-sex couple gets married in the Bible, and the few (four) verses that mention same-sex relations are uniformly negative. They are: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” (Leviticus 18:22) “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.” (Leviticus 20:13) “For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.” (Romans 1:26-27) “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites...” (1 Corinthians 6:9)

These verses only condemn relations, acts. But since the question of a *relationship* never arises, the question whether marriage or something similar is possible for two men or two women is not raised at all. In order to pursue the topic in its proper framework, we need first to consider the scriptural materials on marriage. Then we can look at the isolated verses on homosexual behavior.

To start with, it is worth reflecting on the fact that polygyny (though never polyandry) was practiced throughout the biblical era, and yet Christians have always understood marriage in monogamous terms.

This reflects the growth of the Christian church out of Israel. The patriarchs and kings of Israel practiced polygyny, and the Torah regulated it. The prophets however uniformly condemn the practice. The Torah’s regulations strongly suggest the limiting of an undesirable but socially necessary practice (as it does with slavery), rather than encouraging a healthy

practice. Finally, the historical narratives tend to be very negative about the influence of manifold wives, especially gentiles, upon the practice of the religion of Yahweh.

The Talmud picked up on the condemnation of the prophetic condemnation of polygyny. The rabbinical tradition, while not absolutely negative, is strongly in favor of monogyny. Nevertheless, the practice has not died out completely in certain Jewish communities, since the chief rabbis of Israel condemned the practice in 1950.<sup>23</sup>

The reason that Christians have been uniformly in favor of monogyny is the power of the prophetic tradition. Whereas Jewish leaders were not able to stamp out the practice until recently, the church did almost from the beginning.<sup>24</sup> Why they did so reposes on the same individual strands of the prophetic tradition.

Overall the Bible has relatively little to say, strictly speaking, about a theology of marriage, that is, an explanation of its place in the life of God, creation, and God's people. (For now, we shall prescind from the stories of the original couple, Adam and Eve.) Adrian Thatcher sees two major models of marriage present in the Bible, as well as three minor ones. The two major models are covenant (*berit*) and union, to which we shall return below. The minor ones he calls "dubious necessity," "worldly concession," and "passionate mutual love."<sup>25</sup>

There are three basic forms of biblical discourse about marriage: marriage as metaphor for the relation of God to the chosen people, the prescriptive rules about marriage and sex, and stories and poetry that exemplify the role of marriage and procreation in the life of Israel. The overarching attitude of the Scriptures is that marriage is a necessary aspect of human

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<sup>23</sup> *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. X, article on "polygyny", see <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=425&letter=P>. Accessed 26 June 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Thus the injunctions in I Timothy 3:2 and 12 that bishops and deacons not be the husband of more than one wife could also be intended to exclude polygamists. They could also exclude men who are widowed or divorced, of course.

<sup>25</sup> Adrian Thatcher, *Marriage After Modernity* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 67ff.

community to be regulated. Only in the teaching of Jesus does it take on a specifically transcendent aspect.

That marriage had a central role in the life of Israel is undoubted. As Renita Weems points out, the metaphor of God's marriage to Israel used by Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel was as a result a very powerful image to explain the disasters of the people as like unto the just rewards of an unfaithful wife.<sup>26</sup> Hosea first used this metaphor by marrying Gomer the prostitute as a sign that Israel's idol worship was like wanton harlotry. Yahweh would abandon the "wife of his youth" but she would eventually come to her senses:

In that day, says the Lord, you will call me, 'My husband' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal'. . . I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord. (Hos. 2: 16, 20)

Jeremiah some two hundred years later had no such comforting words:

[Yahweh] will lift up your skirts over your face, and your shame shall be seen. I have seen your abominations, your adulteries and neighings, your lewd harlotries, on the hills, in the field. Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will it be before you are made clean? (Jer. 13: 26-7)

The entire sixteenth chapter of Ezekiel is devoted to a long diatribe against Jerusalem, who is like the worst of gentile women yet nevertheless Yahweh's wife. She became promiscuous and had sex with any stranger, building herself a bedroom in public for her fornication, paying her lovers to have sex with her.

Ezekiel makes it clear that it is Jerusalem's many idols, especially the sacrifice of children to Molech, that is the substance of her "adulteries". For this her husband would strip her naked, just as he found her as a helpless newborn in the field. And when his fury is slaked, he will remember their marriage covenant and make a new and better one, "when I forgive you all that you have done, says the Lord." (vs. 63b)

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<sup>26</sup> Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis : Augsburg Fortress, 1995), p. 14

Isaiah has a similar passage in the third major section of the book (so-called “Trito-Isaiah”):

You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you (62:4-5)

All four prophets use the marriage covenant as a metaphor for Israel’s covenant with God, a covenant to be renewed or made new again.<sup>27</sup>

The specific rules about marriage and sex in the Torah not only regulated polygyny, but they also drew clear lines of consanguinity. Death was prescribed as the punishment for transgressing. The lists of forbidden acts are principally addressed to men (Leviticus 18:19; 20:13, which include a proscription of male homosexual acts). Here a man having sex with a woman — even raping her — and contracting a marriage are synonymous (Deut. 22:23-28). There was no notion of an unconsummated marriage, as medieval canon law would later develop. On the contrary, there is a clear requirement that a husband fulfill his “conjugal duty” to his wife (Deut. 24:5; Ex. 21:10).

The pressure to procreate was tremendous. While a man was forbidden to take as wife his brother’s widow (Lev. 20:21), there was an exception, the so-called levirate law (from Latin *levir*, “husband’s brother”). According to Deut. 25: 5-10, this applied when the sister-in-law was childless. She had to be able to bear a descendant to her dead husband, so that his name could continue. Refusal meant a public shaming by the scorned widow — a serious punishment, in fact, in an honor-shame culture. The stories of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 and the persons in the Book of Ruth are other examples of this overwhelming duty of both men and women to procreate. Further evidence are the stories of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar;

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<sup>27</sup> One can ask whether Israel’s covenant with God was not itself modeled on marriage covenants in ancient Israel. Certainly the power relationship of suzerain and vassal, if not master and slave, is evident.

and Jacob, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah, in which wives who are temporarily infertile send a maid to the husbands as proxies. Finally, a woman who was childless was considered accursed, and a man who had lost his genitals, even in battle, was to be exiled from the people.

Procreation was thus the prime reason for marrying, and the marriage laws and rituals of ancient Israel continued to ensure as they evolved the establishment of kinship for men and the inheritance of property. The tenderness found in the Book of Ruth and the Song of Songs, however, show that marriage was not exclusively about the necessities of communal life, but also about faithful commitment and the joy of sexual love.

The laws for the priests were particular, and they introduce a notion of ritual impurity. The priests were to marry only virgins, not divorced women, prostitutes, or those who had otherwise lost their virginity (Lev. 21: 7, 13-4). As Jonathan Klawans has argued, this is not due to an aversion to sex as something “dirty,” but rather is related to the sacrificial system itself. He posits that priests seek to imitate God in making sacrifice. As the God of Israel neither dies nor has sex, being ritually pure means being healthy and avoiding sex, particularly with women who have had multiple partners and are therefore “sexier,” presumably, than virgins. The “abominations” that brought on moral impurity were heinous because they undid the benefit of sacrifice by discouraging the presence of God.<sup>28</sup>

Thus the Hebrew Scriptures define marriage in terms of its basic anthropological role in the culture, while using it in various ways as a metaphor for God’s relation to Israel, both in its sacrificial system and as a prophetic interpretation of the disasters that befell the nation.

Before considering the teaching of Jesus concerning marriage, which is for our purposes the most significant biblical material, let us consider the other New Testament

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<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Klawans, “Pure Violence: Sacrifice and Defilement in Ancient Israel” *Harvard Theological Review* 94.2 April 2001, pp. 133-56. The word for “abomination” is used as well for male homosexual acts. See also his *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

materials. Paul's attitude to marriage is well-known and can be summed up quickly. He is unmarried, though as he says, he is quite capable and within his rights to travel with a wife as the other apostles do (I Cor. 9:5). He commends his estate to all who are strong enough, though if people "burn," then they should get married (I Cor. 7:9). Husband and wife should not deny each other for long periods of time.

In commending staying in one's social station, Paul echoes Jesus, who, replying to Peter's complaint that he and the others have left their homes (Luke 18:28; cf. Mt. 19:27), says that those who have left everything, *including wives*, shall be receive so much more in this life, and have eternal life in the age to come.

Paul writes to the Corinthians, citizens of a city famous for its licentiousness, that one should avoid fornication. Having sex with a prostitute makes a man become "one flesh" with her, as opposed to being "one" spiritually with the Lord (I Cor.6:16). As this theme from Genesis 2 is never mentioned elsewhere in the Hebrew writings on marriage, but figures prominently in Jesus' teaching, we can surmise that Paul was elaborating on teachings of the first Christians who had taught him their nascent traditions. This is borne out by his considerations of the prohibition on divorce—"the Lord's teaching," as contrasted with his own (I Cor. 7:10).<sup>29</sup>

The prophets' image of Israel as Yahweh's bride becomes, *mutatis mutandis*, the Church as the bride of Christ. This is implicit in the verse referring to prostitutes. Paul develops it a little further in II Cor. 11:2. "I am jealous for you, with the jealousy of God," the apostle writes, "for I betrothed you to Christ, thinking to present you as a chaste virgin to her true and only husband." Then Paul contrasts this with the serpent tempting Eve, the first wife, as false apostles try to get the Corinthians to believe in a different Jesus than he whom

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<sup>29</sup> C. K. Barrett, *Paul* (John Knox: Louisville, KY, 1994, p. 138f.

Paul proclaims. Clearly the prophetic metaphor of idolatry as adultery by Yahweh's wife is operative.

It re-appears in the familiar passage from Ephesians 5, a complex text that addresses relations between husband and wife. Whether Paul or a disciple of his is the author is not our concern here: what is relevant is that again, the Genesis 2 verse is quoted in the context of the Church becoming one with Christ (vss. 29-32). Physical union in marriage and spiritual union with Christ are not contrasting but parallel metaphors. It is, the author says, "a great mystery" (*to musterion touto mega estin*, vs.32). Translated into Latin as "*magnum sacramentum*," this verse later became, as we shall see, a key verse for the understanding of marriage as a sacrament.

Other New Testament material on marriage concerns mainly the image of the Rule of God as a great wedding banquet, to which the faithful are invited. This image appears in Jesus' parables, and obliquely in John's story of the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-12) and his recounting of the Baptist's words calling Jesus the bridegroom (by implication the Messiah) and himself the groom's friend (3:29). In Revelation, this banquet image is wedded to that of the Lamb and the New Jerusalem (ch. 21).

#### *Jesus' teaching on marriage*

The central teachings of Jesus address two questions. One, attested by Matthew and Luke (the so-called "Q" source), is the Sadducees' loaded query about levirate marriage. A woman is married and widowed six times, each time being re-married to her first husband's brothers. Whose wife shall she be in the resurrection? Jesus replies that in heaven we are neither married nor given in marriage (Mt. 22:23-30). In other words, as we are with God and like God, we do not have the societal burden to procreate (the reason for the levirate exception to the general prohibition). Thus, in the resurrection, we are like angels, no longer in necessity of bringing to birth that which must die (Luke 20: 34-6).

The other teaching of Jesus concerns remarriage after divorce. Before considering these texts, it is worth noting that while Jesus presents a positive theology of marriage, it arises within the context of considering the case for divorce. Christian reasoning about marriage ever since has been skewed by the tendency to consider marriage from the perspective of what constitutes proper grounds for its dissolution. This is akin to trying to deduce the substance of a contract from the conditions of its termination.

Following the standard textual theory, Mark presents the earliest strata of the tradition (10:2-12), which then is followed with some variation by Matthew (19:1-12), along with the separate attestation of the “Q source” (Mt. 5: 31-32; Lk. 16:18).<sup>30</sup> In Mark and Matthew, Pharisees test Jesus by asking whether it is lawful for a husband to divorce his wife (Matthew adds “for any cause”). The two gospels invert the order of Jesus’ reply. In Mark, he responds by asking them to quote the Mosaic Law, and then explains that the Law found in Deuteronomy 24:1 allowing divorce was given “for their hardness of heart.” “From the beginning of creation,” Jesus explains in both gospels, “‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no one put asunder.” In Matthew, Jesus does not ask the Pharisees to quote the Law: they do it themselves as a question.<sup>31</sup>

Theories of the origins of these three sources explain the differences. Mark’s context appears to be the Church in Rome, hence the saying about a wife divorcing her husband,

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<sup>30</sup> If this hypothetical document inferred from sayings common to Matthew and Luke but absent in Mark actually exists. Marcus Borg, *et al.*, have expanded the analysis of Q into three separate layers, Q1, Q2, and Q3. According to them, the divorce saying is part of the earliest stratum. See Marcus J. Borg, Mark Powelson, Ray Rieger eds., *The Lost Gospel Q: The Original Sayings of Jesus* (Berkeley, CA : Ulysses Press, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> Before returning to this central common statement, the textual variations are worth noting. Matthew goes on to quote the Q statement already present in 5:32 (and paralleled in Luke 16:18): “And I say to you,” (Matthew’s addition), “whoever divorces his wife, except for *porneia* (Matthew’s addition), and marries another commits adultery.” Mark has the disciples question Jesus later in private about what he meant (one of that evangelist’s trademark literary devices), who then explains in language almost exactly like Q: “whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery” (Mark adds “against her”). Then his unique take on the remarriage of the wife: “and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” Q has another take on the wife: “whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Mt. 5:32b; Lk. 16:18b).

which was certainly possible under Roman law and quite frequent,<sup>32</sup> but impossible in the original Palestinian context, in which only the husband had the right to divorce.

Matthew's addition of "for any cause" to the Pharisees' question and his insertion of *porneia* reflect the debate between the rabbinical schools of Hillel and Shammai on the interpretation of the Law in Deut 24:1. *Porneia* is the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew 'erwat d'bar, "something unseemly (or indecent)." Hillel interpreted this broadly to mean virtually anything ("for any cause"), while Shammai interpreted it strictly to adultery. This theoretically reflects the context of the gospel, a Jewish-Christian community concerned with locating Jesus and his teachings within the traditions of Israel.

Furthermore, various textual variations seem to be later additions to the original teaching, as noted above. We can with confidence assert that Jesus did prohibit divorce and re-marriage in quite absolute terms,<sup>33</sup> and did so by making a unique argument from Scripture.<sup>34</sup>

"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" An apparently silly question, in light of Deut. 24:1. Yet Mark and Matthew say the Pharisees put this question to Jesus in order to "test" or "tempt" (*peirazontes*) him. One may assume, perhaps, that this was to clarify what they had heard him already teaching. What follows is one of the few times when an evangelist has Jesus quote Scripture in defense of his teaching, and the only time two disparate verses are brought together.

Jesus proclaims that Moses gave the Law in Deuteronomy "for your hardness of heart." But, he explains, in the beginning, at the creation, it was meant to be otherwise, and Jesus

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<sup>32</sup> Mackin quotes an historical study of Roman tomb inscriptions in which, of 25,000 inscriptions, only 28 praise the *unavira*, the woman married only once. Theodore Mackin, *Divorce and Remarriage*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 94f.

<sup>33</sup> Many scholars note the absolute quality of Jesus' prohibition with that of the Qumran community. Cf. 11QTemple 57:17-19: "... He shall take no wife apart from her because only she will be with him all the days of her life. If she dies, he shall take for himself another from his father's house, from his family."

