JOURNEY TOWARDS ACCEPTANCE: THEOLOGIANS AND SAME-SEX LOVE

By Savitri Hensman

1. Introduction and overview

Over the past half-century or so, numerous Christian theologians have turned their attention to the issue of same-sex desire and relationships. Many have come to believe that, under certain circumstances, lesbian and gay partnerships are acceptable, though not all are convinced. The debates over this issue reflect some of the developments in theology during this time.

Non-Christians sometimes think that the church (the community of Christians past and present, that is, rather than the leadership of institutions) reaches its view on particular ethical issues on the basis of unchallengeable commands set out in the Bible or doctrinal statements. This is largely the fault of Christians, who have often failed to explain the kind of reasoning that goes on within the church, and the rather authoritarian way in which some congregations and networks function. God is sometimes portrayed rather like a distant general whose orders (passed on by lower-ranking officers) must be obeyed even if they make no obvious sense and many foot-soldiers are destroyed.

However Christ in the Gospels invites his followers to be not like slaves unthinkingly doing what they are told, but friends growing towards maturity in relationship with him as they treat others lovingly (John 15.1-17), apprentices and heirs of a generous God whose ways are filled with wisdom (Luke 6.17-49).

There are certain core beliefs – about the nature of the Divine, including the Trinity whose love embraces humankind – which have remained more-or-less constant for many centuries, though theologians continue to reflect on the implications, and strive to express these in terms to which people in a particular time and place can relate. However, on particular matters of right and wrong, from slavery to the role of women, there has been much debate and what were initially minority views have sometimes gradually won wider support.[1]

Questions have also been raised by economic, social, scientific and technological changes. Archaeological finds, historical research and fresh translations have also prompted scholars and communities to look at the past in new ways, and sometimes rediscover what had been forgotten.

Some theologians (sometimes labelled ‘conservative’) tend to be reluctant to rethink long-held beliefs and others (sometimes labelled ‘liberal’ or ‘radical’) give more weight to new developments, when grappling with particular ethical questions. In addition theology may be especially inspired by, or grounded in, particular aspects of Christian experience (e.g. being a Baptist, hospital chaplain or specialist in the Synoptic gospels or mediaeval Russian spirituality).

However in general, whatever their ‘label’, theologians tend to explore – drawing on the insights of the Bible and church tradition – how human flourishing is and can best be promoted, in the context of the relationship with God and neighbour. They are influenced, in good and not-so-good ways, by the wider church, filled with people who have their own ways of talking about God but who would usually not regard themselves as theologians, and by society.

Theologians may also draw on insights from a related discipline, the study of religion, and the social sciences in general, to illuminate the historical context, how certain beliefs and practices have come to be regarded as acceptable or otherwise, and how they are understood by practitioners.

Even in church circles, some commentators talk as if there were a set of clear-cut beliefs on sexuality which earlier generations of Christians all accepted but which have largely been set aside today simply because of developments in modern society and thinking. Whether this is regarded as a good or bad thing, it is a distorted view of a far more complex reality.

To begin with, thoughtful and spiritually insightful thinkers in ancient as well as modern times have often pointed to the need to go beyond superficial piety, and look more deeply into what God might be doing and inviting people to receive or do, even if the conclusions were unsettling. The Bible itself is a collection of books written at different times and sometimes reflecting different perspectives – even the New Testament contains diverse views – and the beliefs and practices of Christians in past centuries have varied greatly.

The pace of change in the modern world is however probably greater than at almost any time in the past, and there has been intense study and debate in recent decades on a range of issues from economic justice and ecology to gender and sexuality. This has sometimes prompted Christians to read the Bible and writings of earlier Christians afresh.

For instance, while at one time the first few chapters of Genesis were taken as an invitation for humankind to exploit the earth and other animals ruthlessly, it is now widely believed that the kind of leadership which humans are required to exercise is more about care and responsible stewardship. Again, now that the world is indeed full of people, the call for humans to "multiply and fill the earth" (Genesis 1.28) may not apply in the way it once did.

This essay is by no means a comprehensive account of changes in the theology of sexuality which have led many (though by no means all) Christians to believe that same-sex partnerships may be morally justified. A number of theologians who have played a part in that journey have not even been mentioned, and others have had their work only briefly described. What is more, while I have tried to reflect something of the diversity of views even among those who support greater acceptance, there are some whose writings have been particularly important to me at some point in my life: I am not wholly objective.

The focus is on relationships where both partners identify as male or as female. Issues specific to trans or intersex people are not generally addressed, though the theological changes outlined here have had some influence on their experience as well as that of lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

I also say relatively little about the work of those theologians who continue to argue that same-sex relationships are always wrong. But some of their arguments will probably be familiar to anyone who grew up when such beliefs were dominant, attends certain churches or follows media coverage of what prominent church leaders say on homosexuality.[2]

The change in opinion on human sexuality in many churches over the past sixty years throws light more generally on the way that Christians grapple with ethical issues. And the extensive work which has taken place on the theology of sexuality, how the Bible is read and church tradition deserves to be properly acknowledged.

2. Beyond the sin of Sodom

Faith-influenced reflection on same-sex love and relationships is not new, including the affirmation that these could be positive. Yet up to the early twentieth century, this happened more often in the context of pastoral care or creative writing than through formal theology.

From the 1950s onwards, however, many theologians have studied and written on human sexuality, including desire, intimacy and partnership between women and between men, and there has been much discussion in church circles.

The mid-twentieth century was an era when changes within the church and society led to a re-examination of a range of issues. Just a few decades earlier, leaders of different Christian denominations had generally held that contraception was always wrong, even for married couples. Differences remained over whether priests and bishops could marry, and whether celibacy or marriage was a higher state. But by the early twentieth century, it was widely held that the only proper place for sexual intimacy was between husband and wife, with openness to the possibility of conceiving children.[3]

Also, there were widely-held views in society and the church about the roles of men and woman, and the importance of upholding men's mastery in domestic as well as public settings. Similarly, people of certain classes and ethnicities were usually assumed to be divinely chosen to lead. While many in the early church had taken a more egalitarian view, by the Middle Ages those Christians who held on to this were marginalised and often persecuted. Likewise marriage was sometimes seen as a tool to assist better-off families to hold on to and accumulate more wealth and prestige – a notion starkly at odds with New Testament values, but which had come to be regarded as 'Christian'. In some denominations, monks and nuns too were part of strongly hierarchical 'families' with great wealth and power.

In practice, couples who could not have children because of the age or infertility of one or both partners might be permitted to have sex. And not all men and women in church circles fitted gender stereotypes. What is more, marriage did not always involve much emotional closeness, and could co-exist with other kinds of intimate relationship. But entering into an openly acknowledged same-sex union instead of marrying a member of the opposite sex was not usually an option for respectable, religious folk.

