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A critique of the appeal to biology as justification for heterosexual relationship in the Church of England document *Issues in Human Sexuality*

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ABSTRACT

The official position of the Church of England (CofE) regarding human sexuality affirms a heteronormative ideal of human relationship that finds fulfilment in marriage with an orientation towards procreation. Official publications by the CofE justify the male/female partnership in several ways, but it is the recurring appeal to human biology that is of interest in this paper. This paper will critique a natural law approach in which prescriptive statements are derived from biology to justify heterosexual relationships. This paper will pay attention to *Issues in Human Sexuality* (1991) because of the status afforded to it by the CofE; it was essentially used as an official statement on human sexuality; ordinands have been asked to abide by its theology; and because its theology is explicitly affirmed in subsequent CofE documents. Although *Issues* has been superseded and the CofE is in a new phase of debate, claims about biology remain.

KEYWORDS

Biology; natural law; Church of England; procreation; creation

This paper will consider the way that biology is appealed to in the Church of England document *Issues in Human Sexuality*, specifically the way that it affirms heterosexual relationships that find fulfilment in marriage with an orientation towards procreation. *Issues*, published by the House of Bishops of the Church of England in December 1991, is of particular interest because of its historical setting and the status afforded to it by the CofE; it was the document which emerged following General Synod 1987 which *Living in Love and Faith* describes as, ‘the last substantive motion on sexual behaviour passed by General Synod’.¹ *Issues* has also been described as the document which ‘effectively became the church’s official working policy’ on human sexuality,² and until February 2023 when Synod voted for a new statement to be written, ordinands in the Church of England were asked to swear to uphold and abide by the theology found in the document. Finally, until recently, *Issues* has been explicitly defended in subsequent CofE documents on human sexuality.

¹*Living in Love and Faith: Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage* (London: Church House Publishing, 2020), 141.

²*Living in Love and Faith*, 141.

In this paper, I will highlight the way that biology is appealed to in this publication, what is being argued by it and what this indicates about Church of England theology or at least the theology of the House of Bishops of the Church of England in 1991. I will then analyse this appeal to biology as a means of justifying heterosexual relationships. Finally, I will briefly consider how biology is used to understand gender.

Creation, nature, biology

Considering the appeal to biology found in *Issues*, it is the exploration of Genesis 1 and 2 which we turn to first as a picture of the created order. This is referred to later in the document. *Issues* states -

In the Creation stories humankind is by God's decision both male and female. In Genesis 1 this is the way humanity is made from the first, "in the image of God . . . male and female" (v. 27). In Genesis 2 the male is created alone, then the female later out of the male body, when other creatures, made by God separately, are found inadequate as partners for the man. In both accounts it is made clear that man and woman are unique among living beings on earth, that they share an equality denied to other creatures, and that they cannot live without each other.³

This is a significant statement because aside from the confident assertion of a male/female binary in humankind, a binary that we learn is 'God's decision', we read of the affirmation of the male/female partnership – that 'they cannot live without each other', each necessary for the other's flourishing.

In the discussion on nature, on what is meant by the natural, the authors of *Issues* turn their attention to biology, stating that, 'It has been the theme of Christian tradition, ever since St Paul's words in the first chapter of Romans, to classify certain sexual activities and practices, those of homophiles most particularly, as unnatural or contrary to nature'.⁴ To clarify, the authors of the document make the unusual choice to employ the term 'homophile' instead of homosexual.⁵ In any case, the document explains that -

. . . in theology "natural" may refer to what can be concluded about God by unaided reasoning from experience of the created order . . . moral theology employs it to describe those types of human conduct which are in harmony with the will of God as discernible from creation as opposed to those which violate that will and which are "unnatural".⁶

This is appealing to a natural law argument; by experiencing creation and observing facts about the world, we can reasonably discern which behaviours are appropriate, in harmony with God's will, and therefore 'natural'. In applying this logic to human sexuality, *Issues* states –

. . . a first and obvious observation is that sexual desire and the sexual activity that results from it serve the purposes of procreation; and it would be highly unreasonable to argue that it was not the will of a Creator that this should be so. Furthermore, since it is the interaction

³*Issues in Human Sexuality: A statement by the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 1991), 7.

⁴*Issues in Human Sexuality*, 35.

⁵*Ibid.*, 31.

⁶*Ibid.*, 36.

of male and female genital organs which makes procreation possible, that too must be part of God's purpose, and be so for at least the great majority of humankind. In short the biological evidence is at least compatible with a theological view that heterosexual physical union is divinely intended to be the norm.⁷

In other words, we can perceive that sex is oriented towards procreation because we observe and experience this reality in creation; we observe that desire and sexual intimacy lead to conception, so it is 'obvious', even common sense, to suggest that this is the purpose of sex. Because male/female bodies fit together for reproduction and because they are both needed for this to be achieved, we should reasonably assume that heterosexual partnerships 'must be part of God's purpose . . . for at least the great majority of humankind'.⁸ Taken to its extreme, we might also believe that the only real purpose of the sexual organs is for procreation. The paragraph culminates by stating that, 'the biological evidence is at least compatible with a theological view that heterosexual physical union is divinely intended to be the norm'.⁹ Despite this hint of ambivalence, it confirms the picture of the created order in Genesis and the authors of *Issues* remind us that it would be 'unreasonable' for us to conclude that this was not the case.

