

Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain

The challenge of contemporary homosexual culture to the Orthodox Church

By the Very Rev'd Protopresbyter

Stephen J.F. Maxfield

Contemporary homosexual culture? How can we talk of such a thing? What do we mean? It is to these questions that we must turn at the beginning and then consider where the challenge to the Orthodox Church lies.

I am sufficiently old – the ‘wrong’ side of 60, to be able to remember quite well a time when, in Britain, men who committed homosexual acts were deemed to be criminals and were sent to prison. Homosexuality was considered to be a matter that was taboo and not discussed in society, certainly not polite society, even if one knew that it was something that existed – (unlike Queen Victoria, who, legend recounts, refused to sign the Act of Parliament that outlawed homosexual acts between women because she refused to believe that they could exist). Yet in less than fifty years we find ourselves in a situation where homosexuality is considered to be a normal “life choice”, where teachers may be severely censured if they do not teach it in this way, where sex therapists must teach men how to have sex together and where hotels must make rooms with double beds available to a couple of men.

It is a fact worth mentioning, that the word “homosexual” is relatively new. It was coined originally by a German psychiatrist at the very end of the 19th century to describe people who commit sexual acts with people of their own sex: *Homo* being the Greek for ‘same’. In England, the word only started to be used in general speech after the First World War by such authors as George Bernard Shaw and Stella Gibbons in her humorous work *Cold Comfort Farm*. [1] Before this time, those who committed homosexual acts were referred to as “paederasts”. This word again derives from Greek roots (*paidos*: a child or boy and *erastes*: lover). And indeed in those days no distinction whatever was drawn between men who committed sexual acts with boys, and those who committed sexual acts with other men. It was assumed that anybody who did it with the one would certainly do it with the other. Not so today. There is now a definite and clear distinction drawn between “homosexual” and the new word “paedophile”. (This is another word with Greek origins but confusing: *Philos* is not sexual, but brotherly love, quite a different thing altogether to what paedophile describes: the corruption and sexual abuse of children.) Contemporary homosexuals or “Gays” would be appalled at being generally thought of as ‘Paedophiles’.

Again as an example of how things have changed, one needs to look back only forty years to a time when very few people who had homosexual inclinations would allow anybody other than their closest friends to know it. It was a secret; and they did not desire the consequences of being “outed”:- exposed for their sexual tastes. Yet now, many homosexuals are quite open about these tastes and one is considered exceedingly old-fashioned if one is not prepared to accept that one’s Member of Parliament, for instance, could be a homosexual.

However all this is not exclusive to homosexuality. We are living through a time that has been described as a “sexual revolution” and indeed in Western cultures this can hardly be denied for two fundamental reasons. The first is the

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availability of effective contraceptives which allow women to engage in sexual intercourse without any fear of becoming pregnant and the second is that in many countries, even if contraceptives are not available, abortion is freely available and women or couples may resort to safe abortionists to destroy their babies. Exactly as was predicted when these methods of birth control were under discussion, the result has been a culture of 'safe' promiscuity. The word 'safe' is in inverted commas because while the results may have been safe from a physical point of view, they may well have had mental and spiritual results that have been very dangerous indeed. For instance sexual activity may bring strong feelings of guilt, yet curiously this sense of guilt, of knowing one is doing wrong can bring about a rush of adrenalin that is itself fulfilling. Committing the sin brings the desire to repeat it!

But alongside this revolution there has been another one in Western cultures. Couples have become married at a later and later age thus prolonging the time that young, sexually active people spend before entering culturally acceptable relationships, be they marriage or cohabitation. It is worth remembering that in the middle ages girls were frequently married when they were twelve and in some countries, such as Wales, men were considered as having come of age when they were fourteen. In former times the delay between asexual childhood and sexual activity was very short indeed[2]. The issue here is an idea that because you can have sexual relations, safely, therefore you ought to have them. Indeed not to do so is in some way strange and unnatural. The idea that actually abstaining from sex is quite natural and normal and indeed does no one any harm is reviled and resisted by those who promote the sexual revolution.

The issue of "Orientation".