Yet in recent centuries – amidst social upheaval, greater cross-cultural communication and an increase in literacy and availability of books, including the Bible – some of what had been held certain in mediaeval times was called into question. Changes in women's status, family patterns, healthcare and environmental awareness increasingly led people to question the desirability of having numerous children: responsible use of resources and protecting the earth and its inhabitants were as important, if not more so.

By the mid-twentieth century, many Christians – including theologians and senior church leaders – had come to believe that contraceptive use was sometimes acceptable, and that one partner in a marriage did not have to be superior to the other. This opened the door to further questions about when, and how, sexual relationships might be a source of good to the partners and wider society.

In addition, churches in many countries had less prestige than in the past and were more willing to question the status quo. Though the Church of England, for instance, kept certain privileges, some

of its theologians were willing to ask searching questions about society and its treatment of the poor and minorities.

Harsh social, and in some countries legal, penalties had led many lesbians and gays to stay 'in the closet', hiding their feelings from most people around them and being secretive. In the UK, for instance, gay sex was an imprisonable offence, and gays often struggled to change their sexuality, including drastic forms of medical treatment or getting married, which frequently led to disappointment and damage to all involved. When two men or two women did enter into a sexual relationship, all too often this was in part shaped by fear and internalised negativity. But campaigners called for change.

Senior clergy came to recognise the injustice of jailing gay men while, for instance, men who cheated on their wives faced no legal penalties, and helped to change the law. But most continued to believe that sex between men or between women was always sinful.

The Rev Dr Derrick Sherwin Bailey,[4] however, went further in his 1955 work *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*. Examining Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, he argued that the sin of Sodom described in Genesis 19 was inhospitality rather than homosexual practice, prohibitions in Old Testament law were not valid for Christians today and references in the Epistles did not apply to people who were, by nature, homosexual.

Debates have continued about just what St Paul thought about human sexuality and how this should influence Christians today. However many have come to accept the view that the story of Sodom, involving an attempted mob attack on two strangers who are in fact angels, is intended to show the dire consequences of mistreatment of the outsider and injustice in general. This interpretation fits the immediate context (it is contrasted with the generous hospitality and compassion of Abraham, which bring rich blessings), and other Scriptural references to Sodom. It is a sobering thought that what church leaders may confidently claim is God's view set out in the Bible may in fact represent their own biases or those of a particular society; and over the past sixty years many theologians addressing sexuality and other issues have acknowledged this risk.

In 1963 *Towards a Quaker View of Sex*,[5] written by several Quakers, put forward the view that a sexual act was immoral if it involved exploitation, whether of the same or opposite sex. In *The Ethics of Sex*, published in 1964, German Protestant theologian Helmut Thielicke[6] argued that, while homosexuality was less than ideal and those so inclined should seek healing or try to be celibate, if this was not successful, entering into a faithful same-sex partnership might be an ethical path. Norman Pittenger,[7] an Anglican academic teaching in Cambridge University, urged acceptance of loving and responsible gay and lesbian relationships in his *Time for Consent* in 1967.

This was an issue that triggered powerful feelings, as Anglican theologian Hugh Montefiore found to his cost when he suggested that Jesus, whose unmarried status was most unusual in that age and culture, might have been homosexually inclined, though celibate.[8] The furious reaction was a reminder that grappling with the theology of sexuality was a risky business.

3. Questioning assumptions

Growing numbers of Christians were taking the view that theology at its best was not done by people in relatively privileged positions pretending to be detached from the struggles, joys and sorrows of those facing hardship and marginalisation. Increasingly, theologians writing on

homosexuality, if not lesbian or gay themselves, knew people who were, some of whom led reasonably happy, well-adjusted lives with their partners. And the gay or lesbian orientation of pastors and teachers such as Harry Williams,[9] whose writings on Christian spirituality enriched the faith of many, was becoming more widely known.

In wider society, the West was marked by students' and workers' protests, anti-racist and anti-war struggles, while anti-imperialist movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America switched their focus from opposing direct colonial rule (now uncommon) to the more subtle use of economic and political power which led to a global imbalance in power. Philosophers such as Michel Foucault[10] encouraged people not to take for granted what seemed 'normal' and 'natural'.

While some in the church sought to defend the status quo, others were active in struggles for change, and reflected on faith-related issues in the midst of conflict and danger. In the civil rights movement in the USA, which confronted racism in society with non-violent direct action, one of the most important leaders was Quaker peace and justice activist Bayard Rustin, a brilliant organiser, who once wrote, "When an individual is protesting society's refusal to acknowledge his dignity as a human being, his very act of protest confers dignity on him... It is this dignity that our Divine Creator has called all of creation towards. It is my honor to be a voice in this choir. We must be courageous and unafraid as we know that the truth of God is justice and to be afraid is to behave as if the truth were not true."[11] Despite the law and social prejudice at the time, he was openly gay.

Lawyer and Episcopalian (Anglican) theologian William Stringfellow,[12] who lived and work among the poor in Harlem, New York, taught that "The incarnation is not a mere theological abstraction... the church and the Christian people are not simply involved in public affairs of all sorts because of the nature of politics by which all are involved and abstention is a fiction, but because they honour and celebrate God's own presence and vitality in this world, because they know that the world – in all its strife and confusion, brokenness and travail, contention and controversy – is the scene of God's work and the focus of God's love."[13] He too was gay, as was Episcopalian priest and anti-racist campaigner Malcolm Boyd,[14] whose book of prayers in the everyday language of young people became a bestseller.

By the 1970s, a number of eminent thinkers from various church backgrounds were making a case for an approach to ethics in sexual relationships which would apply to lesbian and gay as well as heterosexual people. Not only in theological journals and books but also through other means such as the spiritual autobiography of Troy Perry,[15] founder of the Metropolitan Community Church, *The Lord is my Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay*, published in 1972, the importance of grounding discussions of Christian sexual ethics in the real-life situations of men and women striving to follow Christ was emphasised.

Patrick Henry, a lay Presbyterian and associate professor, drew on his experience of living alongside and teaching lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT people) as well as his understanding of the Bible and church tradition when he argued that "For centuries Christians have identified each other not with a question: 'Are you a Jew or a Greek? slave or free? male or female? straight or gay?'; but with a declaration: 'The Lord is risen!' to which the response is a reaffirmation, 'He is risen indeed!' The church is the outpost of the world transformed in the world as it is. For the church to declare homosexuality an offence against God is for the church to look back, to use 'the old leaven, the leaven of malice' (I Corinthians 5:8)."[16]

Biblical scholarship and exploration of church tradition were yielding new insights. In 1976 Jesuit scholar John J. McNeill's book *The Church and the Homosexual* systematically addressed

arguments from Scripture, tradition and philosophy.[17] The Second Vatican Council, held in the 1960s, had led to a climate of greater openness in the Roman Catholic Church, though later his work was suppressed.