<sup>34</sup> While there are some scholars who would dispute that Jesus actually quoted these two verses, the burden of proof remains upon them, in light of the concordance with the criteria of authenticity.

then quotes two verses that he stitches together. The first is the latter half of Genesis 1:27: “God made them male and female;” and the second is Gen. 2:24: “for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

The juxtaposition of the two verses in defense of his absolutist position implies a number of assertions. The first is that, contrary to the story told in Genesis 2, in which “the two become one flesh” because originally Eve devolved from Adam, the reason a man and woman actually become “one” is because God created them to do so. Only because of the “hardness of heart” which characterizes rebels against God (e.g., the Pharaoh of Exodus) was a concession made.

The second assertion follows directly: “just so, they are not two but rather one flesh. What God has therefore joined together, let no one put apart (*xorizeto*).” The implication is that the actor in marriage is not the bride and groom but God. The casual divorce that men alone practiced set one completely against God, and made one into the prophets’ synonym for an idolator—an adulterer.

The third assertion follows from the treatment of Genesis 2, the story that is often used to justify the inferior status of women, as Woman came in that story from the rib of Man. Since in fact men justified their power to casually divorce a wife from the rib story (and the ensuing story of the Fall<sup>35</sup>), Jesus is annulling the scriptural rationalizations for their behavior. This would be consonant with Jesus’ well-known attitude toward women that was quite different than that of his male contemporaries.

While we shall discuss the theological implications of this central aspect of Jesus’ teaching in our arguments for a theology of marriage, some observations are pertinent at this point.

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<sup>35</sup> Sirach 25:24, 26b).

Quoting the second half of Genesis 1:27 required Jesus' listeners to make the connection with the first half, which they undoubtedly would have: "So God created 'adam in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.'" This then leads back to the previous verse, 26: "Then God said, "Let us make 'adam in our image and after our likeness, and let them have dominion" over all animals.

The word for "image" is *tzelem*, and it occurs twelve times outside of "image of God": where it means "physical representation" (e.g., I Sam. 6:5). The word translated "likeness" is *demut*, which connotes a resemblance, as in Is. 13:4. Over the centuries theologians have pondered what difference exists between "image" and "likeness." Human beings have some resemblance to God that other creatures do not, a "dominion" which derives from men and women "being fruitful and multiplying" (vs.26, 28).

But strictly speaking, Jesus is referring to the image of God being fashioned in some sense in humankind, differentiated as we are into male and female. As a result, in marriage the bride and groom become "one flesh." It does not take much to see the connection between the fundamental declaration of the *sh'ma*, the "creed" of Israel, that God is One, and the unity that prevails in marriage. God has mysteriously joined the two in the image of the divine Unity: therefore to divide the married couple by divorce is metaphorically to divide God. Thus the insistence of Jesus that divorce and remarriage is adultery, not just in the usual sense but also in its prophetic sense as being idolatry in rebellion against the One God.

There is therefore a connection in Jesus' novel teaching with the prophets' metaphor of the relation between Yahweh and Israel, which Paul picked up later. Hard-hearted Israel had wandered off from her husband and fornicated—hard-hearted men had abandoned their wives to a desperate fate and committed adultery with their new women. But there is, more importantly, an authoritative re-evaluation of the value of marriage, making it much more than an imperative of every culture. Marrying involves the action of the Spirit.

Concerning those homosexual acts prohibited in the four verses cited above, none has any specific relation to marriage. In fact, if anything, the term “abomination” strongly suggests a specifically religious, not social, transgression. To what dangers could male homosexual acts expose the community?

As noted above, wasting semen was considered a serious matter. It has been suggested that it was not only a refusal to procreate (as with Onan in Gen. 38: 9-10), but also an intent to frustrate God’s design to bring to birth the Messiah.<sup>36</sup> Other explanations advanced are that since ancient conquerors often anally penetrated the defeated leader in public, the prohibition was a rejection of this humiliation. Or else that the practice was typical of male prostitutes belonging to the temple of a pagan god or goddess, and therefore related to idolatry, as Leviticus 18:3 strongly implies.

Paul’s mention in Romans 1 of pagan men and women “giving up natural relations in favor of unnatural ones”<sup>37</sup> is a symbol of the guilty rejection of God’s law planted in their hearts. It is the opening salvo of his argument that leads up to the ringing assertion that “there is none who does good, no, not one” (quoting Psalm 14:3)—and Jews are even worse offenders than Gentiles (2:24). This last point always seems to be overlooked by interpreters who focus on the preceding chapter.<sup>38</sup>

In both Testaments, nothing connects these verses to marriage itself.<sup>39</sup> Jesus never mentions homosexuality at all, of course.

#### *A few historical notes*

It is quite inaccurate to assert, as often happens in recent commentary, that Christian marriage was no different than marriages among others in the Roman Empire. As early an author as Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 110), in his *Letter to Polycarp*, makes clear that the church

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<sup>36</sup> See James Hanigan, *Homosexuality: The Test Case for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Paulist, 1988).

<sup>37</sup> The only time the Bible mentions women in this regard.

<sup>38</sup> Alison, *Undergoing God*, pp. 123-140. He makes the point that most patristic commentators, including Augustine, construed women’s “unnatural relations” as referring to anal intercourse. And see below, p. 68.

<sup>39</sup> *To Set Our Hope*, para. 2.19, p. 19f.

had a critical role in Christian marriages (chapter 4). There is a considerable patristic literature concerning marriage for Christians. That it was considered sacramental in the early centuries is clear from surviving liturgies of the Oriental churches that originated in the Imperial period.<sup>40</sup>

Augustine of Hippo, is the thinker with the most impact on later thought on marriage, as well as on the Western Church in general. His treatment of questions of marriage spans virtually his entire Christian career, from *De sermone Domini in monte* (written in 394) to *De nuptiis et concupiscencia* and *De coniugiis adulterinis* (written in 429, a year before his death). He is of course one of the rare patristic authors who had had an experience of fathering a child and conjugal life, though he never actually married.

Augustine's fundamental theological view of marriage developed in his apologetic against the Manichees (a sect to which he had once belonged), and his defense of that apologetic against Pelagians. He found in marriage three *boni* or goods: *fides* (sexual fidelity), *proles* (children to be nurtured), *sacramentum* or lasting commitment. These goods of marriage as he defined them continue to be discussed today.

Sexual intercourse had as its only reason the procreation of children, for Augustine. Any hint of passion was an occasion of sin. Such passion, the disobedience of the genital organs against the mind, is the consequence of the Fall. Concupiscence is therefore an aspect of original sin. Semen carried for Augustine the *vitium*, the corruption of sin. From this evil could come good, namely, children. Thus procreation for Augustine is the principal purpose (*causa*) of marriage.<sup>41</sup> As *sacramentum*, marriage was a "remedy for concupiscence." Its sacramental character was that of the *vinculum* or bond established by God, and therefore

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<sup>40</sup> John Zizoulas, *Eucharist Bishop Church* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001), pp.14-18; Pierre Yousif, "The Sacrament of Marriage in the Tradition of the Church of the East" in *Syriac Dialogue*, eds. Peter Hofrichter and Gerhard Wilfinger (Vienna: Pro Oriente, 2003) pp. 40-56.

<sup>41</sup> Mackin has an excellent summary of Augustine's evolving position, *Marriage?*, 127-139. See also Elizabeth Clark's selection of his writings: *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality* (Washington, D.C.: CUA 1996).

unbreakable. Behind his arguments is the Augustine he describes in the *Confessions*, the man who once could not live without sexual conquests.<sup>42</sup>

The use of the word *sacramentum* is significant. Its origin in Christianity arises not in conjunction with what we now call the sacraments of Baptism or Holy Eucharist, but rather in the discussion of marriage in Ephesians 5. It is the Latin translation of “mystery,” *mysterion*.

Charles Price argues that the reason Christians for three centuries avoided using the word “mystery” to describe ritual acts was because Baptism and subsequent Eucharist could be confused with the rites of the mystery religions such as that of Mithras. Its original meaning came from the Hebrew *sodh*, which is the revelation of God’s secret plan to the prophets. The “mystery” of Christ referred therefore to the content of the *kerygma*, the proclamation of who Jesus really is in the incarnation, atonement and resurrection. The word *sacramentum* became current much earlier to describe Baptism and Eucharist, perhaps because one of its meanings referred to the initiatory rites of soldiers swearing allegiance to their commanders with terrible oaths and blood sacrifices.<sup>43</sup>

Augustine’s use of *sacramentum* to describe marriage is part of the process that will eventually include it among the seven sacraments as defined at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. He seems to have used the term in two ways. The first was lifted from the pagan term connoting a sacred commitment, like that of soldiers. The other was that marriage as a *sacramentum* has an indelible character that not even remarriage can erase.<sup>44</sup>

Another reason for Augustine’s ambivalence was a seriously debilitating development in the first centuries. The first Christians had inherited Israel’s positive view of sexual

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<sup>42</sup> *Confessions* 2.2.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Price, “Mysteries and Sacraments,” in *Christ and His Communities* (Cincinnati: Forward Movement, 1990), pp. 124-139.

<sup>44</sup> Augustine may have been thinking of the impression made on a metal circle by minting it. Eugenio Scalco, “‘Sacramentum connubii’ et institution nuptiale,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 69.1, pp. 27-47, esp. 28.

pleasure as a happy byproduct of the prime duty to procreate. The hostility of the rising Stoic philosophies toward sexual pleasure seems to make an appearance in Paul's writings (how much is hotly argued). What is undeniable is that in the larger society, sexuality itself became suspect, an animal vestige of human nature which must be mastered rather than enjoyed. As James Brundage observes, the ancient world "yearned for carnal ecstasy and forswore it with cold disdain."<sup>45</sup> Along with thinkers like Seneca and Epictetus, Christians soon developed a profound antipathy to sexual pleasure. The traditions of the prophetic metaphor of Israel as the adulterous wife of Yahweh, translated into Christian terms as moral impurity, the polluting of the "marriage bed" of Christ and the souls of his disciples. Despite the disappearance of Israel's sacrificial system, emerging Stoic notions made subtle alignment with the older concept of ritual impurity, as well. As the monastic ideal of the chaste celibate in the image of Jesus (and Paul) grew, so did negative ideas toward marriage. These coincide with the growth of the notion of Mary's perpetual virginity, which only served to reinforce it. For example, Augustine claimed that "marriage is good, virginity is better" in *De sancta virginitate*.<sup>46</sup> Marriage became the preserve of "lesser" Christians, who lacked the discipline or spiritual gift to embrace a sex-free life.

One should remember that Augustine's view of marriage was liberal compared to his contemporaries like Jerome. Yet his thought and the reflections of the Fathers are one in their ambivalence toward sex and marriage.

The Christian Church has never fully recovered.

For now I shall pass over the medieval developments, which were nevertheless quite significant, and move to the Reformers.

Martin Luther and John Calvin, Augustine's great disciples of the Reformation, found reason to part with him over the sacramentality of marriage. Luther's thought on marriage

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<sup>45</sup> James Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 576.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Scalco, p. 29.

has had a huge influence down to our day. Outraged by the rampant sexual immorality around him, particularly in the lax morals of the clergy (in his time popes were giving lavish marriages for their children), and living through his own experience as a former Augustinian monk, Luther devised a “pro-family” theology of marriage. In its outline, it seems close to Augustine’s, but differs in emphasis.

Like Augustine, Luther thought sex became sinful after the Fall. He saw that most men have great difficulty in remaining celibate, but marriage, he came to think, was the place where sexual passion was healed and sanctified. Unlike Augustine, who believed that such passion was itself the mark of sin, Luther considered it to be a remnant of the supreme gift of God to unfallen humanity, procreation. Sex in marriage was sinful yet redeemed: *simul justus et peccator*. Thus Luther very strongly encouraged young people to marry, if they found they had no gift of celibacy, which Luther, following Paul, still admired, though he himself did not possess it. Marriage’s role as a remedy for concupiscence was much less important than making children, which Luther (rightly) considered miraculous. So Luther followed Augustine in identifying *fides, proles, sacramentum*, as the three goods of marriage, but significantly reinterpreted the Bishop of Hippo’s analysis by valuing procreation.

As for Luther’s interpretation of the *sacramentum* of marriage, he considered it to be a “work” of this world only. Marriage is universally practiced and honored in all societies, he observed—therefore there is nothing particularly Christian about it. At the same time, his very high view of marriage, including the equality of the spouses, sounds sacramental. However, Luther’s perspective remains in Eden, sex as the sacrament of the unfallen only.<sup>47</sup>

John Calvin developed a less paradoxical and more positive view of marriage. In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he attacks the notion of its sacramentality first by

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<sup>47</sup> A helpful summary of this large topic is found in Allan Carlson, “A Revolutionary Theology of Sex: Martin Luther on Sex, Marriage and Family,” the 2004 Witherspoon Lecture. See <http://www.frc.org/content/a-revolutionary-theology-of-sex-martin-luther-on-sex-marriage-and-family---july-2-2004>. Accessed on 07/02/2010.

attacking the translation of *mysterion* in Ephesians into Latin as *sacramentum*. He points out that the same translation is made elsewhere without the same emphasis. He continues

But, having graced marriage with the title of sacrament, to call it afterward uncleanness and pollution and carnal filth—what giddy levity is this? How absurd it is to bar priests from this sacrament! [. . .] There is also another absurdity in their dogmas. They affirm that in the sacrament the grace of the Holy Spirit is conferred; they teach copulation to be a sacrament; and they deny that the Holy Spirit is ever present in copulation. Not to have mocked the church simply in one thing, what a long train of errors, lies, frauds, and misdeeds have they attached to this one error? Thus, you may say that they sought nothing but a den of abominations when they made a sacrament out of marriage. For when they once obtained this, they took over the hearing of matrimonial cases; as it was a spiritual matter, it was not to be handled by secular judges.<sup>48</sup>

Calvin viewed marriage as an “ordinance” of God, but not divinely instituted by Christ, on a par with “agriculture, architecture, shoemaking, hair-cutting, legitimate ordinances of God, but they are not sacraments.”<sup>49</sup> In practice, however, he saw it as more elevated than trades and crafts. He allowed divorce and remarriage for adultery, though he wished that adulterers could be executed, thus rendering the whole question moot.

Calvin’s covenant theology, however, had much more effect, influencing the practice of marriage in the United States, for instance, well into the twentieth century.<sup>50</sup>

Anglicans oscillate between the two poles, although the Thirty-Nine Articles name marriage as a “sacramental rite,” not instituted by Christ and therefore not essential to Christian life, unlike Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. In the long run, defining marriage for Christians as a sacrament or not strongly influences the view of same-sex unions.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV. 1936, 37, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia : Westminster, 1960), vol. 2, p. 1483f.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1482.

<sup>50</sup> For examination of this question, see *inter alia* Nancy Cott, *Public Vows* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2000); Hendrik Hartog, *Man & Wife in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2000); Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1998); David Kertzer and Marzio Barbagli, eds., *Family Life in the Long Nineteenth Century, 1789–1913* (New Haven: Yale, 2002); John Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*.

<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., the Sweden Lutheran Church’s Theology Committee reflections, accessed on 26 June 2010 at [www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?di=296188](http://www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?di=296188)

I will make an argument for a sacramental view of Christian marriage—Holy Matrimony<sup>52</sup>. This will also enable me to argue for a high view of same-sex unions. For if marriage is not a sacrament, but just another human activity “like shoemaking,” then same-sex couples should not be denied it, for it is then essentially a secular matter. As such it is up to the authorities to decide whether same-sex couples may legitimately be married, and the Church has little to say about it other than the insistence on social justice. Or even why such a relationship — gay or straight — should be blessed in a church rite.