During the 1950s and 1960s four scientific reports were published on human sexuality following research in the United States of America *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953)[3], by [Dr. Alfred Kinsey](#), [Wardell Pomeroy](#) and others and published by [Saunders](#). *Human Sexual Response* (1960) and *Human Sexual Inadequacy* (1970), by [William H. Masters](#) and [Virginia E. Johnson](#). These not only told us a great deal more about the sexual activities of men and women but they also presented them in a way that claimed to be scientific and therefore "true". Subsequently the methodology of the experiments behind these reports has been challenged and much of the detail is now considered unsound but many of the broad ideas have been accepted by the general population, though there is not the same acceptance from the sociological, psychological and gynaecological disciplines from which they originated. One of the most important concepts that are now widely accepted is that of "Orientation". The point here is that the sexuality of a given man or woman's sexuality is conditioned by factors, often considered beyond their control, which determines them to a particular kind of sexual activity, heterosexual (meaning sexual activity with the opposite sex), homosexual or bisexual (meaning that the person will indulge in sexual activities with any sex, their own or the opposite). Exactly when this "orientation" will be determined depends on the authority. Some suggest that it is genetic, determined in the home or determined as a matter of choice or even as a result of abuse.

It is important to point out however that with the scientific community this concept of "orientation" is by no means fully understood, nor indeed accepted. It has been suggested for instance that "orientation" may change during a person's life[4]. So, for instance, the American Psychological Association in their Encyclopaedia of Psychology state:-

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“Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation – heterosexuality, homosexuality, or bisexuality – is determined by any particular factor or factors. The evaluation of amici is that, although some of this research may be promising in facilitating greater understanding of the development of sexual orientation, it does not permit a conclusion based in sound science at the present time as to the cause or causes of sexual orientation, whether homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. (Vol 7, p 260)[5] And further “Currently [as of "September 26, 2007"], there is no scientific consensus about the specific factors that cause an individual to become heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual — including possible biological, psychological, or social effects of the parents' sexual orientation”.

This could be significant, as we shall see when we consider the response that the Orthodox Church makes to these issues and it is to this response that we must now turn.

At the outset we need to state some basic Orthodox teachings about humanity and sexuality.

First we must state that it is our understanding that humans were created by God, (*according to our image and likeness.. Genesis 1:26*), and are thus composite beings composed both of the physical and the spiritual. That their creation was good and that they were given the power to reproduce and thus assist in the creation of further human beings (*Increase and multiply...Genesis 1:28*) and that this power also was good. (*Genesis 1:26-31*)[6] Note however, that it is NOT Orthodox Christian teaching that every human being is individually created by God[7], even if they are known to Him from their conception. (This latter teaching is important for our subject because a person may **not** say that his “orientation” is *God given* and may or should thus be indulged).

Second we understand that humans are created in two complimentary kinds, men and women and it is God’s intention that they should function normally as sexual beings who give increase and as guardians of the rest of His physical creation[8].

Third we must state that as a result of the Fall, mankind is marred and sinful. **All** are sinful and **all** may commit **all** sins without exception. It is not Orthodox Christian teaching that there is elite of special people who are predestined to be different from the rest and thus will not sin as others. The sole exception to this rule is our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who unites in His person both the perfect human and the perfect God and is without sin.

Finally we must state that the Orthodox Christian understanding of sexuality is quite simple. Sexual acts may take place between man and woman who are joined in the mystery or sacrament of marriage in which condition they are blessed not only with children but also with the comfort of each other. All other sexual acts come under the censure of fornication. BUT this is a very broad term indeed consisting of everything from the wet dream of a youth through to the activities of a professional prostitute. They are not all considered in the same way, nor are they considered as having the same importance or significance. The driver for the issue here is to do with the reception of communion: under what circumstances is a person barred from communion and for how long, if at all?

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From these principles we may draw certain conclusions. First of all, homosexual acts will be included under the general umbrella of fornication. And note that it is the **acts** that are the issue. A person may be tempted by all sorts of things but unless he commits them he does **not sin** and **should not** be condemned. A man may be inclined towards homosexual acts, just as another man is inclined towards over-indulgence in alcohol or anger, neither of them are sinners unless they commit the act. Theologically speaking the Church does not accept that a person is “a homosexual”. And here there is a challenge for the Orthodox Church because the homosexual culture of today would very much like to re-define human beings not as men and women but with a qualifier: he is a “gay man” or she is a “straight woman”. This fundamentally un-Christian labelling must be resisted.