In an article on *Homosexuality and the Church*[18] James B Nelson took as his fundamental principle in interpreting the Bible the assumption "that Jesus Christ is the bearer of God's invitation to human wholeness and is the focal point of God's humanizing action; hence, Jesus Christ is the central norm through which and by which all else must be judged". He argued that for everyone, heterosexual or homosexual, "the central biblical message regarding sexuality is clear enough. Idolatry, the dishonoring of God, inevitably results in the dishonoring of persons. Faithful sexual expression always honors the personhood of the companion."

Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?,[19] by evangelical writers Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, which was first published in 1978, also made a strong Biblical case for greater acceptance.[20] (This is different from a later piece of the same name, also highly readable, containing a dialogue between Tony and Peggy Campolo. This illustrates how Christians with similar views may come to different conclusions on the theology of sexuality, while opposing homophobia and remaining in fellowship with one another.[21])

Feminism and other movements for justice deeply influenced theologians such as Carter Heyward.[22] In a 1979 article she argued that "historically the predominant effect of cultural conditioning has been to squeeze all humanity into a single large box labeled 'heterosexual'… The moment a boy child learns that little boys don't cry, the instant a girl child learns that little girls don't fight, the child takes a step further into the heterosexual box."

In contrast "Sexuality, which finds its most intimate expression between lovers, moves us into an active realization, and great relief, that we are not alone; that we are, in fact, bound up in the lives of others; and that this is good. That is why, I think, many (but too few) Christians speak of love and justice together; justice is the moral act of love."[23]

It is important, in considering homosexuality and Scripture, to look beyond a handful of verses, Walter Wink pointed out in an article that year: "The fact is that there is, behind the legal tenor of Scripture, an even deeper tenor, articulated by Israel out of the experience of the Exodus and brought to sublime embodiment in Jesus' identification with harlots, tax collectors, the diseased and maimed and outcast and poor. It is that God sides with the powerless, God liberates the oppressed, God suffers with the suffering and groans toward the reconciliation of all things. In the light of that supernal compassion, whatever our position on gays, the gospel's imperative to love, care for, and be identified with their sufferings is unmistakably clear."[24]

Influential ethicist Beverley Wildung Harrison[25] likewise in her work has emphasised the importance of justice in theology, including sexual ethics.

Meanwhile working parties set up by mainstream churches were beginning, after in-depth study, to conclude that same-sex relationships might in some instances be acceptable. This included a Task Force set up by the Presbyterian church in the USA, which reported to General Assembly in 1978,[26] and a Church of England Working Party chaired by John Yates, Bishop of Gloucester.[27] However these conclusions proved too challenging for their denominations as a whole, which continued to insist that the only proper place for sex was in a marriage between a man and woman.

4. Love and grace

In the 1980s, through into the 1990s and early twenty-first century, the work of social and natural scientists continued to throw light on the diversity within creation. This included scholarship on same-sex love and partnership in history and across cultures, including those of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Not surprisingly there was considerable debate – interpreting beliefs and practices is not always easy – but it was becoming apparent that things were not as clear as they had at one time appeared.

Historian John Boswell[28] revealed examples of loving same-sex friendships in the early church, some of which involved blessing ceremonies. While not suggesting that these always involved physical intimacy, he called into question the assumption that the fierce hostility towards homosexuality which took hold in the Middle Ages was the only attitude which had ever existed among pre-modern Christians. Alan Bray too delved deeply into the issue of same-sex friendship and commitment in history.[29] Bernadette J Brooten, another historian, examined women's lives and intimate friendships in the ancient world, and the theological implications.[30]

An increasing number of eminent theologians were engaging with the issue of lesbian and gay relationships, including Rowan Williams,[31] at that time a professor. In *The Body's Grace*, a lecture at a Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement event in 1989, he suggested that "if we are looking for a sexual ethic that can be seriously informed by our Bible, there is a good deal to steer us away from assuming that reproductive sex is a norm, however important and theologically significant it may be. When looking for a language that will be resourceful enough to speak of the complex and costly faithfulness between God and God's people, what several of the biblical writers turn to is sexuality understood very much in terms of the process of 'entering the body's grace'… A theology of the body's grace which can do justice to the experience, the pain and the variety, of concrete sexual discovery… depends heavily on believing in a certain sort of God - the trinitarian creator and saviour of the world - and it draws in a great many themes in the Christian understanding of humanity". This led to much discussion on the theological significance of sexual intimacy in general, not just for LGBT people.[32]

Others too were grappling with the complexities of the Bible's approach to human sexuality overall, including New Testament scholar L William Countryman.[33] In 1988 in *Dirt, Greed, and Sex*, he examined the changing notions of purity and property in the Old and New Testaments, and argued that writing off a large part of humankind as 'impure' went against the core teaching of the Gospels and Epistles. The Bible offers profound insights into love and faithfulness in committed relationships for both opposite-sex and same-sex partners, Old Testament scholar Bruce C Birch suggested in 1992 in *To Love as We Are Loved*.

Gregory Baum[34] (who had been a theological advisor to the Second Vatican Council) pointed out in 1994 that "for the first time in history we have personal witnesses and an extended literature in which homosexual men and women make known the hidden aspects of their personal lives, offer critical reflections of their own experiences and reveal the ethical orientation that guides them in their attitudes and actions... There seems to be no *a priori* reason why one should reject the thesis that God who creates the majority of humanity as heterosexual, creates a minority as a natural variant defined by a homosexual orientation. If that were true, homosexual love would be in perfect keeping with the natural law."[35]

The view put forward in 1994 by Welsh Anglican theologian Jeffrey John[36] that *Permanent, Faithful, Stable* same-sex partnerships should be accepted in the church, was increasingly widely held.

5. Sexuality, liberation and "queerness"

In Latin America and other parts of the world, liberation theology[37] had become influential. This emphasised the Biblical themes of justice and freedom, especially for the poor and marginalised, and built on earlier Christian social thinking as well as contemporary attempts to analyse oppressive systems and structures.

Indeed some spoke and wrote of liberation theologies, since this approach took different forms in different parts of the world and focused on a variety of forces - not simply economic - that hampered fullness of life. Such theologies often met considerable opposition from powerful figures in society and the church.