Nor is civil marriage, as it is conceived today, of much relevance to Christian couples seeking grace to transform their lives. Therefore, some would rather speak of a theology of Christians *in* marriage than a theology *of* Christian marriage,<sup>53</sup> but its close connection to Baptism is then lost. Marriage is hard work, but if there is no transcendent dimension to it, then there is no clear baptismal vocation to it. It is not a means of grace—rather, it is just another work that requires grace to accomplish as part of holy living, something like being a soldier. If this is so, then John Calvin’s position would seem the most reasonable: marriage is part of the Old Creation that people do, along with shoemaking and other honorable pursuits.

Jesus however taught that marriage does have a transcendent dimension, through the action of the Holy Spirit. As I shall argue, it is his teaching that grounds the sacramentality of marriage.

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<sup>52</sup> Its etymology is a combination of the Latin *mater*, “mother,” and *monium*, meaning an action, a condition, a state of being. Its use can be and perhaps ought to be criticized as implying the legitimization of a woman as a mother who therefore will not bear bastards. But besides being easily recognizable as a synonym for marriage, it also means specifically marriage in the Church—thus “holy matrimony.” *Mater* is also the root of “matrix,” a technical term in sacramental theology, but which generally means something which binds other things together, from which something originates or in which it is embedded. Marriage as matrix is a good partial description of it, therefore.

<sup>53</sup> See e.g., Richard Leggett, “‘It is not good for Adam to be alone’: The Blessing of Same-sex Covenants in the Diocese of New Westminster” *Sewanee Theological Review* 53.2 Easter 2010, pp. 205-223. In “Same-sex relationships,” one of the shared contentions of both traditionalists and liberals is that marriage is something entered into.

*“The giver of life”*

“A theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix.”<sup>54</sup> While this famous dictum that opens Bernard Lonergan’s *Method in Theology* has been hotly debated, it seems obvious that it is true of a theology of marriage. Marriage is one of the truly universal features of every human culture, and thus is a constituent factor of the matrix of that culture. This is the point of departure “from below” for any theology of marriage, including same-sex couples. To *be* human is among other things to live in communities that practice some form of it. All cultures therefore practice marriage, and theologically speaking, it is thus an aspect of the creation of human beings—the action of the Holy Spirit, “the Lord, the giver of life.”

The economics of survival dictate to a great extent how people live. Not just what they eat, wear, or sleep under, but also what or whom they worship and how, the mores they develop, their art, political life, and attitudes toward sex, birth, and death. And how they marry. All human societies do it. All societies do it differently.<sup>55</sup>

To a great degree, therefore, how a culture practices marriage reflects the spirit of the culture itself. Indeed, the fact of marriage in a culture has been seen since Aristotle as the essential institution that constitutes a clan, a tribe, a city, a nation. For a religion that claims that God became human in a particular individual named Jesus of Nazareth, marriage should therefore occupy a far greater place in its reflection, teaching and practice than historically, it has.

Aristotle famously wrote that “to understand the whatness of a thing is the same thing as to understand the *why* of it.”<sup>56</sup> Why marriage?

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<sup>54</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), p. xi

<sup>55</sup> With apparently only one known exception—the Na culture, some thirty thousand people living in southwestern China. Their society is structured around sibling bonds, which have lasted as long as ten generations. Procreation occurs mostly through casual sexual liaisons between unrelated people. See Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: How Loved Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 32-33.

<sup>56</sup> *Posterior Analytics* 90a 31.

Robin Fox's 1967 book, *Kinship and Marriage*, has become a contemporary anthropology classic.

Kinship and marriage are about the basic facts of life. They are about "birth and conception, and death," the eternal round that seemed to depress the poet but which excites, among others, the anthropologist.

[ . . . ] Man is an animal, but he puts the basic facts of life to work for himself in ways that no other animal does or can.<sup>57</sup>

The practice of marriage also reflects how cultures answer a number of challenges common to all peoples:

- human progeny need a great deal of nurture outside the womb, more than any other creature, in fact. The requirements that growing big brains place on every society are manifold. Children need to survive a relatively long time before they can begin to be actors in their community's economy. Marriage creates a stable couple procreating and raising children. The children in turn can care for the aged. This has profound economic, educational, and emotional consequences for the culture.
- the need to establish kinship is primordial, especially for men, who, until the advent of DNA analysis, could not be certain about the paternity of the children they raise. Kinship produces the intimate social community that is the family, necessary for raising children but also for helping each individual locate an identity in the social order. The incest taboo grows in ways still argued about from the need humans have to live in family groups.
- how families create clans and larger communities has a great deal to do with marriage as political institution. Getting in-laws is one of the most important functions of marriage.<sup>58</sup> In every society there is also a need to keep sexual jealousy from rending the social fabric. This is marriage's most basic political function.
- marriage creates economies, whether the sophisticated economies of today or that of hunter-gatherers, and these guarantee the survival of the community. Economic power is closely linked to political power. The relationship between property rights, kinship and marriage is perhaps the most socially visible aspect of modern American marriage practice.

Under the wild diversity of human cultures there are some invariant features.<sup>59</sup> There is an emerging school of thought that styles itself "generative anthropology." Its premise rests

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<sup>57</sup> Robin Fox, *Kinship and Marriage* (Cambridge, England, 1967; Cambridge University Press), p.27

<sup>58</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, p.33.

<sup>59</sup> See Stephen Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking Press, 2002), who makes a persuasive case, if rather grandly stated.

on the work of Professor Eric Gans at the University of California at Los Angeles.<sup>60</sup> He points to a remarkable convergence among anthropologists, linguists, paleontologists, and philosophers who agree on the origin of the distinctiveness of our species, *Homo sapiens*. We distinguish ourselves from other hominids—and indeed have entirely replaced them—because of our ability to communicate with each other with language. This ability was acquired sometime between 100,000 and 50,000 years ago, depending on the theorist, and was either a genetic mutation or cultural leap forward, again depending on the theorist. At the same time, our species developed an esthetic sense, creating works of art never before seen, and simultaneously, also became aware of the sacred. Finally, animal pair-bonding became the symbolic bond we call “marriage”.

The specifics of Gans’ theory notwithstanding, it is clear that phenomenologically, at least, marriage is always a feature of human community, and it is not such in any other species. Furthermore, it is always a symbolic bond, rather than the merely associative pair-bonding of all other animals. The question is what it symbolizes.

The answer seems obvious: the way a society practices marriage reflects how it sees the constitution of itself as a community. The relationships that structure those communities are its essence, and each culture develops over time various communal understandings of how relationships should be entered into and broken. These understandings about marriage reflect its shared beliefs—including theology—about what is required for it to survive. Not what is *actually* required, but what the specific culture *believes* to be necessary. This last point is crucial for a Christian theology of marriage.

The power of the culture each of us is raised in is precisely that it comes to us with mother’s milk — it is inescapable. As we are learning a language, we are also learning the

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<sup>60</sup> See, *inter alia*, *The Origin of Language: A Formal Theory of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990). *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford University Press, 1993). Gans also edits and publishes the journal *Anthropoetics* (<http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/anthro.htm>).

many sub- and super-linguistic ideations embodied in ritual gesture, intersubjective transactions with others, stories of gods and goddesses, origins, and of heroic members of our families, communities, societies, all of which embody our values and norms. This influence is basic: neurologists are now positing that it can even effect physical changes at the neuronal level. If one could plot individual members of a community as they relate to these, the result would arguably be a normal distribution, that is, a bell curve — a statistical representation of “normal people” as defined by that community. Moreover, the ability to reason beyond one’s own culture is quite limited, even in the most “multi-cultural” persons among us.

Most cultures of the past confronted the “shortness and uncertainty of human life” quite directly. It is safe to say that with some exceptions, Thomas Hobbes’ characterization of life for our ancestors in their societies as “nasty, brutish, and short” is accurate. In general, people lived to around the age of 35, one out of two children died before they reached puberty, women frequently died in childbirth, and the energies of the particular human community were perforce wholly focused on survival. Survival in the short term meant finding enough food, water and shelter every day. In the long term children were needed to work the fields or help herd livestock, as well as replace the deceased. The short-, medium-, and long-term survival of the community therefore required a high birth rate. Men, being more expendable than women for this purpose, did most of the fighting over scarce resources with other communities. The societies that produced the Holy Scriptures lived within these harsh strictures.

These same conditions continue today unabated for far too many in our world. It is why many people around the globe do not understand the development of gay relationships, and have little patience with the topic. A farmer in, say, Malawi, who has had a great deal of difficulty getting in a decent harvest year after year with his wife and children will probably be nonplussed by a discussion of the right for gays to marry, have children, receive the

Church's blessing, and be ordained. This writer recalls a conversation at the Lambeth 2008 Conference where a Sudanese bishop whom I had never met suddenly sat down next to me at breakfast and without any greeting asked, "What do two men do in bed?"

Cultural context, therefore, must always be respected, both in the universal ways humans make and carry forth culture, and that each always has unique features that should not be peremptorily judged by people of other cultures. For well-educated, well-fed First-worlders like me, the hard realities of human life as virtually all our ancestors experienced it have changed. We are heirs of a particularly successful technological civilization. We now live over twice as long, on average, as our forebears. Overpopulation means we cannot afford a high birth rate, which contraception allows us to achieve. Moreover, today's market economies require women to work alongside men in occupations that demand little muscular effort but very long educational preparation. The move in the West toward privatizing marriage begun by the development of medieval canon law<sup>61</sup> has blossomed, a mustard seed become a great shrub indeed thanks to contraception, societal mobility, long life spans as the norm, and a host of other factors never before seen.

And yet the same exigencies that molded our ancestors' lives are still present. Our economic life, which assures our survival, still lies at the heart of most of the cultural ideas that inform our communal self-image. If some dreadful global catastrophe brought an end to our civilization and the benefits we enjoy in the First World,<sup>62</sup> we would swiftly develop new norms for marriage that would strongly resemble the necessarily coercive ones that guided our forebears.

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<sup>61</sup> See Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1997), pp. 54-89.

<sup>62</sup> Thinking of the adage, "Civilization is only three meals away from collapse," attributed to Oswald Spengler. It may appear to the reader that my view on culture resembles that of civilization presented in his two-volume work, *The Decline of the West*. While Spengler's ideas are unfairly presented as sympathetic to National Socialism, he remains worth reading if only for the highly imaginative arguments he presents for cycles of growth and decline of civilizations. However, though I am convinced that cultural determinism plays a much greater role in our individual and societal development than is generally admitted, I also believe that Christian life can allow us to overcome the hegemonies of cultural norms and Spenglerian "inevitable decline."

Same-sex relationships, though there is nothing new about them, have never been seen as essential to any community's actual survival. This may be at the origin of the resistance to calling a same-sex union a marriage.

*The natural law*

In contemplating the invariant aspects of human community, we can also discern a perennial pattern of human life, which is the identification and practice of virtues. Human communities do not seek merely to survive: they also define for themselves norms of what makes for the "good life," in other words, what attitudes help people flourish. Following Aristotle in a general way, we can say that virtue is whatever characteristic a person needs to develop in order to become someone who seeks after and enables the flourishing of the community.<sup>63</sup> One can view virtue, as does Aristotle, from the perspective of what makes a good person, or as does Kongzi (Confucius), what are good things to do.<sup>64</sup>

Societies invariably develop ideas of what makes for the society's flourishing. This reflection developed eventually into philosophical schools of thought, in particular ancient Greece and China, which began to inquire systematically into what makes an action, a thing, a person, good. Prior to this, however, such virtuous models are first found in the tales of legendary heroes and heroines, gods and goddesses, and like all important matters in life, these are ritualized in various ways.

This universal drive to inculcate the qualities in individuals that will benefit their society allows us to approach this phenomenon through the natural law tradition.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I.13; II.5, 6.

<sup>64</sup> Philip Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, second edition (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000.) See also Lee Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage* (New York: SUNY Press, 1990)

<sup>65</sup> Especially as revived by Elizabeth (G.E.M.) Anscombe in "Modern Moral Philosophy" *Philosophy* 33, No. 124 (January 1958), pp. 1-19. In this article Anscombe defined "consequentialism" and inspired many to begin looking at the virtue tradition again. See also Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, Second Edition, 1984); *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*, The Gifford Lectures (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame University Press,

The value of natural law for this essay's project is to place into the context of some basic theological presuppositions the elements of a theology of marriage. One reason for the Church's perennial diffidence toward marriage is that marriage is a quintessential means of societal coercion placed on people to fulfill their economic and political roles in their particular society's project of survival. In other words, marriage is usually structured according to the distribution of power. Paul's injunction to people in I Corinthians 7:21 not to seek to change their status—slave or unmarried—was that such exertion detracted from the primordial task of spreading the Gospel, in light of the immanent return of Jesus. The rise of celibacy, considered as the best form of Christian living, argues from this: marriage is a burdensome requirement to procreate and participate in other basic economic and political ways to the survival of the community. Thus, those who feel they must get married (because they “burn”) are “weaker” than those who eschew sexual relations—and the other “natural” *boni* or goods of marriage, like progeny—for the sake of the Kingdom. Weaker because they then become subject to the marital norms, and thus the power structure, of secular society. Not for nothing was Christianity so popular among slaves in the first centuries, for slaves had no right to marry (though that fact gave the Church a lot of pastoral problems).

Therefore the Church over its history has not had a great deal of good to say about marriage, in particular to give sound, wholesome and practical advice about being Christian *and* married. So it stands to reason that underlying theologies of marriage have been undeveloped, even discouraging. To try to develop a persuasive theology of same-sex relationships—either positive or negative—from such perspectives is clearly doomed from the start.

One strength of the “traditionalist” argument against the validity of same-sex relationships is their championing of the natural law tradition. They are right to insist that it

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1990); Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason: A Thomistic View of Moral Autonomy*, tr. Gerald Mansbury (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005)

not be dismissed—this tradition supports the notion that reality is at least partially intelligible, in fact, significantly so.

The theory of natural law, developed in classical philosophy and in patristic and scholastic theology, attempts to account for the awareness of certain general moral principles that human beings have, apart from specifically religious teachings. Human beings have a rational nature, which in the social and moral spheres implies the ability to have purposes and reasons for our actions. This allows us to discern meanings and purposes in the world we live in, and to draw moral conclusions from reflecting on the nature of human life.<sup>66</sup>

If this assertion is in fact *not* true, then there is no point to most Christian theological reflection. Islamic reflection on the Qur'an, for instance, tends to eschew speculation and adheres very closely to a tradition of legal parsing of their Scriptures.<sup>67</sup> If human communal reason is completely unreliable, then in fact all that is needed for salvation is a set of divine commands divinely revealed and humanly obeyed. Some Christians since the eighteenth century have tried to make the Bible into such a suprarational instrument, but they are wrong. We are commanded to love God with all our mind — which requires, basically, paying attention, raising questions and making reasoned judgments about all that we encounter, including our world, our selves, and this perennial “sense of the sacred” that we all share.

While the quotation above is a good thumbnail sketch of what is meant by the natural law tradition, it does not acknowledge the historical reality of how such discernment of meanings and purposes change over time. We need a more effective theory of natural law.

In a very general sense, we can assert that all human cultures develop a moral sense. I am not interested here in defending one theory of moral reasoning over another. But it is quite relevant to a theology of marriage to be able to say with confidence that each society develops this moral sense—of how each member should behave, based on cultural understandings of reality. In other words, it is an invariant constant of human communities

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<sup>66</sup> “Same-sex Relationships”, p. 28ff. *Anglican Theological Review* 93.1, p. 36.

<sup>67</sup> While Christian thinkers have valued the philosophical contributions of Avicenna and Averroës, they are comparatively little studied in the Islamic world.

that we discover that nature is intelligible at least to a degree, especially in the common tasks that the community's survival is believed to demand. It would be foolish to claim that human communities always get it right. In fact, the processes of decline are rooted in the specific flaws of each culture's processes for flourishing. But we are always trying, if only to live another day, to see our children's children, and to believe that our struggle is not in vain.