There are a few ways that we might want to challenge this argument. Firstly, the mode of thinking employed here, namely an appeal to natural law, sees a prescriptive statement arise from a descriptive statement about the world. They are moving from an 'is' to an 'ought'. The authors of *Issues* are moving from statements which they present as fact – that children may result from sexual intercourse or that male/female anatomy fits together for procreation – to arguing that this prescribes appropriate moral action, namely heterosexual union. This could be considered an illogical transition to a different type of statement.

Additionally, we may query whether procreation should be so decisively identified as the purpose of human desire and sexual activity. Does this contention allow us to consider alternative purposes for sexual interaction? Rowan Williams in his essay *The Body's Grace* raises the suggestion that perhaps we feel more comfortable about understanding sexual activity as procreative, after all, this has 'an openness to the more tangible goals of producing children . . . it's all for a good cause and a good cause that can be visibly and plainly evaluated in its usefulness and success'.¹⁰ If, however, we challenge the idea that procreativity is at the heart of human sexuality, then we are left wondering about the meaning of sexual desire and the sexual act itself. Williams writes, 'Same-sex love annoyingly poses the question of what the meaning of desire is – in itself, not considered as instrumental to some other process, such as the peopling of the world'.¹¹ Perhaps, it is easier to situate sexuality in the context of procreation than consider more complex expressions of human desire.

Furthermore, given that the CofE has authorised the use of contraception, is this not an acknowledgement that sex need not always be oriented towards procreation or that there are at least *further* purposes for sexual activity. Susannah Cornwall suggests that

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Rowan D. Williams, 'The Body's Grace', in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 318.

¹¹Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 318.

permitting the use of contraception acknowledges a distinction between ‘spousehood and parenthood’.¹² The authors of *Issues* acknowledge that with the permissibility of contraception come ‘other, if related consequences’, stating –

The intimacy of the parents, and the pleasure they find in each other, serve to strengthen the bond between them and so to enhance their co-operation in the necessary work of raising and protecting their children and bringing them to mature adulthood.¹³

Although this recognises the benefits of non-procreative sexual intimacy, namely the strengthening of the bond between the couple which improves their ability to work together, this is still set within the framework of the ‘necessary work of raising and protecting children’. Contraceptive sex – although useful for building up the relationship between the couple – is a stepping stone on the way to fulfilling their ultimate procreative endeavour. One wonders, though, whether the logic employed here inadvertently leaves the option open for same-sex couples. After all, if the argument is that contraceptive and non-procreative sex prepares a couple for having children by strengthening their relationship, surely same-sex couples can benefit in the same way?

And what of the childless couple? What does this emphasis on procreation mean for those who cannot have children or, perhaps more controversially within the theological framework of *Issues*, who chose not to? The authors of *Issues* are quick to tell us, however, that, ‘The words of Genesis about the union of man and woman are true independently of procreation’.¹⁴ And so it seems that after the appeal to natural law to justify heterosexual unions oriented towards procreation, it is the Genesis account which is the central vindication for opposite-sex couples. One cannot help but feel like the authors are undermining their argument here or are acknowledging that the appeal to biology is not that compelling after all.

We may also want to challenge the suggestion that our sexual organs need to be oriented towards procreation. Or that just because ‘it is the interaction of male and female genital organs which makes procreation possible, that too must be part of God’s purpose, and be so for at least the great majority of humankind’.¹⁵ Despite the caveat that this must be the case for the majority, this is another example of a purpose being identified and then generalised biological claims are used to lend plausibility to the account. Although, of course, couples do naturally conceive this way, is it demonstrably the case that human anatomy should only be used like this and with this intention? If we are going to use a natural law argument to understand human sexuality, specifically one that stems from human anatomy, then what might we conclude, for example, about the clitoris? In *The Body’s Grace*, Williams considers this, asking what of –

... the existence of the clitoris in women: something whose function is joy. If the Creator were quite so instrumentalist in “his” attitude to sexuality, these hints of prodigality and redundancy in the way the whole thing works might cause us to worry about whether “he” was, after all, in full rational control of it.¹⁶

¹²Susannah Cornwall, ‘Faithfulness to our Sexuate Bodies: The Vocations of Generativity and Sex’, in *Thinking Again About Marriage: Key Theological Questions*, ed. John Bradbury & Susannah Cornwall (London: SCM Press, 2016), 103.

¹³*Issues in Human Sexuality*, 36.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁶Williams, ‘The Body’s Grace’, 319.