Unsurprisingly, some theologians in Asia, Africa and Latin America perceived the mistreatment of gays and lesbians in the light of the numerous ways in which ordinary people suffered under repressive governments, powerful elites and an unjust international order. According to the Statement of the 1992 Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, held in Kenya, "The Third World cry for life is one multi-tonal cry. It reflects the various ways oppression assaults Third World life. It carries the cries of countries protesting economic indenture to IMF [the International Monetary Fund] and the World Bank…

"It carries the cries of refugees, children, displaced people and those afflicted with AIDS, the cries against the discrimination of homosexuals, of those who suffer from economic oppression, women forced into prostitution, victims of drug abuse and the unjust politics of health care. It carries the cries of Blacks against apartheid. It carries the cries of the Dalits against the apartheid of caste oppression. It carries the cries of women against patriarchal dominance and sexual violence… following the Jesus of faith means following one who was dedicated to feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and fighting for the liberation of oppressed people… God is present to us in him."[38]

'Black theology' was one of the forms that liberation theology took in the West. Some African-American theologians such as Cornel West[39] and Dwight N Hopkins[40] took the view that sexism and homophobia, as well as racism and economic oppression, needed to be challenged in developing communities of mutual love and freedom.

Some LGBT theologians in the West also drew on the approach of liberation theology to explore their experience and calling, for example Richard Cleaver in the USA, who drew on Scripture in addressing issues of identity, community and justice.[41]

Among the theologians who openly identified as LGBT were some influenced by the 'queer' movement. This sought to reclaim a word used to insult people who did not fit society's notions of sexual 'normality', instead proudly affirming what some had dismissed as 'deviant'. Sometimes the celebration of 'queerness' was linked with radical political activism for greater equality.[42] Some 'queer theorists' questioned whether any form of identity was natural, emphasising instead the human-shaped aspects of gender and sexuality.[43]

'Queer theology' embraced a range of different perspectives,[44] but in general challenged the notion that patriarchal heterosexual households were especially blessed by God while all other ways of life were spiritually inferior. Some questioned whether monogamy was necessary. Robert E Goss,[45] for instance, the author of *Jesus ACTED UP: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (1993), while acknowledging the value of pair-bonding, argued that other relationships too might embody something of God's love.[46]

Others identified with queer theology have included Mona West,[47] Chris Glaser,[48] Ken Stone[49] and Nancy Wilson.[50] Elizabeth Stuart,[51] a UK-based theologian who has also been influential in this field, later argued that it had not gone far enough in exploring the essentially queer nature of the church, in which barriers are broken down and identity remade in Christ.[52]

Some academics exploring the theological implications of 'queerness' such as Gerard Loughlin[53] and Graham Ward[54] have however drawn heavily on queer theory. In 2001 Grace M Jantzen, a distinguished philosopher of religion, explored 'Contours of a queer theology'.[55]

*Omnigende*r[56] by VR Mollenkott (who in the 1970s had co-written *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*) was especially relevant to trans and intersex people. It also generally questioned the neat division of humankind into males and females behaving in ways characteristic of their gender.

There was an overlap between queer and liberation theologies, perhaps most notably in the work of the late Marcella Althaus-Reid,[57] an Argentinian who worked among the poor in Buenos Aires and later became a theology professor in the University of Edinburgh. She put the case for "indecent theology" which broke free from the constraints of "proper" behaviour and acknowledged the "excessiveness of our hungry lives: our hunger for food, hunger for the touch of other bodies, for love and for God".[58]

There were however other openly LGBT theologians who were more socially and theologically conservative. For example Peter J Gomes, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard University and Baptist minister to its Memorial Church,[59] was an African-American scholar who became one of the USA's most celebrated preachers and delivered a sermon at the inauguration of President George Bush. His 1996 bestseller *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* made a case for thoughtful reading of Scripture[60] and was described by former Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie as "Easily the best contemporary book on the Bible for thoughtful people."[61]

It was not only 'liberal' theologians who especially emphasised current scientific knowledge and contemporary experience who were exploring what it meant to be LGBT and Christian, but also thinkers from a wide theological spectrum. Prominent evangelicals who came out as gay and prompted others to question their assumptions about 'Bible-believing' Christianity included Mel White, who had worked with some of the USA's most famous evangelists,[62]

UK academic Michael Vasey, whose book *Strangers and Friends: A New Exploration of Homosexuality and the Bible*[63] appeared in 1995, and well-known preacher and writer Roy Clements, also in the UK.[64] Not everyone engaged in theological debate on sexuality was convinced by such writings,[65] and some refused even to consider the case for greater inclusion, but many were prompted at least to recognise that fellow-Christians who were lesbian or gay might, in good faith, enter into same-sex partnerships.

6. Theological reflection in fiction and film

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond, theological reflection continued to take place not only in articles, books, talks and other direct forms (for instance documentaries such as *For the Bible tells me so*[66]), but also in poetry, fiction, feature films, literary criticism and other imaginative formats. Sometimes theologians have worked in more than one genre, such as Nicola Slee, who is also a poet.[67] But at other times artists and critics addressing homosexuality in various ways have touched on theological themes.

Sometimes this was not overt, as in the 1961 film *Victim*,[68] directed by Basil Dearden and starring Dirk Bogarde, released at a time when gay sex was still illegal in the UK, and blackmailers often took advantage of this law (which the film has been credited as helping to change). Religion is not often mentioned explicitly (though in one telling scene a police officer who prides himself on being a puritan is gently challenged by a wiser colleague), but themes such as love, sacrifice and mercy are prominent.

'Blessed Assurance', a short story by African-American writer Langston Hughes published in 1963, also offered a sympathetic portrayal of gays, this time in the context of a black-led church, and the complex interplay of spirituality and desire for human intimacy.[69]

Some measure of eroticism in human yearning for the divine is by no means uncommon in Christian spirituality. But a poem by James Kirkup published in the UK in *Gay News* in 1976, 'The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name', describing a gay Roman centurion's fantasies about Jesus, resulted in a furore, and the paper and its editor were successfully prosecuted for 'blasphemous libel'.[70]

By then, there was a growing volume of fiction that did not always end in tragedy or loneliness for the main characters and in which same-sex as well as opposite-sex relationships could take place against a background of community, among LGBT people and also increasingly with accepting heterosexuals. For instance Patricia Nell Warren's[71] 1976 novel *The Fancy Dancer* explores the experience of a Catholic priest who grows in emotional and spiritual maturity when he falls in love with another man. The lesbian and gay characters in her 1978 work *The Beauty Queen*, partnered and single, Christian and non-Christian, are forced to respond to a homophobic backlash against growing social acceptance, in which contradictions are exposed and secrets come to light.