Moreover, not all societies' understandings are equally valid, which is the weakness in the "traditionalists'" interpretation of natural law quoted above. "True law," Cicero famously said, "is right reason corresponding to nature."<sup>68</sup> The emphasis that contemporary philosophers of virtue give to the intelligibility of nature is rooted in Cicero, not Aristotle, who is also the real guiding light of the scholastics' natural law thought.<sup>69</sup> Cicero understood clearly that each society has its own approximation of the natural law, expressed by and embedded in historically conditioned mores, customs, myths and legends, rituals, and art. For *true* law is *right* reason, and so defective reason will give rise to false law.<sup>70</sup>

Once our *sapiens* ancestors started to speak, the project of rendering nature intelligible began. One can say that, in fact, this *is* the project of human language, trying to understand and communicate in sign, signal and symbol the facts of our communal life, expressing it as we are taught and reflect on what we are taught, and passing it on in how we live as a consequence. We also developed other symbolic communication: the sense of the sacred ritually embodied, the need to create art, and marriage that communicates how relations of power and other relationships are conceived. And this has been highly successful for us as a species.

Each culture will define the terms of what it considers to be "the good life" differently, and that definition will change with time. But each has one, and, for better and for worse, it

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<sup>68</sup> *De republica* III.23, 33. Quoted in Porter, *Nature as Reason*, p. 2f.

<sup>69</sup> Porter, *Nature*, p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> In their portrayal of natural law, the "traditionalists" do not account for the distance between what a community believes and what is actually real. That distance is the result of the interpersonal and intracommunal processes by which communities and societies define that which "everybody knows."

grounds that society's moral psychology. As children are born into that society in a given place and time, they are inculturated with that psychology, which will define how they think and act, even if only to rebel against the prevailing ethos.

The advantage that Thomas Aquinas' theory of the natural law has is significant. Thomas' method accords a supreme place to Scripture, without which the natural law cannot be rightly understood. It is not a spectacular break from tradition, but a very respectful engagement with previous voices, yet presenting a creative way forward on many questions.<sup>71</sup> Much of his opus represents a permanent achievement in theology and philosophy, with which all generations since have had to deal. For Anglicans, the work of Richard Hooker builds to a great extent on Aquinas, thus affording an entry via our own tradition.

One of the basic questions about the natural law, and indeed, that transcends it, is the relation between revelation and nature. Can humans reliably understand and apply *God's* will to their daily survival issues?

Thomas' answer is no, not without scriptural revelation. But he also insists that this revelation will itself not be understandable, never mind applicable, if we do not grasp that to which it applies. In other words, we have to know that God's Word is spoken to circumstances we have to deal with every day, and therefore we need alongside the "volume" of Scripture the volume of "creation." Thomas is often wrongly characterized as a philosopher interested in proving God exists, instead of the biblical theologian that he is.<sup>72</sup> To follow his method is to insist that we can independently establish a number of things about marriage and same-sex relationships. However, since we as disciples of Jesus need to know

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<sup>71</sup> Karl Rahner among others has called attention to the "modernity" of Thomas' method.

<sup>72</sup> "[Scripture for Thomas] depicts God as one who is turned toward creation in providential care, and who is turned toward it in a loving offer of friendship. All this amounts to something more than a confirmation of what we already know about God, even with some supplemental knowledge thrown in. Rather, it gives definite content for what would otherwise be a series of placeholders for whatever we take to be ultimate in given categories of explanation—in Aquinas' lapidary words, whatever it is 'that all call God' (*Summa theologica* I. 2.3). As such, revelation not only confirms and supplements what we knew or thought we knew about God, it also indicates the proper significance of God's existence for us, in the process transforming even those elements that could be independently established." Jean Porter, *Nature*, p. 328.

the mind of Christ in order to live holy lives (cf. I Cor. 2:16), we must allow the Holy Spirit, speaking through Scripture, to transform us for eternal life, beginning in the here and now.

So for example, agreeing with Aristotle that God exists as an unmoved mover whose existence is rooted in thinking about thinking (see his *Metaphysics*, especially book 12) tells us nothing at all about how God is toward us, and has minimal impact upon the way we live our lives. It is an intellectual exercise only. Compare this with Paul's assertion in Romans 1: 19-23 that all people — not just Jews and Christians — can have insight not only into the reality of God's existence but also can grasp God's will for them.

Such a grasp will always be partial in this life — “for now we know only in part” (I Cor. 13: 12b). Underlying that grasp is the framework within which we construct it. Aquinas' permanent achievement does not depend upon the metaphysics he employs, but rather his method. For we no longer hold to the static view of nature that prevailed until the twentieth century, an abstraction of human being “as such.”<sup>73</sup>

Understanding marriage in the light of revelation means appreciating what marriage actually is, a basic transcultural phenomenon linked to the development of culture and language as particular to our species of hominid, on the one hand. And on the other, interpreting Scripture in such a way so as to apply this feature of our being — created to be this way — to what God is and how God relates to us, within the accepted creedal framework. A theology of marriage therefore needs to focus acutely upon the movement from the apprehension of the challenges to survival and flourishing that specific physical conditions present to a given community to the creation and maintenance (and decline) of cultural norms for the response to those challenges. Because this process is never uniform, it

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<sup>73</sup> “In this fashion one knows man as such; and man as such, precisely because he is an abstraction, also is unchanging. It follows in the first place, that on this view one is never going to arrive at any exigence for changing forms, structures, methods, for all change occurs in the concrete, and on this view the concrete is always omitted. But it also follows in the second place, that this exclusion of changing forms, structures, methods, is not theological; it is grounded simply upon a certain conception of...philosophic method.” Bernard Lonergan, “The transition from the classicist world-view to historical mindedness”, (*A Second Collection*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), p. 5.

will have different specific outcomes in different times. A properly theological analysis of marriage will examine it as part of God's good creation and providential care for men and women. Moreover it will place it within God's gracious offer of salvation that establishes the ground for right relation with God and each other. Marriage, in other words, helps us to understand something of God's self-revelation to us. And in the long run, that revelation helps us understand something about marriage as well.

This understanding of the relation between Scripture and natural law can then help develop a theological understanding of same-sex relationships that is genuinely faithful as it addresses the situation of modern societies.

*Notes toward a theology of marriage and Holy Matrimony*

One essential question that must first be confronted is the theological meaning of sexual differentiation. In God's economy, why are humans female and male?

In Genesis 2, the '*adam* creature pinched together from clay and infused with breath — the "groundling" or "earthling" as some translate it — is then split into male and female, Adam and Eve. It is only after their sin that the human couple's relationship becomes distorted. Yahweh spells out one of its consequences to Eve: "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will be your master." (Gen.3:16)

As Jesus said, however, "from the beginning this was not so." That we are each woman or man is part of God's providence for us.

The notion of providence has been explored in various ways by theologians. Creationists of one stripe or another will define providence as a direct designing of human being by God, and divine intervention to care for us. How God provides is however far more subtle and interesting.

Thomas Aquinas conceived of God's providence as an order of things towards an end, some of necessity, others by contingency.<sup>74</sup> All the universe, therefore, has an order which is meant to provide: first, cycles of existence and being, then cycles of life.<sup>75</sup> We can conceive of human beings as the universe becoming aware of itself. Our chief end, our ultimate happiness or *beatitudo*, as Thomas defines it, is found in the unmediated presence of God. So we become aware of ourselves and then, through life, we become aware of God, and God's call and design to have us share God's life not only in the brief spark of this life, but forever. Providence, then, is God ordering all beings to provide for others.

Sexual reproduction evolved in order to produce genetically unique individuals—a critical necessity for God to make covenants with each of us. For it is part of the human condition that we are both individual members of a species of animal, and also unique persons. This begins with our birth into a world where the very first distinction is our sexed bodies. And from the Fall, according to Scripture, that difference has been at the heart of a distorted relationship, an inequality of power.

Here it is worth considering John Zizioulas' argument concerning alterity or "otherness". Without otherness, there is no communion, he posits, using the Trinity as supreme example. The tragedy of humankind is that we fear the other at the same time that we absolutely need the other. The story of Adam and Eve is about the fear and rejection of the ultimate Other, leading to division from God, on the one hand, and turning the difference between the two into division as well. Since then, quoting Jean-Paul Sartre, the other has become my enemy and "my original sin." As such, unique persons are degraded into interchangeable individuals of a species, for personhood only emerges from relationship: the Person is "communion in otherness and otherness in communion." This generates the freedom that characterizes the person, a freedom not from but for the other. This makes the

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<sup>74</sup> *Summa theologica*, I.22.

<sup>75</sup> If there are multiple universes, or "the multiverse," then this is simply writ larger. Much larger.

person “ec-static”, i.e., enabling a movement from within self to affirm the other. And this other is not only other people or God but also the creation itself. “Only the person can be an artist in the true sense, that is, a creator that brings about a totally other identity as an act of freedom and communion.” And while it may seem parenthetical, Zizioulas relates this to the “ecological problem” — “a crisis between the human being and *the otherness of the rest of creation.*” One antidote is the Holy Eucharist, in which the created elements of bread and wine are so “affirmed” that “they acquire *personal* qualities (the body and blood of Christ) in the event of the communion of the Spirit.”<sup>76</sup>

It should be clear that personhood as affirmation of the other is related to marriage. But at the same time, it is also related to the other deepest relationships in life: parent-child, sibling, and especially, friendship. Only friendship can, in its deepest sense, rival marriage in affirmation of the other, created as it is by the will of the friends.

Our times have witnessed the blossoming of an idea concealed in the bosom of Christian thought since the beginning: we are all equal before God, all are one in Christ (Gal. 3:28). I say “concealed” because this idea did not influence our ways of life explicitly until very recently, though it is for example clearly responsible for turning the barbarian invaders’ view of women as the equivalent of livestock into partners with men.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, only with the advent of modern technology, including medical advances like routinely available contraception, has the equality of the sexes started to become a reality in fact as well as in theory (and previously a theory more about life in the next world rather than this one).

The question of the gender of God, as imaged in marriage, now needs addressing. Feuerbach’s famous dictum about our projecting onto God our own human notions is clearly operative in the ways in which all cultures design theological rationales for their customs and

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<sup>76</sup> *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 1-10. Italics in the original.

<sup>77</sup> This is one of the positive results of the Church’s theology of marriage that the first missionaries shared with the invaders of the Roman Empire. See Frances & Joseph Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

mores: we want divine approbation, if not outright dictation, to bless our cultural understandings (including, of course, our biases). For example, the notion of women's innate inferiority to men has been "blessed" (if that is the correct term) in the past by ascribing the Fall to Eve's weakness.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, the myth of Pandora identified the evils that bedevil humankind as originating with a woman.

Miroslav Volf upends Feuerbach, contending that no gendered qualities can be attributed to the Trinity, either masculine or feminine. He begins with Karl Barth's assertion that one does not discover God as Father throughout the experience of human fatherhood, but rather the other way around. In other words, Christians should model themselves on God, "from above," so to speak. He uses the same argument against Luce Irigaray's demand for female as well as male deities. Rather, gender is what humans share not with divinity but with other animals—specifically, a "sexed body." This is the "root, not the content," of the gender identity that each culture constructs.<sup>79</sup>

Volf goes on to argue that the fact that, for all intents and purposes, each of us is sexed allows not only the construction of the cultural gender identity but also its subversion and reformation, specifically by reflecting upon the relations among the Three and the generation of their identity. "As the source of divinity *the Father therefore constitutes the mutual relations between the persons as egalitarian rather than hierarchical*; all persons are equal in power and equal in glory."<sup>80</sup> These relations are simultaneously self-giving and mutually indwelling: each of the Three gives fully to the others, and as a consequence dwells in the others (*perichoresis*, also called circumincession). "The Father is the Father not only because he is distinct from the Son and the Spirit but also because through the power of self-giving

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<sup>78</sup> Sirach 25:24: "Through the woman came the beginning of sin, and through her we all die."

<sup>79</sup> Tobias Haller argues that one's sex is an accident, like hair color, and not essential to human nature. See *Reasonable and Holy*, p. 38. This assertion is routine in arguments for same-sex relationships. However, while it is true that the fact that I am genetically male is not essential to my being human, my sex within the communal context is essential — not to human nature but to the way I construe and am construed to be human.

Furthermore, no individual is "just" human, as Volf points out.

<sup>80</sup> Volf, *Exclusion*, p. 180. Italics in the original.

the Son and the Spirit dwell in him.”<sup>81</sup> As Volf points out, the entire story of human salvation is the “bringing down” to humanity this conjoined self-giving and mutual indwelling that marks the divine life.

Why are *Homo sapiens* always ready for sex, unlike almost all other animals? Why is sex fun? Creatures with seasons of rut do not seem to enjoy it much, except as a means of proclaiming dominance, since all other animals but humans have sex in public. Jared Diamond identifies the characteristics that, taken together, make human sexuality absolutely unique: “long-term sexual partnerships, co-parenting, proximity to the sexual partnerships of others, private sex, concealed ovulation, extended female receptivity, sex for fun, and female menopause.”<sup>82</sup> Sex is fun, therefore, because it serves our needs within the symbolic world created by our cultures—in particular, but hardly exclusive to, the institution of marriage.

In other words, human sexuality is also providential.

Through marriage God provides, first, the basics of survival: food, shelter, clothing, and then children. But also much more—community, culture, education, worship. These come through the highly unique form of sexuality we have evolved. Or, we can assert, that God has provided.

Then sex as pleasurable unifying drive especially for human beings evolved — was created — next. Marriage is therefore one essential component of God’s providence for humanity, and sex has providentially become its servant.

Only by first grasping marriage’s purpose in creation can the redeemed, such as we are, begin to live into it according to the self-revelation of the Triune God. It begins with sexual differentiation, which makes for unique individuals. Sex for humans is much more than mere reproduction. Marriage is the symbolic bond peculiar to *Homo sapiens* that creates the communities that sustain us in daily life as well as over the generations. Christian marriage—

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>82</sup> Jared Diamond, *Why Is Sex Fun? The Evolution of Human Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 6.

that is, Holy Matrimony—is not different in nature than other marriages, but it transforms marriage according to that self-revelation, the action of grace. We must be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48). Or as one good translation has it, “There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father’s goodness knows no bounds.” (Revised English Bible)<sup>83</sup> The question remains whether a same-sex union can be also transformed into a means toward holy living.

*Notes on the image of God: the Holy Trinity*

Adrian Thatcher, in *Marriage After Modernity* and *A Theology of Families*, argues that marriage needs a profound re-thinking without completely rejecting the Tradition. He follows Roman Catholic and Orthodox authors in using the Trinity in relation to marriage: “Language which has been historically reserved for reverent musings about the holy mystery of God is especially appropriate for filling the hiatus in compiling a theology and spirituality of marriage.”<sup>84</sup> Following these leads, we shall consider how this Trinitarian theology of marriage might play itself out.

It is necessary to recall that the Three, classically named “The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” do not have relationships among themselves. A *relationship* is established between two discrete individuals— Martin Buber’s “I-Thou”.<sup>85</sup> The Three are *relations* which both define the Godhead as triple and also perfectly One: these Three are One because the relations which generate their separate identities also bind them perfectly into an indivisible unity of Love. Thus Christians can identify God as One, following our elder sisters and brothers, the Jews—*sh’ma, Adonai echod!*<sup>86</sup> And yet we can without contradiction also see God in Jesus, the Word made flesh, and God in the Church and the world, through

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<sup>83</sup> Matthew 5:48: “perfect” and “no limit to goodness” are a translation and a paraphrase, respectively, of *teleios*. This word comes from *telos*, usually translated as “end.” Jesus’ last word on the Cross in John’s Gospel, *tetelestai*—“it is finished (accomplished, consummated, completed, perfected)” —also comes from the same root.

