

I wouldn't start from here – a response to Martyn Percy

In 1924 the *Hibbert Journal* published what appears to be the earliest printed version of a very well-known joke. In the 1924 version it runs as follows:

A genial Irishman, cutting peat in the wilds of Connemara, was once asked by a pedestrian Englishman to direct him on his way to Letterfrack. With the wonted enthusiasm of his race the Irishman flung himself into the problem and, taking the wayfarer to the top of a hill commanding a wide prospect of bogs, lakes, and mountains, proceeded to give him, with more eloquence than precision, a copious account of the route to be taken. He then concluded as follows: 'Tis the divil's own country, sorr, to find your way in. But a gintleman with a face like your honour's can't miss the road; though, if it was meself that was going to Letterfrack, faith, I wouldn't start from here.'

The final words of the joke, 'I wouldn't start from here,' have been quoted time and again in a variety of different forms and settings because they encompass a widely recognized truth, that where you start from can make all the difference to your subsequent journey. Starting in the wrong place can make it difficult or impossible to get your intended destination.

I was reminded of this truth when I read Martyn Percy's recent article 'Sex, Sense and Non-Sense for Anglicans.' If you accept his starting point, which is that a study of the behaviour of non-human mammals shows that 'same-sex acts and unions' are a 'quite normal and natural' part of God's good creation (pp.5-6), then all the rest of his argument makes perfectly good sense. From this starting point:

- The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland was wrong in 2014 to uphold heterosexual relationships as the default position for its view of sexual ethics (pp.1-3);
- It would be wrong for the Church of England to reject the growing consensus in Western society (particularly amongst young people) in favour of the acceptance of same-sex relationships (pp.3-4, 6-8);
- The Anglican Communion should not let over inflated claims about the size of the Anglican churches of the Global South or post-colonial guilt lead to the maintenance of a conservative stance on same-sex (pp.4-5);
- Rather than accepting the conservatives' claim that they alone uphold the 'traditional' biblical teaching about sexuality we need to read the Bible 'intelligently and with compassion on matters of sexuality' and this means noting that terms such as 'same-sex attraction' and 'homosexuality' don't appear in Scripture and that the Early Church knew little about the 'normal range of sexual behaviour we now take for granted' (p.8);
- The Archbishop of Canterbury should repent of the way that the British Empire exported homophobia across the globe and should encourage his fellow Primates to collectively repent of the oppression of gay, lesbian and homosexual people and the criminalisation of same-sex sexual activity (p.9);
- The Archbishop of Canterbury should apologize to American and Canadian Anglicans for his gestures of support for The Anglican Church in North America, a schismatic body that has no right to exist (p.12).

However, his starting point is mistaken and this being the case the rest of his argument then crumbles away as well.

The reason that his starting point is mistaken is well explained in Alan Shlemon's article 'Does homosexual behavior in animals mean that it's natural for humans?' He notes that the rationale for an appeal to nature in support of the acceptance of same-sex behaviour among humans is that:

...if animals engage in a behavior, it must be natural and moral for humans do it too. Let's apply that logic to some other animal behavior: cannibalism. Animals eating their own kind has been observed in over a thousand animal species. Following the logic of the view would mean that cannibalism is natural and moral for humans. But that's absurd! And so is the rationale that led to that absurd conclusion.

Indeed, animals engage in all sorts of selfish, violent, and primitive behaviors that humans would almost universally categorize as immoral. That's why taking moral cues from the animal kingdom is absurd. Yes, humans are an animal of sorts, but we're more than that. We are rational beings with a capacity for free will and a rich intellectual life. To reduce our behavior and relationships to instincts, stimuli, and urges ignores a major component of human nature.¹

As he goes on to say, what we see when we observe apparently homosexual acts among animals is in fact either the operation of overpowering sexual instinct or sexual activity engaged in as a way for an animal to express itself in some way:

When humans have conflicting instinctive reactions, our intellect can reason between them and determine the most expedient or moral course of action. Animals, however, behave according to their strongest instinct given what they see, smell, hear, taste, and perceive. These natural impulses aid in their protection, survival, and reproduction.

But internal or external stimuli can cause their instincts to clash or get confused, leading to unusual behavior. Sometimes a cat will kill his kittens. Unlike females whose strong maternal instinct protects her babies, the predatory instinct of a tom cat can confuse his offspring for prey. Are his hunting impulses natural? Yes. Can they be misdirected? Sure. Should we declare filicide or cannibalism as natural or moral for humans? No.