African-American gay novelist James Baldwin[72] continued to explore spiritual as well as political themes, for instance in his 1979 novel *Just Above My Head*. The healing power of love and struggle for human liberation from varying forms of oppression and alienation again featured in a very different novel, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, published in 1982, which won the Pulitzer prize for fiction the following year.[73]

Antonia Bird's 1994 film about a young Roman Catholic *Priest*[74] who is forced out of the closet tackled the wider issue of clerical celibacy, though fine acting by Linus Roache, with strong support from Tom Wilkinson, Cathy Tyson and Robert Carlyle, help to make it far more than an 'issue' movie.

Likewise Sigourney Weaver's excellent performance in *Prayers for Bobby*,[75] a 2009 film directed by Russell Mulcahy and based on a true story, helps to make it both moving and thought-provoking.

The spiritual implications of same-sex attraction and love continue to be explored in poetry, fiction and film. Sometimes this is understated, elsewhere explicit, as in the fiction of Michael Arditti,[76] such as his moving and often funny novel *Easter*, in which clergy and parishioners in North London celebrating Holy Week find their lives changed in unexpected ways.

Literature has in turn prompted some theologians to explore sexuality more deeply. For instance Roger A Sneed drew on the work of black gay writers in his 2010 book *Representations of Homosexuality: Black Liberation Theology and Cultural Criticism*.[77]

7. Debating sexuality in the church

By the late twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, theological debates on homosexuality were taking place within a number of churches and traditions. Though some theologians still insisted that same-sex partnerships were unacceptable, or at least so controversial that churches should discriminate against those in such relationships to avoid offending the 'faithful', many others were taking a different stance.

The notion that same-sex love was necessarily unstable and led to unhappiness, in stark contrast to heterosexuality, was increasingly difficult to uphold in light of the evidence – though there was also a backlash, reflecting some people's feeling that too much was changing too fast in the modern world. Theologians found themselves in the midst of such debates. Some – especially those with the gift of being able to communicate in relatively simple ways – were able to make a valuable contribution, encouraging thoughtful responses and sometimes demonstrating how even the most learned could be humble enough to study, listen and re-examine their views.

Against the background of controversy among Presbyterians in the USA, Choon-Leong Seow's[78] reflection on the Wisdom tradition in 1996 in a chapter in *Homosexuality and Christian Community* examined the connections between Scripture and present-day experience, including how he had come to revise his own views. He also edited the book, in which contributors reflected different viewpoints, but sought to promote mutual listening.

Well-known Anglican theologian John Austin Baker, when he was Bishop of Salisbury, had led the Church of England's House of Bishops in arguing against celebrating same-sex relationships. But in 1997 he publicly changed his position, taking the view that faithful and self-giving love, gay or straight, could enable people to grow in likeness to Christ.[79] "Persons living in faithful heterosexual and homosexual partnerships, can through sharing sexual love be 'the grace of God to each other'. The fruit of the Spirit can grow in that soil," he wrote. "I have seen the face of Christ in the sacrificial support of gay men for their lovers right to the end."

The 1998 Lambeth Conference exposed deep divisions among Anglicans internationally over homosexuality, and fierce resistance on the part of some bishops even to considering the possibility of greater acceptance.[80] Though this has sometimes been portrayed as a split between the 'traditionalist' South and more 'liberal' West, the reality was more complex.[81] South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu for instance had taken a strong stance in favour of inclusion,[82] while some US bishops had been vigorously campaigning against this.[83]

Indeed, not only in Anglican circles but also the wider church, a number of prominent right-wing Christians in the USA worked hard to build alliances and extend their influence throughout the world, especially Africa. As Zambian priest and researcher Kapya Kaoma later pointed out, LGBT Africans found themselves at risk of becoming "collateral damage in the US culture wars".[84]

The marginalisation of LGBT people in many parts of the world was intensified by the tendency of some Western church leaders not to acknowledge diversity of views and experiences among Christians in the global South. In an article on the relevance of Dalit theology to exclusion in the Anglican Communion, Winnie Varghese (an Indian living in the USA) has suggested that in the missionary era "The strategy in the colonies was to convert the powerful, or to cause the converted to become powerful... I wonder if much has changed today ... We are still in conversation with a supposed elite, many of whom we have trained in our seminaries and placed in power with international support. We don't know how to find or hear voices around the world, minority groups of all kinds, including groups as mild mannered as church women's groups, writing and speaking out, aghast at the presumption and/or hypocrisy of those in power who claim to speak for them."[85]

Within various denominations, tensions ran high. But in the Anglican diocese of Toronto, those with different views on this issue were able to relate warmly to one another while taking forward the debate,[86] a process later reflected on in a book *Living Together in the Church: Including our Differences*, edited by Chris Ambidge of Integrity Toronto – a key figure in enabling dialogue and fellowship – and Greig Dunn.

In Roman Catholic circles, the Vatican had become increasingly heavy-handed in enforcing the line set out in a 1986 letter to bishops signed by conservative theologian Joseph Ratzinger (later to become Pope Benedict XVI), head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and backed by Pope John Paul II.[87] According to this, "Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder", though "It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech or in action". In a widely publicised case, a priest and nun who for many years had engaged in pastoral work with LGBT people and their families were in 1999 forbidden to carry on with this because they did not uphold this teaching.[88] This disciplinary measure was criticised by many in the Roman Catholic church, including Lisa Sowle Cahill,[89] a distinguished ethicist.[90]

While careful scholarship is much prized in the Roman Catholic church, some in the hierarchy reacted strongly against even considering the possibility that same-sex partnerships might be morally acceptable in some circumstances, connected perhaps to a deeper unease about gender and sexuality. Mark D Jordan, whose book *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* came out in 2000, indeed argued that "The Roman Catholic church has long been both fiercely homophobic and intensely homoerotic."[91]

It should be possible to discuss complex issues of human sexuality, and the day-to-day challenges faced by those are lesbian or gay in orientation in making ethical choices, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and without fear of reprisal, argued theologian James F Keenan.[92]

In *A Question of Truth: Christianity & Homosexuality*, published in 2003, Gareth Moore drew on Scripture, theology and reason to counter the Vatican's arguments against accepting same-sex unions,[93] taking forward some of the themes in his earlier work *The Body in Context: Sex and Catholicism*. In his view, church teaching was only authoritative if it was true: it was not enough simply to command obedience without making a convincing case. This powerful and carefully-argued work, which systematically considered the main arguments against acceptance and found them wanting, was published after his death from cancer.[94]

In Lutheran circles too, debate intensified, prompting a number of thoughtful articles by Christian Scharen,[95] including 'Experiencing the Body: Sexuality and Conflict in American Lutheranism'[96] and 'Gay Christians: Symbols of God's new creation'.[97]

Episcopalian Charles W Allen wrote of the value of authentic engagement between those with differing theological views and personal experiences.[98] Within the Anglican Communion, debate had become more heated after the consecration of an openly gay and partnered bishop in the USA, and adoption of a liturgy for same-sex blessings in a diocese in Canada, followed by calls from some other member churches for firm reprisals. The Episcopal Church and Anglican Church of Canada were asked to explain their theological reasons, which they did in *To Set Our Hope on Christ* and the *St Michael Report* respectively.[99]

In addition to official publications, a number of anthologies were published offering useful insights from theology and other disciplines on the sexuality debate, situation of LGBT people and nature of Christian fellowship and communion.