<sup>84</sup> Thatcher, *Marriage*, p. 232. See also John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, paragraphs 11-13; Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 1985), pp. 115-119.

<sup>85</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), p. 33.

<sup>86</sup> From Deuteronomy 6:5, meaning: “Hear, the LORD is One!”

the Spirit. God the Holy Trinity is a dynamic Lover—a perfect Communion of Love—reaching beyond “Self” to create and re-create, to free us by binding us to love—“in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom...”<sup>87</sup>

Zizoulas, in his classic *Being as Communion*,<sup>88</sup> argues forcefully that the Church as a whole has forgotten the true dimension of its doctrine:

The Holy Trinity is a primordial ontological concept and not a notion which is added to the divine substance or rather follows it, as is the case in the dogmatic manuals of the West and, alas, in those of the East in modern times. The substance of God, “God,” has no ontological content, no true being, apart from communion. [. . .] The fact that God exists because of the Father shows that His existence, His being is the consequence of a free person; which means, in the last analysis, that not only communion, but also freedom, the free person, constitutes true being. True being comes only from the free person, from the person who loves freely—that is, who freely affirms his being, his identity, by means of an event of communion with other persons.<sup>89</sup>

All human life is therefore to be conceived of as dwelling within the infinite life and horizon of this Triune God. As many commentators have pointed out, including Karl Barth, our relationships with others do not prepare us to understand God. Rather, we can recognize God because the Trinity is the model for all true human relationships. This indwelling is God’s sheer gift to humanity through Christ in the Spirit. Our response to this gift is always free, but we should respond by valuing this gift above all, by adoring its Giver, giving in return our *worship*.<sup>90</sup> In other words, in all things and above all, we should value the gift of life in God, how much it is worth to us. The chief way we worship God—showing our gratitude and love of God for the gracious divine gift—is not just through participating in worship services, but also through making and keeping covenant. Our ritual life as communities of faith and as individuals within community is therefore always a re-enactment

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<sup>87</sup> “A Collect for Peace,” *The Book of Common Prayer 1979*, p. 57.

<sup>88</sup> Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985.

<sup>89</sup> Zizoulas, *Being*, p. 17f.

<sup>90</sup> Original form of the word “worship,” i.e., showing what we value most.

and renewing of our covenant with God and those covenants with others informed by the gift of God's life.

*The notion of covenant*

So far the word "covenant" has appeared only obliquely in this essay. Yet it is a crucial notion.

While the other provinces of the Anglican Communion use the word only infrequently (until the recent consideration of a proposed "Anglican Covenant"), "covenant" features prominently in The Episcopal Church's 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*. Its most distinguishing feature is the "Baptismal Covenant" which forms part of the baptismal liturgy. This has taken on the status of a mission statement of the church, as well as a measure of faithful discipleship. The 1979 Book is also the first Anglican Prayer Book to call marriage a "covenant." The word has taken on a normative quality: for example, in the essay *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, it is not even defined, as if all readers would understand what is meant by a "covenanted relationship."<sup>91</sup>

"It is not good that the man ('*adam*, literally "earthling") should be alone" (Gen.2: 18a). Thus the Scriptures point out that humans must live in relationships, which are themselves structured by open-ended agreements that define the terms and relations of the living of those relationships. Another way of saying this is that human beings must live in communities, which are the embodiment of a skein of covenants of varying kinds, explicit and tacit: marriage, parent-child, friendship, ruler and the ruled, and so on.

Moreover, the biblical model for our relationship to God *is* covenant. These occur several times between God and the Hebrews, and these make them God's people, Israel. Furthermore, people in the Hebrew Scriptures make covenants among themselves as well. At

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<sup>91</sup> This text was presented to the 2005 meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council as an official response of the Church to the request in the *Windsor Report* for a theological justification of the acceptability of same-sex relationships in the Christian Church. However, no official body of The Episcopal Church has ever endorsed it — sadly, the House of Bishops has never even discussed it.

the Last Supper, Jesus speaks of the New Covenant in his blood, and this New Covenant is made with his disciples at Baptism. The rest of life is living out that covenant with God through Christ in the Spirit.

This matrix of covenants is what actually distinguishes a human community from a mob. It exists and develops to meet the most basic needs of the community: to survive both until tomorrow and indefinitely. Each form of covenant is defined by the community, and the understanding of all of them together constitutes the communal articulation of its identity. Rituals develop to inculcate and perpetuate this fundamental matrix of common understandings. From this matrix, virtues are identified, exemplified, and taught as necessary to the flourishing of both individuals and community.

As the community's perception of its needs change, the terms and conditions of the covenants also change. For covenants express the terms and conditions by which the people in them will maintain their identities while allowing the parties in the covenant to define to an extent those identities. Covenants narrow the distance between individuals and yet, also maintain it.<sup>92</sup> They have publicly articulated norms as well as the personal interpretations their participants make of those norms, for good and for ill. They are as formal as becoming an American by making a pledge to live as a citizen according to the precepts of the Constitution of the United States, as simple as regular bartering for goods, as profound as a long- and happily-married couple's love for one another. Or two true life-long friends.

The most fundamental Christian assertion about God is that God is love (I John 4:16). The Scriptures attest to one of the basic forms this divine love takes for us: God makes and keeps covenants with people. The incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus form the supreme example of God making and keeping covenant with us. The sacraments are all examples of covenant-making or covenant-keeping. To consider the relation between God's

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<sup>92</sup> Volf, *Exclusion*, p.45f.

covenants with humanity and an individual covenant of marriage, one first must begin to define the image of God: humanity is created to make covenants.<sup>93</sup>

In this context the image of God as male and female is not just about a marriage of a man and a woman taken individually. The image of God is the myriad communities of women and men that all humans at all times and in all places must live and die in, for they are each defined and sustained by the matrix of covenants that constitute their existence. An individual marriage is therefore a special empirical example of a general reality, which is itself incarnated in a specific society at a particular stage in its development.

This community begins theoretically with the covenant of a man and a woman to live together in order to ensure the other's well-being and thus create a common good.<sup>94</sup>

Therefore the image of God is among other things a woman and man in covenant with each other, though it is derivative from the whole community as primary *imago Dei*. Furthermore, each person, married or not, participates in the *imago* as covenant-maker and -keeper.

This assertion rests upon the fundamental Christian understanding of the nature of God: God is Love because God is Trinity. God is the originator of covenanting because this creative activity is itself derivative from the relations that constitute the Godhead. The unitive nature of the bond and covenant of marriage, therefore, is its chief end and good, and has always been so.

We can agree with John Chrysostom's provocative remark in his Homily 20 on Ephesians that marriage is an "icon"—a particular type of image that represents and helps create a relation—of the Trinity. To clarify the connection between the inner life of the

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<sup>93</sup> For a recent Episcopal discussion of covenant, see Jo Bailey Wells, "You have to be crazy!" The privilege and price of covenant relationship", in *Writings on Marriage*, ed. Greg Jones (Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, 2009), pp. 52-62. Available at <http://bit.ly/bhZaLL>

<sup>94</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics*, VII.16.

Trinity (the “immanent” Trinity) and the covenant of marriage (the “economic Trinity”<sup>95</sup>), we begin with the classical definition of Thomas Aquinas of the Trinity’s relations.

The notion of procession (Gr. *ekporeusis*, Lat. *processio*) is at the heart of trinitarian doctrine. Thomas, building on Augustine and others, sees two processions, which then establish four relations. The whole structure rests on John 8:42 (“I proceed from the Father”) and 14:26 (“the Spirit whom the Father will send”), as well as other clues in the New Testament. Thus the doctrine is pure revelation; no human could have apprehended it intelligently. Yet though it is a mystery in the strict sense, the doctrine is not irrational.

The Son proceeds from the Father, the Uncreated (*agennetos*), and the Spirit proceeds from both, in the Western understanding.<sup>96</sup> Thomas notes that it is the begetting of the Son that makes the Uncreated the Father, and it is the Two who “spirate” or generate the Spirit, which is (here he follows Augustine) their love. From these two processions arise four relations in God, which Thomas insists are not just intelligible but also real, constitutive of the Godhead. They are generativity (or fatherhood), filiation, spiration, and procession. As the relation of Spirit to Father and Son does not constitute its reality, as the acts of begetting, filiation and spiration do, the four relations produce Three.

Heretofore we have avoided the word “person” in describing the Trinity, as the term is misunderstood. It is often taken to mean that there are three separate “people” in God, and that at least two of these are male. Thomas uses the term *persona* but relates it to the earlier Greek term, *hypostasis*, used to describe the union of the two natures of Christ in one

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<sup>95</sup> “Economic” of course comes from *oikos*, Greek for “household.” It seems especially appropriate to discuss marriage as the work of the “economic” Trinity, God for us, as opposed to God’s “aseity,” the immanent interior life of God.

<sup>96</sup> There is no room here to discuss the *filioque* controversy dividing East from West. It is enough to note that Eastern theologians tend to accept that Augustine and others hold to this “double procession” as an opinion about the Trinity, not as the final word on the doctrine.

“subsistence.”<sup>97</sup> Thus he rejoins the earlier Greek Cappadocian formula of the Trinity, “one *ousia* in three *hypostateis*,” to mean one Being in three “Subsistences.”

The key point we want to make here is that the Godhead *is* its relations. Furthermore, continuing to follow the classical doctrine, those relations are perfectly mutual. Thus when One acts all Three act. At the same time, each retains a separate identity in equality of relation. This so-called *perichoresis* (Latin *circumincessio*) is that which, at their best, all human relationships derivatively image.

Turning to marriage as an example of this, we note first that our language of imaging is analogical, beginning with the fact that humans are discreet individuals: we are persons who arise within a communal matrix, dependent on others, beginning with God’s grace to maintain us in existence. Thus there is an infinite distance between the Trinity and us, though the Word’s incarnation has bridged that gap in Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, as created in God’s *image*, we enter into relationships characterized by their open-ended mutual nature, yet incarnated to one extent or another in the culture of the particular society we live in. In engendering these covenants, we image to some extent the Uncreated, whose eternal generation grounds the Trinity. In generating, the Uncreated *is* “Father”: in covenanting, we become who we are. This happens first in the (usually tacit) covenant between child and mother, child and father.

In marriage, however, it is through the explicit promises which the couple exchange that the covenant springs into existence. The ritual essence of a marriage is that a man and a woman promise to one other an open-ended sharing of life together, ending with death. These promises make a woman a wife and a man a husband, equal partners creating together a common life, just as the Father is “Father” and the Son is “Son” by generation. This common

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<sup>97</sup> Here we prescind from considering the question of the translation of *υποστασις* as either *substantia* or *subsistentia*. But see *Summa Theologica*, I. 29, 2. Thomas means by this that a *persona* of the Trinity exists perfectly in itself.

life will be, one promises to the other, a “space” where the other’s body, mind and spirit can blossom. It should be what Rowan Williams has called “a context in which grace can abound because there is a commitment not to run away from the perception of another,” in which the “grace” of the two (including their bodies) can be discovered.

For my body to be the cause of joy, the end of homecoming, for me, it must be there for someone else, be perceived, accepted, nurtured; and that means being given over to the creation of joy in that other, because only as directed to the enjoyment, the happiness, of the other does it become unreservedly lovable. To desire my joy is to desire the joy of the one I desire: my search for enjoyment through the bodily presence of another is a longing to be enjoyed in my body.<sup>98</sup>

This “creation of joy in the other” is of course not limited to the sexual, and indeed does not absolutely necessitate genital sexual consummation, as long as both spouses do not require it. But creating joy is physical as well as emotional, spiritual, and economic.

The covenant of marriage is therefore intensely generative: it creates conditions for both people to satisfy a great deal of the basic needs of human life, beginning with meals provided, prepared, and shared together. The need to provide nourishment, clothing and shelter, to have children and raise them, to create a career within society, to learn how to separate from our parents, care for them in their old age, and eventually to grieve them, and much more—these arise in the common life created by marriage.

The promises exchanged by the couple are open-ended in that they intend the terms and conditions to be in force until one dies. Thus both can enter the covenant expecting that their exchange of vows will provide a stability to the common life they will make, providing some guarantee that the risk of making these vows will be worth it. Human finitude itself therefore enters the covenant, underlining the deadly seriousness of these promises.

The vows also promise another stability: sexual and emotional fidelity. So a person can enter marriage with the assurance that the other’s sexual desire and need for intimacy will be

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<sup>98</sup> Rowan Williams, “The Body’s Grace” the Tenth Michael Harding Lecture delivered in 1989 (London: Oxford, 2002).

directed toward him or her. For a man this also means an assurance that the children which may result from the union will be genetically his.

Furthermore, the couple becomes an actor in the community, as the common life of their household touches immediately the lives of their families and neighbors, and has “ripple effects” on the wider community and eventually their entire society.

Another need that the marital covenant intends to meet is discovering how God loves each of us, and responding by working at loving God through the other. Thus there is a deep link between the covenants of Baptism and Matrimony (Christian marriage), which therefore requires the active involvement of the couple’s community of faith in celebrating it, witnessing it, and calling God’s blessing on it.

Even if the couple exchanges their vows of marriage in solitude, without witnesses, in whatever words come to them, their marriage rests upon the universal human need for an intimate common life in order to thrive. Each promises the other to do all to meet the other’s need, to be thwarted only by death. As long as they intend a life-long common life together, they are married. All else flows from this.<sup>99</sup>

As we saw, the relations that constitute the Godhead are generativity, filiation, spiration, and procession. In marriage we can identify images of each: generativity, in that marriage creates a common life; filiation, including not only the possibility of children but more essentially creating the identities of husband and wife; spiration, in that the common life goes forth from the private intimacy of the couple into their individual selves and the lives of their families, communities, and societies; and finally procession, in that the marriage reflects back to the couple the goods that married life was created to bring. The more

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<sup>99</sup> Paul Marshall relates a story told by Edwin Friedman that illustrates this point: A couple flies their rabbi to a resort to perform their wedding. When he arrives, they meet him at the airport to say that for scheduling reasons, the ceremony must be as short as possible. “Do you want to be married?” asks the rabbi. “Why, yes,” they reply. “Then you are,” says the rabbi, who promptly gets back on the airplane. See *Same-sex Unions*, p. 49.

reciprocal their love, the more it resembles the divine relations, each of which is utterly mutual and reciprocal.

Moreover, the divine *perichoresis* finds its image when the couple's covenant is lived out in mutuality. The more self-forgetful each is in meeting the other's needs, the more visible the image. Only when both are oriented to the other, when each one shapes the "I-Thou" in this way, does this image appear. In the long run, without it, the relationship cannot be called a true marriage, one that is the image of God.

We must again underline the analogy of "image." An image is not the reality that it images. The "I-Thou" does not describe the relations that constitute the Godhead. It is the reflection of those relations among discrete individuals. The communion that arises is characterized, as Zizoulas points out, essentially by not only love but also freedom.<sup>100</sup> It is therefore both derivative and prone to distortion.

For marriages can be all sorts of other things besides reflections and icons of God. In most societies, marriage practice reflects the arrangements of the power structure. They can be traps designed by every culture's need to dominate marriage practices, exploited by scheming parents, for example. They can be little more than baby factories. They can be fairly casual liaisons hardly distinguishable from mere cohabitation for convenience in societies where sexual relationships are just more "stuff" to be consumed, used up, thrown away. Marriage images to a great extent that which is good and evil in a given society, and each society, including biblical Israel, has a great deal of both.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> *Communion and Otherness* (T & T Clark: London, 2006), p. 9.