Finally, we may want to challenge the understanding of biology presented in *Issues*. The document states, 'In short the biological evidence is at least compatible with a theological view that heterosexual physical union is divinely intended to be the norm'.¹⁷ This claims that biological evidence has been highlighted but it has paid no serious attention to human biology. For example, it relies on the idea that biology is binary, neatly dividing into male and female. Although this view has been defended in the context of human identity, for example by Kathleen Stock in her book *Material Girls*, Cornwall has argued that 'the binary nature of biological sex is not quite as obvious and self-evident as it seems'.¹⁸ She writes –

... not everyone's body fits neatly into the either-or, male-female system. Intersex people ... cannot usually reproduce with their partner ... The Church of England does not seem to acknowledge that not everyone's body fits clearly into the male-female, ideally procreative account of sex.¹⁹

It seems that there is a complexity here that the authors are not taking into account. This is not a serious engagement with a scientific understanding of biology, it is an appeal to 'folk biology', a common-sense appeal to how we should use our bodies. We may want to conclude by saying that *Issues* demonstrates an overconfidence about how well we understand human biology, can understand our purposes in relation to that biology, and understand human relationships as a result.

A brief word on gender

The authors of *Issues* contend that men and women, created by God, bring different and unique attributes to a partnership that makes them complementary, suited to fulfilling certain roles with and for each other. The document states –

We can and should acknowledge the goodness of God's primal gifts, emerging from the evolutionary creation for which he is responsible, and including in the present context the fact of gender and the potential for fullness of sexual life and relationships, for procreation, family and human society and civilisation.²⁰

Again, we see an appeal to a divinely created order which is tied to an assertion about 'the fact of gender'. It is unclear exactly what is meant by this though given the remainder of the clause my suspicion is that the 'fact of gender' is being rooted in something perceived as obviously factual, i.e. a common-sense binary of male/female bodies, something that emerges from creation and is tied to sexual life, procreation, and the family.

Later in the document we see a further elucidation about what the authors understand about gendered difference. They write –

In heterosexual love this personal bonding and mutual self-giving happen between two people who, because they are of different gender, are not merely physically differentiated but also diverse in their emotional, mental and spiritual lives, their way of experiencing and responding to reality.²¹

¹⁷*Issues in Human Sexuality*, 36.

¹⁸Cornwall, 'Faithfulness to our Sexuate Bodies', 101.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 103.

²⁰*Issues in Human Sexuality*, 13.

²¹*Ibid.*, 37.

We see the contention that in male/female partnerships not only is there a biological difference but also, crucially, a gendered one, manifested in ‘emotional, mental and spiritual’ differences between men and women. Later, the document tells us that this allows them to make ‘distinctive contributions . . . essential for the fullness of humankind as a whole; and it is important . . . to value this complementarity’.²² This confirms the assumption that the gendered difference stems from an initial physical differentiation, i.e. that the truth of anatomical difference determines gendered difference.

If difference is important, however, this seems to ignore the fact that two women or two men will differ in their ‘emotional, mental, and spiritual’ lives. It seems to imply that these things will manifest in the same way in all women or all men and therefore same-sex couples cannot witness distinctive contributions within the pair.

The document also fails to define what these ‘emotional, mental and spiritual’ differences might be and why precisely they develop differently. If this is an expression of being male or female, and this is rooted in biology, then this seems to ignore individual personality or more complex differences between bodies. There is a sense in which this contends that quite basic facts about one’s biology will determine gender, and therefore influence one’s inner life and understanding of the world, that one’s ‘emotional, mental and spiritual’ life and the way one experiences the world are at the mercy of their anatomy.

Concluding thoughts

In arguing from natural law and an appeal to biology, *Issues* states that, ‘homophile orientation and its expression in sexual activity do not constitute a parallel and alternative form of human sexuality as complete within the terms of the created order as the heterosexual’.²³ The appeal to ‘created order’ – i.e. of the created world according to Genesis and of the anatomy of male/female bodies and their complementary potentiality for procreation – is used as a means of justifying certain forms of human relationship. We are reminded that this is obvious, that ‘it would be highly unreasonable to argue that it was not the will of a Creator that this should be so’.²⁴ In this paper, I have tried to challenge statements like this one, to show that it is, in fact, reasonable to push back on some of the assumptions made in the document; to challenge a natural law argument which prescribes behaviour from an observation of creation, which roots sexual activity in the purpose of procreation, and contends that the fact of gender maps on to male and female sexed body. This is not obvious or common sense in the way *Issues* presents it to be.

Issues gives little sense of the debate or complexity in Christian ways of thinking about human sexuality. Nor do the authors of *Issues* show much interest in understanding the complexity of bodies or the way that our feelings tie-in with that biology. The aim of this paper has not been to undermine the significance of biology per se, but to critique the manner of the appeal to biology in *Issues in Human Sexuality*. It is worth noting, however, that many subsequent CofE

²²*Ibid.*, 37.

²³*Ibid.*, 40.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 36.

publications appeal to biology more explicitly than is done so in *Issues*. This line of thinking, therefore, is not outdated, but has remained a key part of Church of England thinking about human relationships.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Philippa Evans is a PhD candidate in Theology at Durham University, where her research is considering the attentiveness demonstrated by the Church of England towards human relationships in its publications on sexuality. Philippa is a qualified teacher in Religious Education and taught for a few years before working for a parish church in the Church of England. Before starting her PhD, she completed her MA in Christian Theology at Durham University, writing a dissertation on whether the Church of England should consider procreation to be a purpose of marriage.

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