However homosexual acts are not merely included with fornication. They are singled out for attention by the Church primarily based on teachings that we find in both the Old and the New Testaments. The first is the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (*Genesis 18:16-19:29*). This is of particular significance because the sin was deemed to be so extraordinary and unnatural that God (in the form of three angels) went to the city of Sodom to see for Himself whether the report was indeed true. And indeed, the people of Sodom left Him in no doubt for when the angels arrived at Sodom “*And the men of the city, the Sodomites, from young man to elder, all the people together, encircled the dwelling and they were summoning Lot and were saying to him. “Where are the men who came in to you tonight? Bring them out to us in order that we may have relations with them.” (Genesis 19:4-5)*. The Law, as given in the book of Leviticus is clear. Sodomy is a sin.^[9] In the New Testament we find teaching on the subject by St Paul, particularly his first letter to the Corinthians “*You know perfectly well that people who do wrong will not inherit the kingdom of God: people of immoral lives, idolaters, adulterers, catamites, sodomites, thieves, usurers, drunkards, slanderers and swindlers...*” (1 Corinthians:6:9^[10]) In St Paul’s time Corinth was dominated by the Acropolis on which stood a huge temple to Aphrodite, housing, it is said up to 2,000 temple prostitutes. It is significant therefore that this teaching was written to the Corinthians for whom sexual licence must have been an ever present reality. However this sexual licence was not confined to Corinth of course. Throughout the Roman Empire until the hegemony of the Orthodox Church homosexual lifestyles were almost the norm. The Emperors Hadrian was famous for his male lover as was the bizarre Emperor Elagabalus (218-222) who it is said had his lover proclaimed as the “Emperor’s Husband”. It should be remembered that Christian ethics were forged in marked distinction and opposition to the norms of the day.

We continue to find teaching against homosexual acts from the time of the New Testament on, for instance in the letter of St Barnabas chapter 10 (late 1st early 2nd century) “... *by which he means you are not to debauch young boys, or become like those who do...etc.*”^[11] In fact many church fathers condemned homosexuality notably St John Chrysostom (late 4th century).

Not surprisingly it is in the Church Canons that the matter is most clearly dealt with. The issue principally is that of the sin of sodomy for which a penance of 15 years was imposed by St Basil Canons 7 and 62 (4th century). St Gregory of Nyssa (4th century) imposed a penance of 18 years. It would seem that these fathers derive their teaching from Canon 16 of the Council of Ancyra (314). However a sodomite was also barred from ordination (canon 18 of John the Faster (ca 580) and a boy who had been defiled was likewise barred (canon 19). It is probable that the Faster is making explicit an issue that is covered by canon 17 of the Council of Ancyra. (A canon, which in the form we now have it is rather opaque). It is not clear whether this ban on ordination was to do with some ontological change that takes place in the victim – a change in “orientation” perhaps? Or whether it demonstrates the wisdom of the Church whose experience was, and sadly still is, that one who has been abused as a boy may well go on to abuse others and is therefore a risk to the integrity of the priesthood in particular and the Church in general.

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The challenge today.

The Church is now faced with a situation in the West that it has not encountered for some 1,500 years or more – a culture that is accepting of and may promote homosexual acts. But more than this it is a culture which without much searching is awash with sex, from internet porn sites and extra-marital dating agencies catering for every taste to all manner of marketing ploys aimed at selling one product or another even down to lingerie for little girls who cannot possibly have a real use for such things for at least five years.

When it comes to homosexuality there are several approaches: for the general population it is often accepted as a matter of taste – “I do not want to do that, but what he or she wants to do is nothing to do with me, good luck to them”. For others, particularly in the Christian Churches the response may be more subtle: “Well the ethical teaching of the Church was fixed a long time ago, we understand so much more about people now. The ethics must move with the times.” Or even “Well they were made by God like that so it must be all right and they cannot avoid it.” The revulsion felt by many towards homosexuality has been cleverly diverted into a loathing of paedophiles that are seen as entirely distinct from “gays and lesbians”. Well perhaps they often are, but perhaps sometimes they are not.

How is the Orthodox Church to respond to this situation? I would like to make a number of suggestions.

First of all we need to stress the godly virtues of self-discipline and chastity. This is a fundamental pre-supposition for the Christian life from the day of Pentecost onwards. It is a major reason for fasting – which also involves restraint from sexual relations just as much as it involves abstaining from certain food and drink. We can do without sex as hundreds of thousands of monastics have demonstrated through the ages. However the Church has always recognised that sex is a very powerful passion, greater even than the desire to eat or drink, but it can be controlled. It is nevertheless God given and part of what it is to be a human being.