<sup>101</sup> The Anglican Church of Canada, in its *St. Michael's Report* (2007), points out: "Understandings of family are strongly culturally defined and conditioned, and we note that several models of the family exist in Scripture (*Gen 3; Gen 16; Song of Solomon; Ruth; I Sam 1-3; Hos 1-3; Mk 3:31-35*). Yet the Bible invites critique of family structures found in all cultures. Because they are such a powerful force in human life, and because of the strength of family systems, they are one of the places that sin can be most forcefully encountered (*Gen 3:1-4:16; II Sam 11 19; Gen 27*). Equally, the family is often the place where, even in the midst of brokenness, great grace is found (*Gen 27; Gen 37-50; I Sam 1-3; II Kings 4; Ps 133; Hos 1-3; Luke 1-2; Mt 1; I Cor 7:12-17*)."

A particular community enters in, shaping marriages both to the better angels of its nature and its lower demons. The communal economic enterprise shapes each culture, which in turns fashions each of its members' view of the essentials of life. The importance of the pecking order often determines who marries whom, and what options the couple and their possible children have for life in that community. "Blood is thicker than water," and so married couples discover the power that each spouse's family has over both of them, for good and for ill. For families transmit through generations various patterns of conjugal life, from nobility of mutual self-sacrifice to the basest abuse and exploitation. They certainly will always exert tremendous power over each of us by wielding the two-edged sword of emotional process.<sup>102</sup>

And so we bring to a marriage what we have become, both through the living out of covenants and our failing to abide by their open-ended demands upon us.<sup>103</sup>

The covenant of marriage as the special empirical case of general human community should ideally be the privileged locus for two people to develop their own shared image of this Trinitarian love, and exemplify it to their children (if there be any) as well as other family, neighbors, friends, and colleagues. This will entail as a result the overturning of the notion of equality itself, in the sense of opposition, and replace it with the infinitely richer notion of mutual indwelling as image of the Triune—living in the Thou by letting the Thou be Thou. For those who live by these lights, there is no need of talk of equality.

*Love and romance noted: Matrimony today*

Our own culture considers that there is only one valid reason to marry, namely, love. Most cultures in human history, however, have considered romantic love to be a sort of madness. Cupid's arrow is painful, and arrows can kill as well. It has been for some cultures

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<sup>102</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation* (New York: Guilford, 1985). I am especially thinking of his description of the universal phenomenon of "emotional triangling." See pp. 35-39.

<sup>103</sup> See pp. 171-181.

to be avoided at all costs, including in marriage.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, at its peak, the lovers become incapable of thinking of anyone or anything else than the beloved and their love. They appear emotionally unstable, even irrational. If that love is unrequited, or broken off by the other, the resultant trauma can drive people to suicide or insanity. Romantic love is brutally powerful, and most societies in the past considered it to be essentially a tragic occurrence in the lives of people, best avoided if at all possible. This has changed so completely that we moderns often seem to believe that romantic love has always guided the choice of marriage partner.

“How love conquered marriage” is the wry subtitle of Stephanie Coontz’ *Marriage: A History*, which I have already had occasion to cite. Modern marriage practice is globally more and more grounded on the desirability of finding the “soul mate,” “the One,” with whom one will find deep love and the joys of conjugal life—living “happily ever after.” This concept had its origin in the Middle Ages and flowered in the late eighteenth century in western Europe and America. Nineteenth-century cultural developments like “the home,” the “virginal bride” who became the desirably frigid wife, and men’s need to rein in their sexuality have all been abandoned as impractical. Even in societies that traditionally have practiced arranged marriages, the new love perspective is gathering force (as viewing any “Bollywood” film from India will show). Coontz identifies four changes that undergird this in our time: the realization that men and women have similar needs for sexual satisfaction; the impersonal and mobile nature of Western society, which weakens the coercive power of family and community to regulate behavior; reliable birth control and the abolition of the legal category of illegitimacy; and the growing economic and legal independence of women, thanks in part to the development of modern cooking and laundry technology.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> For instance, Puritan preachers admonished against being “too fond” of one’s spouse, because it could be a temptation to love the spouse more than God—i.e., idolatry.

<sup>105</sup> Coontz, *Marriage : A History*, p. 307f. The same developments have strongly favored the “coming out” of the gay liberation movement.

While I have insisted throughout that these developments are possible only because of our highly developed technological society, and that a planetary catastrophe would quickly return us to “the good old days,” that catastrophe seems unlikely. We continue as did most of our forebears to hold to our own norms as the best ever, an illusion fostered by what some have termed “temporal provincialism.” And while the ritual of marriage is now often considered optional, we still hold married people to clear standards of responsibility and fidelity.<sup>106</sup>

Coontz points out that today’s developments also exact a high price. For example,

... the Industrial Revolution exacted an enormous personal toll on people who were uprooted from traditional communities and whose old ways of organizing their lives were destroyed... But individual and society as a whole had to come to grips with the fact that the new system of wage labor and the free market was here to stay. We face a similar situation with the revolution in marriage.<sup>107</sup>

Is it possible to develop a convincing theology of romantic love?

One unjustly-neglected theologian, Charles Williams, did so. He called romantic love

a thing not of superstition and indulgence, but of doctrine and duty, and not of achievement but of promise. . . It is neither sex appetite, pure and simple, nor is it necessarily related to marriage. It is something like a state of adoration...<sup>108</sup>

He uses Dante as his major example. In the *New Life*, the Italian poet describes romantic love and in the *Banquet* presents an analysis of it. Abstracting from this, Williams sees romantic love as a foretaste of the Kingdom, an introduction to a state of *agape* love or *caritas*—*una fiamma di caritade*, in Dante’s words. Without the Incarnation and the attendant importance Christians give toward matter in general and the flesh in particular, this

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<sup>106</sup> One new fashion is “polyamory,” the practice of covenanting to love more than one partner, including sexually. “Cheating” or secret affairs, is still condemned in these relationships, indeed, as even more than one partner is injured, it is considered even more reprehensible by practitioners of polyamory. This practice, however, lies outside the acceptable parameters of Christian living.

<sup>107</sup> Coontz, *op. cit.*, p. 308

<sup>108</sup> Charles Williams, “A theology of romantic love,” in *Charles Williams: Essential Writings in Spirituality and Theology*, ed. Charles Hefling (Boston: Cowley, 1993), pp. 68–90. Here p. 71. See also Owen C. Thomas, “Beatrice or Iseult: The Debate About Romantic Love,” *Anglican Theological Review* Fall 1997, pp. 571-580.

would seem to be no more than the regrettable madness that other religions and cultures consider it to be. “The beloved (male or female) is seen in a paradisaic knowledge and experience of good.”

Three false assumptions about romantic love, Williams argues, undermine it: that it is everlasting, that it is personal, and that it is sufficient. These lead to grasping at it in a way that will destroy it. Williams explains why jealousy and envy are such serious sins: they are attempts to keep the glory, not adoring it but rather enjoying one’s relation to it. “It must be admitted that we might be nearer, intellectually at least, to pure love if jealousy had been as passionately denounced as divorce in the Christian church.” Romantic love must grow into something else if it is to be, in the long run, good. “The Beloved—person or thing—becomes the Mother of Love; Love is born in the soul; it may have its passion there; it may have its resurrection.”<sup>109</sup>

With Charles Williams we can assert that the experience of romantic love is a grace to attract the lover toward God. When one is in love, the world seems transfigured. What can appear to others as silliness, lunacy, or a real impairment does not affect the lover.<sup>110</sup> What is needed is a similar reaction from the Beloved.

Zizioulas adds a reflection that clarifies this notion of romantic love in an explicitly Christian way, and elevates it to ontological status:

Christ is the only one that guarantee the ontological truth, the eternal survival, of every being we regard as unique and indispensable, for he is the only one in whom death, which threatens the particular with extinction, is overcome. It is for this reason that Christ can claim absolute uniqueness for himself to the point of demanding from us that we seek, for his sake, to regard any other being (father, mother, wife,

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<sup>109</sup> Williams, “A theology,” pp. 85–90. Here Williams means “passion” in the sense of “the Passion of Christ,” i.e., his suffering and death.

<sup>110</sup> From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, Otto Kernberg writes, “Sexual passion reactivates and contains the entire sequence of emotional states that assure the individual of his own, his parents’, the entire world of objects’ “goodness” and the hope of the fulfillment of love despite frustration, hostility and ambivalence [...] Sexual passion is the facilitating core of a sense of oneness with a loved person as part of adolescent romanticism and, later, mature commitments to the beloved partner in the face of the realistic limitations of human life, the unavoidability of illness, decay, deterioration, and death.” Otto Kernberg, *Love Relations: Normality and Pathology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 45.

children, etc.; Mt. 10:47, Luke 14:26) as unique and indispensable. It is not that he wants to exclude in this way anyone we love uniquely, but he is the only one who can hypostasize them and give them eternal being. Without him, their uniqueness would not be ontologically true, and our *eros* for them would tragically stumble upon their death, the ultimate enemy of all uniqueness (I Cor. 15:26).<sup>111</sup>

And we need to say that while romantic love need not always have a sexual fulfilment, it usually does. This militates for reviving the betrothal period. Today becoming engaged is still an important step, but it is usually preceded by cohabitation or at least a long period of sexual intimacy. Fifty years after the success of the “true-love-happily-ever-after” model began to show its dark side, namely, high rates of divorce, young people are leery of marriage. In this period of great transitions, some have come to believe the institution itself is irredeemably flawed. Others find having a series of lovers to be preferable, as they pursue careers in highly demanding corporations and government offices, or try to eke out a living in the ranks of the working poor.<sup>112</sup> Some people seem to become addicted to the experience of “falling in love,” and so never marry (or at least not permanently). Entertainers and to a growing extent politicians find that entering and exiting marriages is one way to keep them in the public eye, which is often more important than the marital relationship itself. The demand that the definition of marriage stretch to include same-sex couples has also contributed to the view of marriage today as optional, private, and malleable according to the participants’ felt needs.

Bishop John Spong has argued for “trial marriage” in *Living in Sin?*, which he defines interchangeably with betrothal.<sup>113</sup> This fits with much current wisdom about “trying out” a marital relationship before making the vows. However, betrothal has within it the clear intent to marry. “Trial marriage” does not—it has an instant, unilateral and supposedly painless exit

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<sup>111</sup> Communion and Otherness, p. 75.

<sup>112</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich’s books are deeply instructive about the reality of work in contemporary America. See *Nickle and Dimed* (New York: Owl, 2001) and *Bait and Switch* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005). Marriage and children are almost always viewed as second in importance to work and career.

<sup>113</sup> *Living in Sin? A Bishop Re-thinks Human Sexuality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

built in the concept itself. Betrothal is clearly part of Matrimony in the making, while “trial marriage” is not.

Thatcher quotes with guarded approval a report of the Church of England entitled *Something to Celebrate*.<sup>114</sup> The report sees in a cautiously positive light the emerging practice of cohabitation before marriage as a challenge to the church to help marriage regain its centrality by, among other things, restoring betrothal. It will require developing a corps of seasoned married Christians to advise and support the betrothed; helping people through homily and program to give up casual sex (fornication properly understood) and the modern practice of cohabiting just for sex and other limited goods of proto-marital relationships, instead of developing intimacy on all levels; and asking theologians and other specialists for more and better studies of love, marriage, and Matrimony than exercises like the present essay.

#### *The indissoluble bond?*

Holy Matrimony is always in the making, always a process. From this insight can develop much more helpful understandings of sex in marriage, distinguishing the erotic (which the church should encourage) from the obscene.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, continuing to improve pastoral practice of family therapy counseling, the understanding of stages of marital life, and the virtue of chastity properly conceived as practices of both celibate and sexually-active Christians are desperately needed in order “to help marriage regain its centrality.”

There is also the problem of marriages that fail. Heretofore, we have discussed marriage as a covenant more than as a bond of “one flesh.” Yet the American Prayer Book’s introduction to the sacrament states “The *bond and* covenant of marriage was established by

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<sup>114</sup> General Synod Board for Social Responsibility, *Something to Celebrate: Valuing Families in Church and Society* (London : Church House, 1995). In Thatcher, *Marriage*, pp. 102, 131f.

<sup>115</sup> Instead of the old saw that “I can’t define it, but I know obscenity when I see it,” Rowan Williams proposes a more useful standard. Reflecting on Goya’s powerful paintings of the horrors of Napoleon’s war in Spain, he notes the painter’s lack of “corrupting involvement” in the depictions. Similarly pornography is discernible by the artist’s own emotional gratification in violent or sexual scenes. See *Grace and Necessity* (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 150ff.

God in creation...” (p. 423). The term “bond” refers to becoming “one flesh.”<sup>116</sup> This bond is considered “indissoluble,” meaning that it only dissolves with the death of one of the two spouses, based on the teaching of Jesus we examined above. Furthermore, what makes a marriage indissoluble is, in traditional terms, free informed intent and consent to live in the covenant of marriage, and one single sex act.<sup>117</sup>

We have argued that God is the major actor in Holy Matrimony: “Those whom God has joined let no one put asunder.” Marriage is part of God’s providence for humankind; God’s grace enables married couples to keep their covenant. And at the heart of it is Jesus’ teaching. We are God’s image in creation, and we are therefore male and female. Since woman and man come together in marriage, the Two become One, by the providence and grace of God.

While affirming this wholeheartedly, it is important to ask what is the connection between the covenant the couple makes and the action of God in making their bond. We should affirm *a priori* that the grace of God is present and active in the couple’s relationship from the first time they meet, and that Matrimony is, in retrospect in process from that moment on.<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, as God’s grace is never coercive, it is always possible for the covenant between the two to break down. Just as there are many things that can go awry in the process of, say, pregnancy, leading to embryonic death, so too marriages can die.

But if the covenant can die, what of the bond? In the Tradition, this became the heart of the matter. Since the bond perdures (being as it is made by God), neither member of the couple may re-marry, in the Roman Catholic understanding. In the Calvinist view, there is no

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<sup>116</sup> A good (and still relevant) review is found in Philip Turner, “The Marriage Canons of the Episcopal Church,” *Anglican Theological Review*, Vol. 65 (Oct. 1983, pp. 371-393, and Vol. 66 (Jan. 1984), pp. 1-22.

<sup>117</sup> With Gratian’s *Decretum* (ca. 1140), the Bologna school of Decretists arrived at a contractual step-by-step notion of marriage as *matrimonium initiatum, ratum, perfectum, consummatum*, i.e., marriage as engagement, as contracted, as “perfected,” and as consummated. Compare with the current Roman Catholic canon 1061 (Cf. the *Codex juris canonici* of 1917, 1015 and 1118). *Initiatum* and *perfectum* have disappeared.

<sup>118</sup> A proper understanding of the doctrine of predestination (that is to say, predestination to election, not damnation) will also allow us to consider that, as God’s choice of us precedes our choice of God, even “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1: 4), so too God possibly foresees our marriages. However, predestination is always understood only in hindsight... See the 17<sup>th</sup> of the Thirty-nine Articles.

bond when the covenant is broken, and so re-marriage is possible. For the former, marriage is a sacrament; for the latter, it is not.

As noted above, the fact that Jesus' teaching on marriage has to be extracted from his teaching against divorce has distorted understanding in applying his marital teaching. The sacramentality of Holy Matrimony does not hinge on the notion of "one flesh." It is the conjoining of a couple's intent to love as God loves, along with God's grace provided them in the Church, that makes it a sacrament. A marriage dies when one or both fail either to make the covenant sincerely or to keep it. That marriages do die is not proof that Matrimony is not a sacrament. It is just another sign that we live into the Kingdom as redeemed sinners, as much if not more in promise than in reality, always *in process* in all things, and first of all sanctification.