For example *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism*, edited by Andrew Linzey and Richard Kirker, came out in 2005,[100] with contributions from a number of distinguished theologians such as Keith Ward, Vincent Strudwick , Marilyn McCord Adam, Rowan Greer, George Pattison, Thomas Breidenthal, Elaine Graham, Martyn Percy and Adrian Thatcher.[101] *Other Voices, Other Worlds: The Global Church Speaks Out on Homosexuality*, edited by Terry Brown, at that time Bishop of Malaita, a thoughtful and informative study of attitudes to sexuality in various parts of the world and the implications for the church, came out in 2006.[102] It included chapters by Winston Halapua, Bishop for Polynesia (later to become an archbishop), Aruna Gnanadason from India, retired bishop David Russell from South Africa, Charles Hefling, a professor of systematic theology in the USA, and Brazilian theologian Mario Ribas. He examined the impact of colonialism on attitudes to sexuality, and described Brazilians as "still struggling with the institutionalised guilt we inherited in the colonisation process, which disciplined the country and colonised its bodies."[103] In 2007, *An Acceptable Sacrifice? Homosexuality and the Church*,[104] edited by Duncan Dormor and Jeremy Morris, with chapters by Maggi Dawn, Andrew Mein and Jessica Martin among others, focused particularly on the Church of England .[105]

The theological implications of baptism were highlighted by some theologians, for instance Louis Weil[106] in a 2007 talk on 'When signs signify - the Baptismal Covenant in its sacramental context'.[107] In 2009, the Chicago Consultation, an organisation made up largely of US Anglican theologians and committed to increasing inclusion of LGBT people, published *"We Will, with God's Help": Perspectives on Baptism, Sexuality, and the Anglican Communion*,[108] with an introduction by Ruth Meyers and chapters by Fredrica Harris Thompsett, William H. Petersen and A Katherine Grieb.[109]

Reasonable and Holy, a clear and readable book by Tobias Haller, was also published that year.[110] Drawing on earlier posts on his blog *In a Godward Direction*,[111] Haller systematically considered issues surrounding same-sex partnerships, including the arguments used by theologians opposing greater acceptance, in particular Robert A Gagnon, and made a strong case that such relationships could be compatible with being a faithful Christian.

In 2010 a study document was presented to the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church which summarised arguments against and in favour of accepting *Same-Sex Relationships in the Life of the Church*.[112]

Meanwhile the publication in 2006 by Jack Rogers, who has served as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA, of *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*,[113] urging greater inclusion, had caused something of a stir. Five years later, presbyteries were allowed, if they so chose, to ordain partnered gays and lesbians.

In evangelical circles in particular, the influence of the 'ex-gay' movement,[114] which sought to change people's orientation (often with disastrous results) has been powerfully challenged by those who have been through this process and found out the hard way that for them, and many others, it did not work. Jeremy Marks'[115] highly readable and thought-provoking 2008 book *Exchanging the truth of God for a lie* examined the experience of those wanting to become heterosexual, and the theological issues. (Over the years, various other former leaders of 'ex-gay' organisations have also admitted that their activities often did considerable emotional and spiritual damage.[116])

Also in 2008, South African scholar Yolanda Dreyer questioned Reformed Church attitudes towards gays and lesbians, in the context of Scripture and history.[117]

Mennonite theologian Ted Grimsrud, whose main focus is peace and nonviolence but who has also done considerable work on sexuality,[118] wrote in 2008 that "the best and most respectful straightforward reading of the Bible supports the inclusive perspective – in my opinion. One can be relatively conservative in one's view of the Bible and still come to inclusive conclusions. I will argue for the inclusive perspective because of, not in spite of, the Bible."[119]

In 2009, Roman Catholic theologian James B Nickoloff critically examined the church hierarchy's teaching that gay and lesbian sexuality is "intrinsically disordered".[120]

Understanding ancient views on gender and sex can be helpful in re-examining the theology of sexuality, Adrian Thatcher (one of the contributors to *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism*) suggested in 2011.[121]

In different churches and across the world, debates on sexuality have prompted some theologians to make the case for a more open approach than that which is dominant in some denominations. However there are some who regard church unity as a greater good than acceptance of partnered gays and lesbians, and have maintained that discrimination should continue until there is greater consensus on inclusion.[122] There are also some who do not believe that same-sex relationships are right but want the church to be more inclusive, believing that being judgmental is wrong and that God is constantly at work enabling church members – gay or straight – to outgrow what is not spiritually helpful.[123]

A report to the Church of Scotland's General Assembly in May 2011 by a Special Commission on Same-Sex Relationships and the Ministry examined some of the theological and pastoral issues and acknowledged differences of opinion and the need to continue a "process of prayerful discernment".[124]

Likewise in July 2011, a national convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada agreed[125] a thoughtful *ELCIC Social Statement on Human Sexuality*,[126] produced over several years by a task force. This did not reach clear conclusions on the issue of same-sex relationships, but identified various important issues relevant to the theology of sexuality, and pointed out that Christian unity did not require agreement on all matters. Instead, "When we feel tension around matters of morality, sexuality and interpretation of scripture, and hear threats to divide, Word and

Sacrament remind us to turn to God, the true source and provider of our unity."

8. 'Family values' in the Bible

Meanwhile, a number of scholars were re-examining the Bible and drawing radical conclusions.

Much of the earlier work on the Bible and sexuality had examined a handful of passages possibly relating to sex between men, including their precise meaning and significance, and some theologians had looked at the creation story and what it did and did not imply.

Now however it was being argued by some that those who did not fit in with the norms of the time, which heavily emphasised marriage and childbearing, were unusually positively depicted, especially in the New Testament. Even today in certain societies, those who are past adolescence and unmarried or childless experience pity or disapproval: in Jewish society in Jesus' day, there was huge pressure to conform. Yet there are many, including Jesus himself, who do not fully fit in with expectations of masculine or feminine roles.

In 2000, in *The Subversive Gospel: A New Testament Commentary on Liberation*, Tom Hanks[127] argued that a close reading of the New Testament often offers positive images of sexual minorities. (The author is an academic based in Latin America who also sometimes writes as Thomas D Hanks, and is not the famous actor of the same name, though he too is a Christian who supports greater acceptance of LGBT people.)