The same is true for allegedly homosexual acts among animals. Their sexual drive and instinct to mate is extremely strong and can be confused. When animals are in heat, they release pheromones that trigger an instinctual behavior by males. According to an expert in the field, this inborn impulse is so strong, that it can 'instigate a frenzy of mounting

¹ Alan Shlemon, 'Does homosexual behaviour in animal mean it's natural for humans?' at Stand to Reason, <http://www.str.org/blog/does-homosexual-behavior-in-animals-mean-it-s-natural-for-humans#.VoO8D2ArHIU>

behaviors. Even other females who aren't in heat will mount those who are. Males will mount males who have just been with females [in heat] if they still bear their scent...And males who catch wind of the estrus odor may mount the first thing (or unlucky person) they come in contact with.' I've even seen a dog mount a couch. One might have good taste in sofas, but I doubt it's so good that your dog is sexually attracted to it. The poor pooch is confused.

Plus, sexual activity among animals is known to be used for purposes other than reproduction. Although humans can express themselves by speaking, writing, gesturing, and a multitude of other ways, animals are limited. Consequently, they are known to use sexual behavior to express a range of sentiments: social dominance, aggression, avoiding conflict, and many other emotions. That's why many researchers think it's naive to impose a human understanding of homosexuality onto animal behavior.

'Properly speaking, homosexuality does not exist among animals.... For reasons of survival, the reproductive instinct among animals is always directed towards an individual of the opposite sex. Therefore, an animal can never be homosexual as such. Nevertheless, the interaction of other instincts (particularly dominance) can result in behavior that appears to be homosexual. Such behavior cannot be equated with an animal homosexuality. All it means is that animal sexual behavior encompasses aspects beyond that of reproduction.'²

What all this means is that an appeal to mammalian behavior to support same-sex activity amongst human beings fails to acknowledge that behaviour observed among animals may not be right for human beings and also fails to properly understand what is actually going on when animals engage in same-sex activity. They are not engaging in a consensual loving relationship.

Indeed, one can go further than Shlemon and argue that what is observable in nature tells against the idea that same-sex activity is part of the way God intended his creation to be. The Bible tells us that the created order is out of joint because of sin (Romans 8:18-25) and in so far as same-sex activity in animals involves a confusion of instincts and is way of expressing dominance and aggression it can legitimately be seen as a manifestation of this out-of-jointness that God permits, but which goes against the way the world would have been had sin not entered into the picture.

If we cannot therefore read God's creative intention straight off the face of nature the question then arises where we can learn about it. The answer that the Jewish and Christian traditions have always given is that the primary place we learn about it is from the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis where we learn about how God made the world to be

² Ibid citing Jacquelyn Schultz, C.P.D.T. at <http://www.petfinder.com/pet-training/stopping-dog-humping.html?page-index=3&> and Antonio Pardo, "Aspectos médicos de la homosexualidad," *Nuestro Tiempo*, Jul.-Aug. 1995, pp. 82-89

In his paper Percy ignores these chapters entirely, but if we do look at them what we find is that they present us with an unambiguously binary account of human existence and sexual activity.

They tell us that God created human beings in his image and likeness as male and female to exercise dominion over the world on his behalf (Genesis 1:26-27, 2:18-23) and that he also instituted marriage as a life-long, exclusive sexual union between one man and one woman through which his command to 'be fruitful and multiply' should find its fulfilment (Genesis 2:24, 1:28).

This view of God's creation of human beings is endorsed by Jesus (Matthew 19:3-9, Mark 10:2-12) and is reflected in the fact that, to quote the American author Michael Brown, the Bible is a 'heterosexual book' in the sense that it 'presents and presupposes heterosexuality as the divinely intended norm.'³ This can be seen, he says:

...throughout the entire Bible in book after book.

- Every single reference to marriage in the entire Bible speaks of heterosexual unions without exception, to the point that a Hebrew idiom for marriage is for a man 'to take a wife.'
- Every warning to men about sexual purity presupposes heterosexuality, with the married man often warned not to lust after another woman.
- Every discussion about family order and structure speaks explicitly in heterosexual terms, referring to husbands and wives, fathers and mothers.
- Every law or instruction given to children presupposes heterosexuality, as children are urged to heed or obey or follow the counsel or example of their father and mother.
- Every parable. Illustration or metaphor having to do with marriage is presented in exclusively heterosexual terms.
- In the Old Testament God depicts His relationship with Israel as that of a groom and a bride; in the New Testament the image shifts to the marital union of husband and wife as a picture of Christ and the Church.
- Since there was no such thing as in vitro fertilization and the like in biblical times, the only parents were heterosexual (it still takes a man and a woman to produce a child) and there is no hint of homosexual couples adopting children.⁴