If the covenant dies then the bond is empty. When a spouse dies, the covenant comes to the end the couple foresaw in making it. Part of the ancient idea, now completely abandoned, that re-marriage for widowed people is impossible, had to do with the bond perduring. Yet this would imply that in the resurrection, when we are finally transformed fully into the New Creation that we are presently only partially in Christ, something would carry over untransformed from the Old Creation. Jesus made it clear to the Sadducees that this is not so. It is arguable that for couples who re-marry, the previous marriage continues to be experienced if only as a phantom, a shadow of something once lived.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> This experiential reality also mitigates against the practice of Roman Catholic marriage tribunals, whose ruling of nullity not only makes the children of the union illegitimate in the church's eyes, but also has the effect of giving the lie to people's experience that there once was a reality of a love pursued at great personal cost—if only in one's hope.

In any event, the bond of marriage is indissoluble; however, this is not an insurmountable barrier to divorce and possible re-marriage. It is nonetheless a very high one. The Church does have "the power of the keys," exercised in Anglican tradition in the office of the Bishop and delegated to the Priests, normally understood to be the forgiveness of sins. But "what you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven and what you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven" (Matt.16:19; 18:18; John 20:23) arguably relates to the marriage bond as well, thus giving further scriptural foundation to the Eastern Orthodox practice adopted in the 1960s by The Episcopal Church.

### *The question of children*

We have argued that, properly understood, a Thomist view of natural law will be very helpful to revive and use for a theology of marriage. However, we cannot agree with our elders in theology that procreation is the primary purpose of marriage. It remains so in official Roman Catholic teaching, and this understanding perdures in the 1662 Prayer Book's introduction in the marriage liturgy.<sup>120</sup> Jean Porter argues that it is still the first good or *bonum* of marriage, if only because it is one purpose all Christian churches are committed to.<sup>121</sup> However, unanimity of opinion is no argument for truth, just as the vote of a synod does not guarantee the validity of its action.

God's providence for *Homo sapiens* includes Matrimony as the means for procreating and nurturing children, who then become in turn the object of salvation in Christ and the offer of sharing the life of the Trinity forever. Thus we cannot exclude that procreation is one of the ends of marriage and consequently of Holy Matrimony. But the basic premise is that the image of God is human community, male and female, and besides providing for the future of the community embodied in new generations, marriage has a critical role in providing many of the invariant processes that bind an amorphous mass of people into a community. Chief among these are the unifying effect of covenant, both for a woman and a man as well as for the spouses' families and clans. The creation of a common life that provides the basics of survival as well as the needs for intimacy, sexual and otherwise, that we need as a species may or may not produce offspring. That depended until recently purely

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<sup>120</sup> "... duly considering the causes for which Matrimony was ordained.

"First, It was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.

"Secondly, It was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.

"Thirdly, It was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined."

<sup>121</sup> Jean Porter, *Natural and Divine Law* (Ottawa : Novalis, 1999), p. 199f.

upon the fertility of the wife and husband as well as their frequency of intercourse.<sup>122</sup> That half of children on average perished before age 12 added its own wrinkles.<sup>123</sup> But this does not mean that marriage's primary purpose in God's providence is procreation.

*Same-sex relationships, marriage and Holy Matrimony*

Having set forth at some length a number of assertions, it seems good to sum them up at this point before going on to consider specifically same-sex relationships. Marriage is a *sine qua non* of human community, indeed of humanity's created being. We live and die in communal relationships, some essential to life and others that threaten it. The powerful forces that shape our common understandings are also means for introducing sin into our lives as well. Isolation and alienation are therefore the shadow side of this communal existence.

God who is Love, the triune communion of persons in One, comes into our lives that are created specifically to be recipients of this divine love. We enter into covenant with God through Jesus Christ in the power of God's creating, redeeming and sanctifying Spirit. We can recognize God's self-revelation in Christ, offering us salvation here and now and forevermore, because the creation has shaped us to render reality intelligible. The ongoing dynamic perfecting of this natural law through revelation allows us to be saved by divine grace through our response of faith. And this faith in God's offer in Christ is expressed and enacted in the covenant of Baptism.

Marriage, the symbolic bond of human community that itself is the basic image of God in creation, is also transformed in this encounter and covenant with the Holy Trinity. It becomes Holy Matrimony, a sacrament or outward sign of the grace of the Spirit flooding our hearts with God's love (Rom. 5:5). But for a very long time, the sacramentality of Matrimony

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<sup>122</sup> This writer recently was able to view cards given to French newlyweds in the nineteenth century. Written in doggerel, these give advice on how to be happily married. Both husband and wife are enjoined to make love (*faire son devoir*) every single night.

<sup>123</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach is often noted for having had twenty children. It is however usually overlooked that he buried eleven of them.

has been questioned, even though the word “sacrament” itself comes from the Ephesians discussion of marriage.

Part of the issue, as Karl Rahner points out, is that the notion of sacrament has suffered from overweening abstraction:

For the general concept of ‘sacrament’ is—historically speaking and from the point of view of the subject itself—a subsequent abstraction which has emerged at a relatively late stage from those seven sacred realities which take place in the life of the Church, but which, when we compare them with one another, turn out to be of very different kinds. An ill-thought out application of this concept which has subsequently been abstracted from them . . . can make it extremely difficult for us to perceive the real nature of the individual sacrament.<sup>124</sup>

Clearly this applies to Matrimony. He discerns three basic elements to a sacrament. The first is that it is an event in the Church, a “cultic manifestation” in space and time, which is “an objective symbol.” Second, this event “belongs to the nature of the Church which in Christ is the arch-sacrament, eschatologically victorious and indefectible, of precisely this self-bestowal [in grace] of God.” Finally, the sacrament is not only sign but also what the sign signifies, “a message to proclaim in hidden form in the manifestation.” The message is of course Christ’s offer of salvation, “effective and unconditional.” In this sense sacraments “work” (*ex opere operato*) because they rest in and express God’s saving and sanctifying grace and power. However, in order for the sacrament to be effective, it must be freely accepted. For we have the power to reject it, and so “the sacramental manifestation of grace remains radically indeterminate *precisely from the human aspect*.”<sup>125 126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Karl Rahner, “Marriage as a sacrament” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 10 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), pp. 199-221; p. 200.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201f. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>126</sup> One caveat that I as an Anglican would issue is that our freedom is not absolute. We would say fairly uniformly that our acceptance of salvation in general and in the sacraments in particular requires also the gracious impelling of God’s Spirit. Yet in order that I not be misunderstood, it must be clear that God’s grace is active in the lives of all humans at all time. See I Tim. 2:4; also the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*, especially XVII, XXV and XXVI.

Baptism transforms us by the power of the Spirit, making us members of a very particular community, the Body of Christ (I Cor. 12). Matrimony therefore helps to effect this transformed human community, made to be image of God, now become the Body of Christ, an icon of the Trinity.

As sacrament, Matrimony today brings forth new insights:

- Holy Matrimony was normally celebrated in the early Church during the Holy Eucharist, the sacrament *par excellence*, and this shows forth its close link to the covenant of Baptism. It rests upon the universal practice of marriage, but transcends it and often calls into question the specific ways a particular culture conceives marriage. A prime example is the equality of man and woman, which is an evangelical truth few societies, including the Church, have lived into.
- Holy Matrimony is a symbol of the whole human community transformed by the salvific grace of God in Christ, and thus is celebrated by a woman, a man, a Christian community and a priest or bishop. The nuptial blessing is therefore not added to the marriage, as some argue: it transforms it, along with the vows of fidelity and mutuality that are made in the Name of God (as well as the exchange of tokens, usually rings). I posit therefore that the notion that the man and woman are themselves alone the ministers of the sacrament is incomplete: Holy Matrimony also requires the nuptial blessing in the context of the worshipping community in order to transcend ordinary marriage.<sup>127</sup>
- While the Church in the era of Christendom could consider that marriage and Matrimony were equivalent, where no one was unbaptized, that no longer applies. It is time to recognize the truth that civil marriage as practiced in advanced societies is a secular matter, as demonstrated by the various forms of civil marriage and its varying

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<sup>127</sup> There is no reason to demand that both partners be believing Christians. The action of the Spirit is certainly not confined to the Church. And there is also I Cor. 7:14.

purposes of inheritance of property, and the legitimization of children. The Church should consider betrothal and civil marriage as steps in a process that for Christians should include Holy Matrimony, but cease the practice of blessing a civil marriage as if the heart of the matter were already taken care of in the preceding ceremony. The vows are not the same. The same consideration applies to same-sex unions, as we shall see.

- The vows of Matrimony are in fact the sign of the acceptance of a vocation, a specific calling by God the Holy Spirit to a changed way of life that incarnates the reality of the New Creation. It takes up and does not annul the natural-law understanding of marriage as builder of human community, but adds to and transforms its meaning. There is also a vocation to celibacy as a gift, a charism, for a few people, who nevertheless still need to live in communities created by vows. Clearly, there must also be a vocation to live in a same-sex union.

Until recently the Church unanimously joined society in condemning homosexual relationships. The overwhelming priority of procreation that marked all human societies (including ancient Israel) has however now been reversed: overpopulation resulting from the virtual vanquishing of infectious disease and other medical advances, proper diet and sanitation for a slender majority of people in the world, and the widespread availability of sabbath leisure have more than doubled average life expectancy. For these reasons, among others, the understanding of what the marriage bond symbolizes has changed significantly in the majority of societies.<sup>128</sup> And it has also allowed for the expression of homosexual relationships as well, which have always been present, albeit in the fringes of communal life. No longer are these repressed due to the perceived urgency of procreation for the community's survival. In fact they can be seen to help with the new project of survival through lowering the birth rate. As such, natural law reasoning, properly understood, can

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<sup>128</sup> The specific rejection of homosexuality and its criminalization in some countries is as much a sign of this shift as the growing acceptance of it in others.

anticipate the emergence of such relationships in cultures such as ours. In any event, the Scriptures hardly mention them, and those verses do not address the type of homosexual relationships that form in current society. Whereas hundreds of verses are dedicated to marriage, and these remain extraordinarily pertinent, especially in criticizing the shallowness with which contemporary society too often treats marriage.

It is often argued that homosexuality violates the natural law because of complementarity, the notion that sex is good and right only between a man and a woman. Clearly, two people of the same sex cannot make a child without the intervention of a third party of the opposite sex, if only minimally in the case of a sperm donor. However, if complementarity is a condition for moral sexual behavior, this must first require the principle that sex be indulged in only in order to reproduce. Secondly, it overlooks the question of the relationship of the sex partners. Can a physical expression of affection and love between two people ever be of equal or lesser value than the commercial transaction of sex with a prostitute? Thirdly, if the argument depends on the levitical condemnation of an abomination before God (notwithstanding many of the other rules we cannot possibly accept, such as execution for a child who strikes a parent), the question then must be what specifically is meant by “If a man lies with a male as with a woman...” (Lev. 20:13). In point of fact, people tend to practice the same sex acts, *mutatis mutandis*, beyond penis-vagina sex.

The opposite error is to consider that in fact sexual differentiation is unimportant. As noted above, it is providential. Furthermore, we *are* our bodies. As N. T. Wright points out, Christians all too often forget the Resurrection in favor of a dualist view of an enfleshed soul, presumed to be without gender, which is released at death from the bondage of incarnation. This ghost-in-the-machine notion, so prevalent in modern culture, is not at all the Christian view of the Resurrection.<sup>129</sup> It is in fact Gnostic.

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<sup>129</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (SPCK: London, 2007) especially pp. 159-176.

Homosexual relationships should be therefore neither demonized nor trivialized. How people seem to be or become attracted to others of the same sex is part of the mystery of human being, as are those few who feel they are wrongly incarnated in an opposite sex. Our advanced technological society has abolished the old brutal strictures to which our ancestors were in thrall — and devised some new ones. Technology allows for new unsuspected human potential to emerge (think of people walking on the Moon or exploring deep in the ocean). Clearly homosexual attraction is for a relatively small minority of women and men part of this emergence. As all technology is an amplification of human potential, it also sets its own terms for that, as Martin Heidegger observed decades ago.<sup>130</sup>

*Notes on same-sex relationships and marriage*

After all this consideration of the marriages of straight people, especially Matrimony, we can now focus more clearly on same-sex relationships.

In a paper delivered to a symposium in Boston in June, 2008, entitled “Freedom for Community,” the Rev. Andrew G. Lang, a minister of the United Church of Christ, made a startling point. While the Roman Catholic Church has made some provision for the pastoral care of gays and lesbians by enjoining celibacy for them, within its own well-developed notion of celibacy, he said, Reformed churches encouraging gay and lesbian people to adopt celibacy have no positive examples at all of celibate life to commend it to gays. He defines celibacy as “a particular disciplining of sexuality that liberates sexual energy for communion with others.” As charism and vocation, however, celibacy cannot be forced upon people—indeed, this was one of the causes of the Reformation. On the other hand, same-sex unions

... are covenantal relationships if they conform to [the] Trinitarian structure. Like heterosexual marriage and celibate community, these relationships are “schools for sinners” in which two partners learn how

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<sup>130</sup> See “The Question Concerning Technology” originally published as “Die Frage nach der Technik” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1954). English translation available at <http://www.wright.edu/cola/Dept/PHL/Class/P.Internet/PITexts/QCT.html>. Accessed June 30, 2010. Part of living the baptismal covenant in our time requires that we stand over against the dehumanizing tendencies of a technological society, as well as demanding that its benefits be available to all.

to live in the paradox of freedom that is unlimited precisely because it is limited by the other. The partner in a same-sex relationship is truly “other”—not through the complementarity of a man and woman, of course, but in the mutuality of two persons who in freedom choose each other and delight in being chosen. God creates these relationships because within the limits of our given sexuality we are always called out of isolation into community.<sup>131</sup>

This sums up the similarity between Matrimony and a same-sex union.

We have seen how natural law, understood as God’s purpose in creation rationally apprehended, points us toward the variety of human societies and cultures and the underlying invariant structures of human communities brought into being by among other things, marriage. This clarifies that Paul’s argument in Romans 1, in particular, does not relate directly to the emergence of homosexual relationships in modern Western societies. It also points to the moral status of being homosexual *versus* homosexual acts. In biblical times, and up to the modern era, the need to procreate was very serious. It generally precluded the development of same-sex relationships, which — quite reasonably in this light — would have been seen as treason to the community (though some societies certainly viewed them more favorably).<sup>132</sup>

Much has been made of sexual orientation, that some people are attracted to others of the same sex, while most find the opposite sex sexually appealing. This is however a red herring, to an extent. Human sexuality has a certain plasticity, and cultural imperatives shape it to an extent. Individuals respond differently, of course. How people become straight or gay, others bi-sexual, and still others transgendered, remains mysterious. It must be noted that these are more or less fixed. Perhaps one day, science will come to a settled explanation (as opposed to what we have today, essentially conflicting descriptions of contemporary

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<sup>131</sup> Andrew G. Lang, available at <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/theology/does-god-have-a-plan-for.html>. Accessed 30 June 2010.

<sup>132</sup> It is worth noting that prior to the emergence of the Black Death and the destruction of a third of Europe’s population by the plague, homosexuality was less and less punished, a trend that accelerated as medieval civilization became more sophisticated. After the plague, however, the older punishment of death returned with a vengeance.

people's sexuality). The theological task, as noted above, cannot depend upon scientific theories of orientation.

To return to marriage as a symbolic bond, we saw that it symbolizes how a community believes itself to be, and its explicit covenant undergirds the emergence of that community from the chaos of a mob to a skein of covenant relationships of many types. We saw that scriptural revelation transforms that bond into a symbol, an image, of God—the special case of the general reality of human community as image of God. The question is now, what does a same-sex relationship symbolize?

As noted above, the practice of marriage is a fundamental invariant phenomenon of human being. Same-sex unions are not, historically speaking. Moreover, the very possibility of same-sex relationships requires the prior reality of the human community of women and men. All of us have mothers and fathers, even if only in a minimal physical sense. Thus glossing over the differences, in an attempt perhaps to counter strong claims for complementarity, is much too facile.