In *The man Jesus loved: homoerotic narratives from the New Testament* in 2003 and *Jacob's wound: homoerotic narrative in the literature of ancient Israel* in 2005, Theodore W Jennings Jr.[128] argued that the Bible contains far more that is positive about same-sex intimacy and eroticism than is usually recognised. This was an approach also taken by Keith Sharpe in 2011 in *The Gay Gospels*.[129]

Not quite as controversially, Deirdre J Good[130] suggested in her 2006 work *Jesus' family values* that the prevailing vision of family in the New Testament was far more inclusive than that put forward by many 'pro-family' Christians, while challenging kinship loyalties that might displace commitment to bringing about God's reign on earth.[131]

Sometimes theologians have come to think differently about inclusion of sexual minorities when studying a quite different topic. Retired professor of worship Arlo D Duba, former Director of Admissions and Director of Chapel at Princeton Theological Seminary and former Dean of University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, was doing research on baptism when he came to believe that the account in Acts of Philip's conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch might have more far-reaching implications than he had previously recognised, and that "when the church does not open itself to 'the other,' it deprives itself of the leadership and power that the Holy Spirit can turn loose."[132]

9. Good news and challenge

By the turn of the millennium and early twenty-first century, much of the theological work which strengthened the case for acceptance of loving and committed same-sex relationships also had far wider significance.

For instance, *The Inclusive God. Reclaiming Theology for an Inclusive Church*[133] by Hugh Rayment-Pickard and Steven Shakespeare, published in 2006, argued (drawing heavily on Scripture) that an inclusive vision of God is at the heart of Christian theology. Giles Goddard's 2008 work *Space for Grace*[134] explored St Paul's image in 1 Corinthians of the church as a body in which all members are honoured, and what this meant in practice in the experience of an inner-city church with a diverse congregation and parishioners.

Widely acclaimed gay Roman Catholic theologian James Alison[135] has explored how, through God's grace, humans can relate to one another without either victimising others or acting as victims. Christ's self-giving love "completely relativizes all anthropological structures and ways of being together which depend on identity derived over against each other, on comparison, on rivalry, and ultimately on death",[136] enabling reconciliation and spiritual growth.

Drawing on the thought of fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa among others, Sarah Coakley has examined how desire can be rightly directed.[137]

Eugene F Rogers Jr. has argued that, for those not called to monasticism, marriage – whether between members of the opposite sex or same sex – can be a place of growth in holiness, of putting on the "wedding garment" of Matthew 22. In his view "Sexuality, in short, is for sanctification, that is, for God. It is to be a means by which God catches human beings up into the community of God's Spirit and the identity of God's child. Monogamy and monasticism are two ways of embodying features of the triune life in which God initiates, responds to and celebrates love." [138]

Drawing on Scripture and tradition, Rogers later also made the point out that complementarity between partners need not be confined to biologically male-female couples.[139]

Other theologians too have been exploring the spiritual value of committed relationships, with the opposite or same sex. Examples include David Matzko McCarthy's examination of what is beneficial in the experience of married or partnered life,[140] and Paul Jennings' work on being in love in *The Grace of Eros.*[141]

Scripture has often been cited in debates around sexuality and gender, and important work has been published on good and bad ways of reading the Bible, a matter of great importance for Christians. For example, a short book published in 2002, *Struggling with Scripture*,[142] contained chapters by Walter Brueggeman (perhaps the world's most eminent Old Testament scholar), William C Placher and Brian K Blount.[143] Drawing on the Reformed tradition, this emphasised the authority of the Bible, but argued that this required careful reading rather than crude literalism.

A booklet in 2005 by L William Countryman (author of *Dirt, greed and sex*) on *Love Human and Divine: Reflections on Love, Sexuality and Friendship* drew on the Song of Songs as well as the writings of seventeenth-century mystic Thomas Traherne to examine the place of the erotic in Christian spirituality.[144]

Walter Deller's piece *The Bible, Human Sexuality, Marriage and Same-Sex Unions*[145] has sought to identify key Biblical themes and consider such relationships in this context.

In a lecture on *Being Biblical? Slavery, Sexuality, and the Inclusive Community*,[146] based in part on the South African experience, Richard Burridge[147] discussed how the Bible should properly be approached, and emphasised the importance of learning from Jesus' actions as well as teaching.

Radically, in *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*,[148] Dale B Martin[149] questioned whether there is a single 'correct' meaning of a range of Biblical passages, and explored the importance of the imagination in understanding and responding to the Bible.

Ethical reasoning – how Christians make their minds up about moral issues – is also of great importance. For instance, drawing on the experience of Asian LGBT people, Patrick S. Cheng argued the need for a Christological rather than legalistic approach to sin and grace.[150]

In the Summer 2008 issue of *Anglican Theological Review*, Margaret A Farley[151] (responding to a piece by Richard A Norris Jr.[152]) explored 'Same-Sex Relationships and Issues of Moral Obligation'.[153] She argued that "what emerges from attention to traditional sources is that none of them provides grounds for an absolute, incontestable condemnation of same-sex relations; neither do they provide grounds for an absolute blessing", and that "the norms for human relationships in the sexual sphere are more like than unlike the norms for human relationships in other spheres, such as the social, economic, or political... In short, these norms include at least: do no unjust harm, free consent, mutuality, equality, commitment, fruitfulness, and social justice."

Werner G Jeanrond's wide-ranging 2010 work *A theology of love*[154] traced the development of Christian thinking about love through the ages. The author touched on the possibility of "broadening of the concept of marriage beyond the traditionally heterosexual framework", and took the view that "as in heterosexual partnership, the point is the faithful and committed opening towards God's gift of love... just offering a mere blessing to this or that form of lifelong partnership will never suffice either to do justice to the depth of ecclesial interconnectedness between all forms and institutions of love in Christ or to stress the obligation to relate a couple's praxis of love intimately to the mystery of Christ's emerging body."

Drawing on the history of the evangelical movement, Jonathan Dudley pointed out in 2011 that "love cannot only require holding others accountable to systems of morality; it requires reconsidering systems of morality too. Part of 'loving the sinner' must be making sure that legitimate desires are not classified as 'sin.'"[155]

As theologians from different traditions and different parts of the world continue to debate same-sex relationships and church treatment of LGBT people, other issues too are touched on of importance to human flourishing and spiritual growth.

10. Creating space for discussion and reflection

By the early twenty-first century, it was generally far less risky for a theologian to suggest that same-sex relationships could be sometimes helpful to spiritual growth than it would have been in the mid-twentieth century. Yet some remained under pressure to avoid voicing such views.