Furthermore, it is because sexual relationships between men and woman are the God given norm that St. Paul teaches in Romans 1:26-27 (once again ignored by Percy) that sexual relationships between two people of the same sex are 'unnatural.' As Tom Wright explains, 'taking Genesis 1 as the primary theological statement' St. Paul:

....sees humans created in God's image and given charge over the non-human creation. Humans are commanded to be fruitful: they are to celebrate in their male-plus female complementarity, the abundant life-generating capacity of God's good world. And they are charged with bringing God's order in the world, acting as stewards of the garden and all that is in it. Males and females are very different, and they are designed to work together to make, with God, the music of creation. Something deep within the structure of the world

³ Michael Brown, *Can you be Gay and Christian?* Lake Mary: Front Line, 2014, p.83.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp.88-89.

responds to the coming together of like and unlike, something which cannot be reached by the mere joining together of like and like.⁵

In the light of this theological vision, St. Paul's rejection of same-sex sexual relationships as 'unnatural' and the result of idolatry in Romans 1:18-27 does not mean:

...simply 'we Jews don't approve of this,' or 'relationships like this are always unequal and exploitative.' His point is 'this is not what males and females were made for.' Nor is he suggesting that everyone who feels sexually attracted to members of their own sex, or everyone who engages in actual same-sex relations, has got to that point through committing specific acts of idolatry. Nor, again, does he suppose that all those who find themselves in that situation have arrived there by a deliberate choice to give up heterosexual possibilities. Reading the text like that reflects a modern individualism rather than Paul's larger all-embracing perspective. Rather, he is talking about the human race as a whole. His point is not 'there are some exceptionally wicked people out there who do these revolting things' but 'the fact that such clear distortions of the creator's male-plus-female intention occur in the world indicates that the human race as a whole is guilty of a character-twisting idolatry.' He sees the practice of same-sex relations as a sign that the human world in general is out of joint.⁶

In Scripture the existence of God's people from the time of Abraham onwards is intended to be counter sign to the out-of-jointness of the world. It is a witness to God's coming kingdom in which everything will be as it should be because God's will is done 'on earth as it is heaven' (Matthew 6:10). Consequently, in both the Old and New Testaments engaging in same-sex relationships is seen as behaviour incompatible with membership of God's people both in this world and in the world to come (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 1 Timothy 1:9-10 – passages which Percy also ignores).⁷

If we review the rest of Percy's argument from this alternative biblical perspective we find that it is no longer persuasive.

First, contrary to what Percy suggests, the Church of Scotland was entirely correct to re-affirm its commitment to the biblical teaching about sexuality. Where it went wrong was to say that individual ministers and congregations should have the freedom not to obey this teaching. If this teaching really is biblical and therefore carries God's own authority then obedience to it cannot be optional.

Secondly, it would not be legitimate for the Church of England to tailor what it says about sexuality in order to try to make evangelism easier. The Church of England is a national church, but it is first and foremost a *church* and as such its calling is to remain faithful in its confession of the message given to it by Christ and trust him for the result. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

⁵ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone – Romans Part 1*, London: SPCK, p.21,

⁶ *Ibid*, pp.22-23.

⁷ This last aspect of biblical teaching means that Percy's statement 'Lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians will not suffer discrimination in heaven. In the Kingdom of God, as faithful Christians, all enjoy a full and equal citizenship' (p.8) requires qualification. It is certainly true that those with same-sex attraction are as capable of achieving eternal life as any other category of human beings. However, it is also true that for them, as for all other human beings, the achievement of eternal life involves refraining from, or repenting of, all forms of sexual sin (same-sex sexual activity included). Those who refuse to turn from sexual sin exclude themselves from being part of God's eternal kingdom (Matthew 5:27-30, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Revelation 21:7-8).

It is a great comfort which Christ gives to his church: you confess, preach, bear witness to me, and I alone will build where it pleases me. Do not meddle in what is my province. Church, do what is given to you to do well and you have done enough. But do it well. Pay no heed to views and opinions. Don't ask for judgements, don't always be calculating what will happen, don't always be on the look-out for another refuge! Church, stay a church! But church, confess, confess, confess! Christ alone is your Lord, from his grave alone you shall live as you are. Christ builds.⁸

Thirdly, it is true, as Percy says, that the Church of England or other churches of the Anglican Communion should not take accept the view of sexuality taken by the conservative Anglican Provinces of the Global South because of claims about the size of these churches or because of post-colonial guilt. The reason they should accept their view of sexuality (which is, incidentally, also the official view of the Anglican Communion and the Church of England itself) is because it is in agreement with the teaching about sexuality given to us by God in Holy Scripture that we have looked at above.⁹

Fourthly, the examples that Percy gives of reading the Bible intelligently and with compassion are neither compassionate nor intelligent.