Yet their emergence in modern Western societies is symbolizing to us something fundamental as well. We have seen the atomizing effects of our societies, driving people into individual isolation and alienation— lives warped and distorted by sin. The vast changes wrought by our technology have not changed the basic nature of sin—its demonic ability to divide us from God, one another, and our true selves by the power of the Lie. (Our alternate lives in cyberspace only amplify the overall temptation.) We can conclude that the Spirit is pointing to the value not only of marriage to the upbuilding of human community, and therefore, human being. We can also see the emergence of same-sex unions as the special case of the general reality of friendship.

In our world where social networking in cyberspace has corrupted the word “friend” into “acquaintance”; in which friendship is all too often seen as a means of social

advancement only; whose sexualization of all human relationships has entailed the devaluing of friendship—in this world the Spirit is calling us to friendship with God first, then friendship with one another.

People traditionally do not have to be friends first in order to marry, though that is of course highly desirable. On the other hand, same-sex couples, in covenanting to be with and for the Other, must found their common life on friendship. There is an inherent equality in a same-sex relationship that therefore lacks the cultural dynamics of power that other relationships have.<sup>133</sup> Their relationship is a symbolic bond, like marriage, but the bonds do not symbolize the same thing. Extending civil marriage to same-sex couples, in our society, is simple justice. People should be able to found a common life together, with all the rights and responsibilities that entails in a given society. But the Church cannot simply extend Matrimony to same-sex couples. Something new is needful.

The issue that often exercises modern people is whether these unions are sexually celebrated. The natural law is often invoked, as we saw above, quoting Romans 1, to show that homosexual relations are inherently sinful because unnatural. However, this understanding of the natural law rests upon a static view of human nature — “man *as such*”<sup>134</sup>. A more adequate grasp of the natural law understands the practice of marriage to be both invariant (in that every society does it) and wildly diverse (in that every society practices it differently in its history). In our time, technology has freed us from the overwhelming drive to procreate that earlier societies inculcated in their members, with all the neuron-molding power of culture. As a result, we have witnessed the emergence of individuals whose primary or sole sexual attraction is to others of the same sex. Never mind whether this is novel or has always been a part of human being—the universal character of homosexuality is debatable, and of no importance to this argument. What we do know is that human sexuality is quite

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<sup>133</sup> See Harriet Baber, “Is homosexuality sexuality?” *Theology* May/June 2004, Vol.107.837, pp. 169-183; on page 180. Baber’s unusual argument frames the question from a strict utilitarian position.

<sup>134</sup> See above, note 72.

plastic; that its expression varies greatly from individual to individual, family to family, society to society. In this, sexuality is like language; indeed, sex is a basic way humans communicate. Above all, sex has a unitive power unlike any other form of communication, for it asks for self-donation. It is not primarily oriented toward procreation, as far as our species is concerned—if it were, we too would have seasons of rut (see above).

Unlike other animals, human beings as a rule mate in private (exhibitionism is an essential aspect of pornography, after all). When a man and a woman marry, they now have societal permission to have sex and make children, and are required to restrict their sexual appetites to the spouse. They become part of two families, as well. However, nothing *requires* that they have sex, as long as both parties are agreeable to this. And because this is a private matter, that decision concerns no one else, unless, of course, one party is dissatisfied, in which case it could become reasonable grounds for annulment.

It is therefore of no real consequence to the rest of society—or the Church—whether a same-sex couple wishing to form a common life includes some expression of sexuality or not. This is primarily a private issue. What is not private is when third parties are involved, or when a person is promiscuous. Casual sex or fornication is always wrong, not only because it can result in unwanted pregnancy, but also because it is a misuse of the power of sex, created for us to be a means of intimate self-donation, of life lived with and for the Other. Living with and for the Other is not possible if the Other is not known beyond a casual encounter and a sparking of sexual attraction. So from the point of view of natural law transformed and supplemented by divine revelation, the “remedy for concupiscence” that the Tradition celebrated as a God-given reason for marriage still does in fact apply to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered — and heterosexual — persons.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> An interesting aspect of the “liberal” case in “Same-sex Relationships” is the insistence on the need for the *remedium* in same-sex relationships as well. See p. 49ff. *Anglican Theological Review* 91.1, p. 65ff.

As queer theologians like to point out, the Scriptures have several stories of two men or two women in deep friendship. It is however no proof of sexual relationship, of course, though these are often invoked as proof as same-sex relationships in the Bible. But the stories of Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, and Jesus and the “disciple whom he loved,” among others, do indicate something that is now missing in contemporary society: that human beings are created first for ultimate friendship with God, and then deep friendship with one another beyond familial, societal, or purely sexual relationships that all too often are principally — and sinfully — about status and power.

*Notes for recovering the meaning of friendship*

Friendship with God is a major biblical theme, a primary metaphor for salvation in this world as well as the next. In the Old Testament, only two people are called “friend of God,” Abraham (2 Chr. 20:7; Is. 41:8; James 2:23) and Moses (Ex. 33:11). Others like Enoch, Noah, Zacharias and Elizabeth (Gen. 5:24; 6:9; Luke 1:6) “walked with God.”

In the New Testament, friendship with God is especially a theme of the Gospel of John, as well as the Letter of James. In his study of the latter, Luke Timothy Johnson notes that in the first-century context, friendship was a very serious matter, indeed, the highest form of relationship, because it was the only one based on equality. Ancient authors referred to it as “being one soul”, “sharing all in common”, even “sharing identity.”<sup>136</sup> This is consistent with how Luke and Paul use the term—friendship equals *koinonia*. Analyzing the well-known saying, “Friendship with the world is enmity with God” (James 4:4), Johnson points out that men who are “friends of God” in James, like Abraham (2:23), are not aggressive and boastful, but rather show the traits of “acceptance, patience, gentleness, self-sacrifice, and service.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 214.

<sup>137</sup> Johnson, *Brother of Jesus*, p. 230.

Jesus is portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew as “friend of sinners” (Mt. 11: 19), which is a taunt directed at him that ironically turns into a compliment in the listener’s ear.<sup>138</sup> In John’s Gospel he qualifies friendship with him as doing what he commands:

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. (15:12-14)

And oddly, what Jesus commands, in order that we be his friends, is that we love one another. It is *prima facie* a very strange thing to order someone to love another, for how can we control love? But as C. S. Lewis noted in his classic *The Four Loves*,<sup>139</sup> English and the Romance languages have an impoverished vocabulary for love compared to Greek.

“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). This would not be surprising in the context of that age: indeed, this saying by itself accords perfectly with the Hellenistic ideal of friendship that was then current.<sup>140</sup> The contrast is between the verb *agapate* in vs. 12 and *philo* in 14: that is, we are to love one another with the general love that is God’s for the creation, and we shall share with Jesus the specific human love of one for another that God’s love enables if we do as he has commanded us. The same contrast of vocabulary occurs in John 21: 15-17. Jesus asks Simon Peter whether he loves (*agapas*) him, and Peter answers that Jesus knows that he loves (*philo*) him. This happens three times. In the third question, Jesus changes from *agapas* to *phileis*. Peter, poignantly cut to the quick, replies that Jesus know all things and therefore must know that he loves him—though he was not previously willing to lay down his life for Jesus at the gate

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<sup>138</sup> This peculiarity is at the heart of Jesus’ enemies’ attacks upon him in the Gospels: insults become compliments. See France Quéré, *Les ennemis de Jésus* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1985)

<sup>139</sup> C. S. Lewis. *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1960). And none compares with Arabic’s ability to describe love in its different genres and phases.

<sup>140</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970) p. 664. Paul says in Romans 5:7, however, that actually to die for another is rare.

to the high priest's courtyard (18:16). Jesus repeats a third time his command that Peter "tend his sheep." reiterating that Peter is still his friend.

Connecting these Johannine affirmations with the Old Testament ideals of God's friends, this means that any of us, not just a very few elect, can also become friends of God just as Abraham and Moses were, by accepting God's offer of saving relationship, practicing the agape love of God for one another in general, and living that out in specific friendships with others. As noted above, such an ideal of friendship brings under severe judgment the way friendship is practiced in our own society.

One medieval theologian for whom friendship was central is Aelred of Rievaulx. In his treatises *Speculum caritatis* and *De spirituali amicitia*, he reflected deeply on the relation between God's love and human friendship. While it seems plausible that he was reflecting on his move from homoerotic love to a celibate ideal of friendship,<sup>141</sup> Aelred describes in profound terms the effect of *agape* on the development of *philia*. Specifically, the love of God enables us genuinely to love one another as true friends: God *is* friendship, in fact, for Aelred.<sup>142</sup>

Friendship with God is of course a principal theme of the *opus* of Thomas Aquinas. Writing a century after Aelred the monk, the Schoolman connects the practice of the theological virtue of hope closely with the development of friendship with God. Whereas we first love God for what we get, eventually we love God as a true friend—without regard to what we get out of it, but rather because of a *rapprochement* of God's will with ours. Similarly, genuine human friendship is not at heart the sharing of common goals, but rather discovering and living out the sharing of a common will toward life. For Aquinas, life with

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<sup>141</sup> E.g., Martín Hugo Cordova Quero, "Friendship with benefits: A queer reading of Aelred of Rievaulx and his theology of friendship" in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays in Sex, God and Politics*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid, Lisa Isherwood (London: T & T Clark, 2005), pp. 34-39.

<sup>142</sup> St. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1974)

God is not an individualistic affair, but a communal life together, not only in the Beatific Vision but also now.<sup>143</sup>

Development of doctrine essentially requires a persuasive argument for widening and deepening the interpretation of the Scriptures. The Tradition often bears gifts from one era to another as well, whose value is not immediately obvious to all generations, but which the Spirit has reserved for later. In the matter of blessing same-sex relationships, we have such a legacy. The controversies over *adelphopoiesis* and *affrèment* rites, initiated by John Boswell<sup>144</sup> and Allan Tulchin<sup>145</sup>, respectively, should not deter from grasping the essence of these otherwise very different rites, which is friendship.

In other words, we have been here before.

The repristinating of these ancient liturgies for pledged friendship for the use of modern same-sex couples, as well as studying the contemporary rites being tried out, is arguably the place to start. A covenant that promises lifelong friendship to each other, a sharing of life with its joys and sorrows, and that is witnessed by the community of faith and blessed by bishop or priest does not compete with Holy Matrimony—it can only strengthen that foundational rite, both in the strengthening of friendships throughout the community (not just the Church), and in the affirmation that covenant with God and before God is how all of us, vowed celibates, vowed spouses, and vowed friends, are to live, if we desire joy in this world and life in the next.

It remains an open question whether one rite can suffice for both. The Scottish Episcopal Church has developed such a rite recently, entitled simply “Marriage Liturgy.”<sup>146</sup> The text offers several possible variations, which adapt to various couples. The word “marriage” appears in all variants. The Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht have

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<sup>143</sup> Daniel Schwartz, *Aquinas on Friendship* (Clarendon Press : Oxford, 2007), pp. 4-23.

<sup>144</sup> John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994)

<sup>145</sup> Allan Tulchin, “Same-Sex Couples Creating Households in Old Régime France: The Uses of the *Affrèment*.” *Journal of Modern History* 79: September 2007. Pp. 613–647

<sup>146</sup> Accessed at [http://www.scotland.anglican.org/index.php/liturgy/liturgy/marriage\\_liturgy\\_2007/](http://www.scotland.anglican.org/index.php/liturgy/liturgy/marriage_liturgy_2007/)

also considered the question in depth. Our full-communion partners have come to a different conclusion, namely, that Matrimony is a sacrament, while a same-sex blessing is not. Each of the Old Catholic churches has a different policy on liturgies for same-sex blessings.

This author's conclusion is that since a sacramental rite expresses an essential aspect of God's economy, transforming essential aspects of being human into images of aspects of the life of the Trinity, we will need separate rites for Holy Matrimony and for vowed friendship. They are both equally sacramental, like Baptism and Eucharist, and like those sacraments, they are related but not interchangeable.

### *Summing up*

The image of God in the universe is human being, male and female, living in covenants that create communities, the image of the Holy Trinity in human flesh. Through Jesus, in the power of the creating Spirit, the Father seeks to draw all into the heart of the God Who is Love. This is our salvation, if we accept it, our restoration to health and wholeness even in the face of sin, suffering and death. The essence of the covenant between each of us and God is that we can, at God's initiative, become friends of God through faith in Jesus. This friendship, no longer the privilege of a happy few, is what Jesus promised to his disciples: "you are my friends if you do what I command: love one another as I have loved you."

At the heart of God's saving initiative stands the Cross of Christ, the ultimate symbol not only of innocent suffering of the scapegoat, institutionalized cruelty, and shameful death, but also ultimate self-donation, "obedience unto death." One cannot thread a needle with a hawser.<sup>147</sup> It must first be reduced to its single first thread. So too we cannot enter God's reign without stripping down to our essence, and being willing to lay down and hand over our life to another, namely Jesus Christ. We must become his friend, just as he is already ours by his gift of Himself, if we are to become fit for life in God's direct presence.

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<sup>147</sup> The correct translation of "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle...".

This is in fact what a covenant of two men or two women should symbolize to the rest of us. Friendship is an ultimate outcome of human life, one which also should only end with death (though in our finitude and fallenness this is not always true). Just as Matrimony sums up and symbolizes creedal truths to the Church about Creation and the Trinity, as well as transforming the couple's relationship by God's grace, so too the blessing of a same-sex friendship can show forth what friendship with one another is, by God's grace, in the Reign and Domain of the Holy Trinity.

As Christians continue to work out the rituals for such blessings, their meaning and sacramental quality will become clearer through the dialectic of the practice of liturgy and theological reflection upon liturgy. The kind of moral living that God enjoins in same-sex relationships, as well as different-sex relationships, will also come more clearly into focus. And pastoral practice will be also more effective, along with pedagogy about the things of God.<sup>148</sup>

There is a great deal of work ahead if we are to hear and learn from the Spirit of truth:

Jesus told his friends, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you." (John 16:11-14)

These "Notes" are meant to be only a stimulus to further conversation toward the goal of seeing some day the Episcopal Church officially present a persuasive argument based on Scripture and communal Reason, leavened by the Tradition. Clearly, there are many continuing loci of investigation. Marriage itself has only recently begun to receive serious theological investigation, and it is a vast subject, spanning the range of human endeavor. The appearance of same-sex relationships in developed societies also demands much more work as well, and this will require resisting the powerful political forces on both sides that want to

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<sup>148</sup> I should like to thank the many people who have generously given of their time and knowledge in reviewing this manuscript through several versions, and whose comments, suggestions and criticisms have greatly enriched it. All errors are, of course, mine alone.

force a simplistic explanation and therefore a one-dimensional moral formulation. The Church is moving into an uncertain future in the near term (God in Christ has assured the long term, of course), and this should help all Christians realize our need for one another.<sup>149</sup>

Finally, it is my hope that we Anglicans can make progress in grappling with this question, which has so distracted our Communion, among other churches. The challenges to human flourishing today are enormous, and should be pushing the churches closer together in addressing those challenges through sharing more deeply in God's mission to humanity and the whole creation, through Christ in the Spirit. Seen in this light, the question of same-sex relationships takes on its true dimension.

That it has served to distract us from God's mission to the extent that so far, it has, should be a powerful reminder of the reality of the "spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God" which we have each sworn in Baptism to renounce. The Spirit of division, the Evil One, has had a hell of a good time at our expense. While we are well assured that the gates of hell will not prevail against us, this does not mean that they will not keep on trying. The very least we can do is to try to avoid being collaborators.

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<sup>149</sup> I Cor. 12: 12-27.