For instance, Rowland Jide Macauley has described the ongoing discrimination faced by LGBT people in many parts of Africa and how this affects Christians seeking to grasp how to articulate and live out their faith.[156] In other countries too where the state continues to punish people for being gay, theologians may be cautious about taking what might appear to be a subversive stance.

Church hierarchies can also exert pressure on those seeking to explore the theology of sexuality. In Ireland, for instance, Irish priest Owen O'Sullivan was banned from publishing further articles without prior Vatican approval after a piece in 2010 which challenged the official church position

on homosexuality.[157] This prompted protest. German Roman Catholic theologian David Berger, who came out as gay in 2010 after many years of secrecy, stated that theological writings had sometimes been edited to conform to the church leadership's teachings.[158]

In February 2011, over one hundred and forty theology professors at Catholic universities in Germany, Austria and Switzerland wrote an open letter calling for major changes by the Vatican, including allowing married priests and giving laypeople greater authority.[159] The authors included distinguished scholars such as Peter Hünermann and Dietmar Mieth of the Catholic Theological Faculty of Tübingen University. "The deep crisis of our Church demands that we address even those problems which, at first glance, do not have anything directly to do with the abuse scandal and its decades-long cover-up," they urged.

"Absolute respect for every person, regard for freedom of conscience, commitment to justice and rights, solidarity with the poor and oppressed: these are the theological foundational standards which arise from the Church's obligation to the Gospel. Through these, love of God and neighbour become tangible...

"Respect for individual conscience means placing trust in people's ability to make decisions and carry responsibility. It is the task of the Church to support this capability. The Church must not revert to paternalism. Serious work needs to be done especially in the realm of personal life decisions and individual manners of life. The Church's esteem for marriage and unmarried forms of life goes without saying. But this does not require that we exclude people who responsibly live out love, faithfulness, and mutual care in same-sex partnerships or in a remarriage after divorce."[160]

More theologians subsequently added their names as signatories,[161] including eminent figures such as Gregory Baum in Canada and Jon Sobrino in El Salvador,[162] and large numbers of laypeople also expressed their support.

In a radio interview in February 2011, 94-year-old theologian and writer on spirituality Sebastian Moore, a Benedictine monk, described the change in attitudes towards same-sex love and desire as "a huge anthropological shift", while also highlighting the value of learning from tradition, including the blessing of same-sex friendships.[163]

Discussion in various countries on legal recognition of same-sex partnerships, and whether these should be described as 'marriage', has to some extent been influenced by the shift in views among many Christians, and in turn has prompted further theological reflection. For instance, in September 2011, politician Kristina Keneally (who has a masters degree in theology) reflected in the Australian media on "Why I support gay marriage".[164] "A Catholic conscience must give attention and respect to Church teachings, but is also bound to consider science, reason, human experience, scripture and other theological reflection," she explained. Her view "is formed by prayer, reading, and reflection. It gives me no relish to be at odds with my Church. But it also gives me no joy to see people who are created in God's image unable to fully express their humanity, or live with the rights and dignity that heterosexual people are afforded."

A survey in the USA in August 2011 found much higher levels of support for allowing same-sex as well as opposite-sex couples to marry among young adults than among older people.[165] The following month, commenting on the fact that 44% of white evangelicals aged 18-29 favoured marriage equality, Dean Snyder (a Methodist) argued that this was the result of a new "reading their Bibles with fresh eyes and insight. For those who do their theological and ethical thinking, as Karl

Barth reportedly advised us to do, with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other, it is hard to maintain a biblically based opposition to marriage equality... The Bible has a way of not remaining hostage to a culture or ideology. Its revelatory focus on liberation, justice, reconciliation and inclusion has a way of liberating it from repressive cultural assumptions that some try to use it to reinforce."[166]

The debate on marriage equality has prompted much discussion on whether church recognition of same-sex partnerships is desirable and, if so, whether this constitutes marriage or something fundamentally different. Even among senior clergy, some have openly questioned whether their institutions have given sufficient recognition to the potentially valuable aspects of committed partnerships. Jeffrey John, who by 2012 was Dean of St Alban's and in a civil partnership (albeit celibate), explained in an interview why he believed that "same-sex monogamy seems to me to be spiritually indistinguishable from a marriage between two people who are unable to have children together".[167] Meanwhile retired Australian Roman Catholic bishop Geoffrey Robinson was making a thoughtful case for a wide-ranging reconsideration of sexual ethics.[168]

11. Looking back and forward

This article is far from comprehensive, and does not seek to be anodynely neutral. Nevertheless I think it is evident that since the 1950s, when Derrick Sherwin Bailey began to re-examine Christian responses to same-sex relationships, much important work has been done by theologians on this and related issues.

Some is relatively well-known, such as Rowan Williams' *The Body's Grace* and Gareth Moore's *A Question of Truth*, while other publications, despite their quality, are probably less commonly read today, such as Bruce C Birch's *To Love as We Are Loved* and John Austin Baker's *Homosexuality and Christian ethics*. Some work, for instance Tobias Haller's *Reasonable and Holy*, covers a spectrum of issues, while other writings, such as 'An argument for gay marriage' and 'Same-sex complementarity' by Eugene F Rogers, have a more specific focus. It is noteworthy that many theologians with very different backgrounds and perspectives, while taking different routes, have reached the same destination of acceptance.

Yet there are some Christians today – both for and against full inclusion of partnered LGBT people – who have little awareness of the debates that have taken place in theological circles over the past sixty years, and the process by which so many theologians today have come to support greater inclusion. Some seem to believe that calls for acceptance in the church are based on embracing society's values (at least in parts of the world where same-sex relationships are by and large accepted) and ignoring those aspects of the Bible and church tradition that do not fit. This is regarded as a mark of either faithlessness or progress, depending on people's own views on the subject.

However this does not do justice to the efforts of most theologians who have argued the case for greater inclusion, drawing on the witness of the Bible and the church through the ages, to discern how God has been and is at work in a complex and constantly changing world. Moreover it makes it harder to find common ground to enable fellowship and dialogue among those with different views, and promote mutual understanding even if disagreement persists.

Making such works more accessible, especially to those of us not academically trained in theology, might help – though some of the theologians mentioned above write quite clearly and simply, at

least some of the time! The internet has also opened up new possibilities for exploring and discussing theological issues.

Life-stories of LGBT Christians and their families too can help to clarify how the theology of sexuality is embodied in concrete situations. Many people find it hard to think in purely abstract terms.

Opponents of change may be dismayed by the growing number of theologians who believe that some same-sex unions can be spiritually fruitful, or may dismiss this as a passing trend. Yet other people may see the journey towards acceptance as an example of the way the Spirit of truth continues to guide followers of Christ (John 16.12-14).

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