To begin with, the claims that concepts such as 'same-sex attraction' and 'homosexuality' are not found in the Bible and that the Early Church knew little about the range of sexual behaviour we now take for granted are no more compassionate than claims that the cat sat on the mat, that Caesar defeated the Gauls at Alesia or that Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837. These are all claims about what happened in the past. What they are not is expressions of compassion. Percy has simply made a category mistake.

Furthermore not only is reading the Bible in the light of such claims not compassionate, but it is also unintelligent. It is unintelligent because it fails to take account of the evidence from both Ancient Near Eastern and Classical Sources and from the Bible itself which suggests that people in the Ancient Near East and the Classical world and the writers of the Bible were just as aware as we are today that people experience attraction to those of the opposite sex, to those of the same sex and to both and that people have sex with members of both the opposite and the same sex.¹⁰ They may not have used the terms 'same-sex attraction' or 'homosexuality' but they knew about the realities to which these terms refer. It is also unintelligent because it fails to take into account the big picture of how the Bible approaches the subject of human sexuality that we have looked at above. A 'traditional' approach is a more intelligent approach because it avoids both these errors.

Fifthly, while it is legitimate to debate to what extent it is right for governments to criminalize either heterosexual or homosexual forms of sexual activity,¹¹ and while there does need to be a debate across the Anglican Communion about how best to provide pastoral support for people with same-sex attraction, it would not be right for either the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Primates as a

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, London: Fontana, 1970, p. 212.

⁹ The article by the Spanish Anglican Daniel Munoz which Percy quotes may or may not be correct in claiming that the number of practising Anglicans in the Global South has been exaggerated. Even if this claim is accepted, however, it is irrelevant to the key theological issue, which is that of fidelity to biblical teaching.

¹⁰ For the evidence see David F Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1988, Thomas K Hubbard, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, Berkeley and London: University of California UP, 2003 and Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, Nashville: Abingdon Press 2001.

¹¹ All governments, including our own, impose criminal sanctions against some forms of sexual activity, so the debate has to be about which forms of sexual activity should be criminalised and what constitutes an appropriate degree of punishment. Saying sexual activity should never be criminalized is too simplistic.

whole to make any statement of repentance which implied that Anglicans and others have been wrong to say that same-sex sexual activity is something immoral and therefore something that people should not engage in. To say this would be to reject biblical teaching and this is something that the Primates do not have the theological authority to do. As Article XX of the Thirty Nine Articles puts it: 'it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's Word written.'

Sixthly, it would not be right for the Archbishop of Canterbury to make any statement to The Episcopal Church or the Anglican Church of Canada that either stated or implied that the Anglican Church in North America is a schismatic body that should not exist. This is because the existence of ACNA came about because The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada caused division in North America and within the Anglican Communion as a whole by deliberately disregarding the teaching of the Bible and the Communion about same-sexual activity through offering services of blessing for same-sex relationships and through ordaining and consecrating those involved in them. ACNA was formed by those who wished to remain loyal to traditional biblical and Anglican teaching and to remain in communion with orthodox Anglicans elsewhere in the world and who felt that remaining in The Episcopal Church or the Anglican Church of Canada would not enable either to happen. They were not seeking to be schismatic but seeking to preserve a future for orthodox Anglicanism in North America.

Where Percy has a point is that the Archbishop of Canterbury should not be simply making occasional ad hoc gestures of support towards ACNA. He should instead be seeking to regularize its position by encouraging it to apply to join the Anglican Communion and should at the same time be advocating the suspension of The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada from the Communion until such time as they are willing to return to orthodox teaching and practice with regard to human sexuality.

To conclude, what the Anglican Communion needs at this juncture is not, as Percy suggests, poetry (pp.13-14). What is required is coherent and biblical based thinking about the challenges it faces. Unfortunately, as we have seen, Martyn Percy has given us an approach to thinking about the future of Anglicanism that does not start from Scripture and which does not hang together as an argument. Consequently, as the Irishman said, 'I wouldn't start from here. '

M B Davie 3.1.15