Second the whole notion of a fixed sexual “orientation” should be resisted. In strange circumstances all of us can do more or less anything! We change, and can change. The Christian is one who changes to the good, but a saint is one who has changed much.

Third the Church needs to recover her teachings about fantasy. One of the reasons that the Church disliked actors was that they lived in fantasy. The difficulty now is that through the internet everyone may have access to the most extraordinary things – every kind of sexual depravity that one can imagine and a whole lot that one never imagined in one’s wildest dreams. Because these things may be exciting to an individual who willingly or unwillingly finds them, does not mean that they are *de facto* depraved: though it would be an excellent thing if they resisted these things in the future!

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Finally the Church will and always has encountered people who are strongly drawn to homosexual acts and commit them.. They need help and love to encourage and assist them to change their lives to bring them back into proper balance. As do we all, for we are all sinners. Over and over again let spiritual fathers remember the great canon 102 Of the Quinisext Council (692):

“For the whole account is between God and him to whom the pastoral rule has been delivered, to lead back the wandering sheep and to cure that which is wounded by the serpent: and that he may neither cast them down into the precipices of despair, nor loosen the bridle towards dissolution, or contempt of life; but in some way or other, either by means of astringency, or by greater softness and mild medicines to resist this sickness and exert himself for the healing of the ulcer, now examining the fruits of his repentance and wisely managing the man who is called to higher illumination.....” [\[12\]](#)

It is to this higher illumination that we are all called by the Orthodox Church, and just as all sin, so all are made alive in Christ: His life, the Life of God Himself, and to Him be the glory, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

[\[1\]](#) *Cold Comfort Farm* is a bucolic satire on the works of the author Mary Webb.

[\[2\]](#) King John of England married his second wife Isabella of Angouleme when she was 12, he was 33. Although it was said that they had intercourse with her from their marriage – his courtiers complained at how late into the morning they remained in bed, she did not actually conceive until she was 18. Likewise Mahomet is supposed to have had a wife aged 10. While one can now be very uncertain about *any* events of Mahomet’s life, what is certain is that when the story came to be written in the 9th century, to take a wife so young was not considered odd.

[\[3\]](#) Parts of the Kinsey Reports regarding diversity in [sexual orientations](#) are frequently used to support the common estimate of 10% for [homosexuality](#) in the general population. However, the findings are not absolute, and Kinsey himself avoided and disapproved of using terms like homosexual or heterosexual to describe individuals, asserting that sexuality is prone to change over time, and that sexual behavior can be understood both as physical contact as well as purely psychological phenomena (desire, sexual attraction, fantasy). Instead of three categories ([heterosexual](#), [bisexual](#) and [homosexual](#)), a seven-category [Kinsey Scale](#) system was used.

[\[4\]](#) And this would be my own pastoral experience. I know of at least two men who were in “stable” homosexual relationships for a many years yet are now happily married with contented wives.

[\[5\]](#) See generally Am. Psychol. Ass'n, 7 *Encyclopedia of Psychol.* 260 (A.E. Kazdin ed., 2000); 2 *Corsini* [*The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences . . .* (W.E. Craighead & C.B. Nemeroff eds., 3d ed. 2001)], . . . at 683

[\[6\]](#) Old Testament quotations are from the *New English Translation of Septuagint* (NETS)

[\[7\]](#) This issue was dealt with particularly by St John of Damascus (c.657-749) and derived from a controversy with certain Moslems who did argue that everyone *was* individually created. St John argued that this teaching was immoral as it implied that God would bless, by the gift of children, a sinful act: rape. He thus argued that we are created as co-creators with God.

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[8] It may be argued that an extremely small number of human are born with uncertain gender. This is a complex topic well beyond the scope of this paper but the answer lies somewhere along the lines of the previous paragraph.

[9] See also Leviticus 18:22: “*and you shall not sleep with a male as in a bed of a woman, for it is an abomination - Kai meta arsenou ou koimhēsh koithn gunaikeian, bdelugma gar esti*”. also Leviticus 20:13, where it is required that they are put to death.

[10] *Jerusalem Bible* translation.

[11] *Early Christian Writings* Penguin p. 206

[12] *The Nicene and Post –Nicene Fathers Vol. XIV The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, p408