

MAPPING THE Rainbow

Researching the diverse colours
of the LGBTIQ community

VOLUME II

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Same-Sex Relationships and the Contemporary Christian Landscape: A Plurality of Positions.

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Introduction

What do Christians think about same-sex relationships? How is it possible that divergent and contradictory views on this reality exist among the different Christian churches, denominations and communities?

This brief article attempts, in two steps, to offer some insights on these questions. It will first outline four main positions on same-sex relationships that one might encounter within the contemporary Christian landscape. Second, it will explore why such a variety of standpoints exists, without attempting to resolve the tensions and contradictions within this plurality.

As the title suggests, these observations will be limited to same-sex relationships and to the Christian landscape. Needless to say, a number of them may also apply to other issues and to other religious traditions.

Plurality of positions

The stances of Christians around the world about same-sex relationships range from an aggressive or punitive kind of rejection to total affirmation and celebration. The different standpoints can be grouped in different ways (see Jung & Smith, 1994; Sullivan, 1996; Holben, 1999; Johnson, 2012). This section follows a fourfold typology, similar to that proposed by Nelson (1977).

Radical Prohibition

The first stance can be described as Radical Prohibition (see, e.g., Harvey, 1987, 2007; Groeschel, 1988; Sullivan, 1996: 19–55; May 2004; Johnson 2012: 49–58; Stahle, 2015; Torockai, 2016).

Christians upholding this position deem all same-sex relationships as essentially abominable and sinful experiences that can never be justified, tolerated or compared to heterosexual relationships. This viewpoint usually rests on premises such as: heterosexuality is intrinsic to all humans; homosexual behaviour is a violation of the will of God; the Bible condemns same-sex relationships; such partnerships lack meaning because they do not proceed from sexual complementarity and cannot fulfil the procreative finality of sexual intercourse; same-sex couples are in danger of eternal damnation.

Hence, the homosexual orientation is judged very negatively. It is commonly considered as a distortion or corrupted manifestation of human sexuality, a disordered inclination that leads to perversion, a pathological disturbance, a

consequence of having been abused or of a flawed parent-child relationship, a promiscuous choice, an addiction, or even as an evil or diabolical tendency.

Consequently, Christians embracing this worldview tend to express their convictions in these ways: they exhort gay and lesbian individuals to repent and to beseech God for forgiveness; promote spiritual efforts or exorcism rituals for healing and liberation from homosexuality; support or perform reparative practices; consider those in same-sex relationships as hedonists and promiscuous; blame them for natural and social calamities; exclude them from leadership posts within the community or from active ministry, especially with children and young people; at times, bar them even from the community.

Christians in this group also feel upset and scandalised when other Christians or Church leaders affirm gay and lesbian persons. They denounce any discussion of LGBTIQ+ issues as propaganda and rally against support shown to same-sex couples. They call for clear teachings on this topic and also express concern that allowing same-sex relationships or changing the definition of marriage will have bad consequences on society and will lead to the legitimisation of polygamy or incest. Many believe that children raised by same-sex couples are at greater risk of becoming gay or lesbian themselves; hence, they argue that such couples should be legally prevented from raising children.

Moderate Prohibition

The second kind of reaction to same-sex relationships among Christians is Moderate Prohibition (see e.g., CDF, 1986; Harvey, 1987, 2007; CCC, 1992: 2357–2359; USCCB, 2006; Holy & Great Council, 2016: 10; Vasilievich, 2016).

As in the first stance, Christians subscribing to this position believe that all same-sex relationships are objectively wrong and sinful and that these relationships can never be justified or tolerated. Nevertheless, unlike those in the first group, Christians in this category call for respect toward gay and lesbian persons. They insist that homosexual persons are to be welcomed and valued for who they are as fellow human beings made in the image of God.

Christians embracing this worldview distinguish between an individual's orientation and his or her choices and relationships. In fact, they do not consider the homosexual orientation as evil or sinful in itself and the majority in this group do not promote reparative practices or prayers for healing. At the same time, they do perceive the homosexual orientation as an unfortunate burden. For this reason, they accept same-sex friendships but never recognise a couple

as intimate partners. Indeed, they promote prayer and spiritual exercises – not for healing or liberation from the homosexual orientation, but for gay and lesbian persons to embrace the Cross, self-restraint and sexual abstinence (see Crowley, 2004).

Qualified Acceptance

Another type of response found among Christians falls under the category of Qualified Acceptance (see e.g., Thielicke, 1964: 269–292; Keane, 1977; Curran, 1983; Jewett & Schuster, 1996: 342; Hunsinger, 2001–2; Francis, 2016: chap. 8; Martin, 2018; Ware, 2018).

Those embracing this position tend to express a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward same-sex relationships. On one hand, they believe that such relationships are irregular and wrong and cannot be proposed as a valid option of Christian living. Having said that, however, they also maintain that in a fallen world, the Christian community needs to reach out to persons who are doing their best to live their sexual lives with integrity. In specific cases, same-sex relationships are open to traces of grace and may be tolerated or even justified as a permissible exception for different reasons: as a greater good or a lesser evil (e.g., exclusive same-sex partnerships are better than promiscuity; civil unions are less offensive than same-sex marriage); out of mercy and compassion (e.g., gay and lesbian persons suffer many injustices; one cannot demand heroism; there is a difference between the ideal and reality; everyone has sinned, see Rom 3:10–11, 23–24); in view of one's subjective circumstances and intention; and on the basis of conscience, among other factors.

Christians in this group usually tend to: speak about themes like encounter, discernment, compassion and inclusion; call upon other Christians and people at large to be more welcoming and listening; prefer to speak 'to' gay and lesbian persons rather than 'about' them; walk alongside them, help them flourish and grow in grace; pray for and express solidarity with abused and persecuted homosexual persons around the world; reach out to all those who have abandoned the faith or the ecclesial community due to certain teachings on LGBTIQ+ issues. Christians on this point of the spectrum also tend to explore their church's or denomination's history and teachings more critically, and invite the Christian communities to take responsibility for their share in supporting or transmitting negative attitudes toward homosexuality. In fact, they feel upset and scandalised when other Christians or Church leaders condemn gay and lesbian persons.

Since their acceptance is qualified, they also tend to struggle as they juggle between acceptance and inclusion of same-sex couples on one hand, and loyalty to the teachings of their church or community on the other hand, especially when confronted by other Christians. In fact, they may receive criticism from rejecting and affirming groups alike, and are likely to remain rather discreet as they seek and implement innovative pastoral approaches. It is often observed that Christians who in principle subscribe to the first two positions (Radical or Moderate Prohibition) find themselves operating from the standpoint of Qualified Acceptance when they are faced with gay and lesbian people in real-life circumstances.

Full Acceptance

A fourth kind of reaction to same-sex relationships is Full Acceptance (see e.g., Farley, 1983, 2010; McNeill, 1988; Williams, 1989; McCarthy Matzko, 1997; Stuart, 2003; Thatcher, 2011; Herbert, 2021).

Christians embracing this position express an affirmative attitude toward gay and lesbian persons and towards same-sex relationships. They perceive the homosexual orientation as a normal minority variant in the human condition which could be compared to left-handedness. For them, one's orientation is not the result of a free choice, and gay and lesbian persons are no more responsible for their sexual orientation than heterosexual people are for theirs.

For this reason, they believe that same-sex relationships are a valid option of Christian living and have, like their heterosexual counterparts, the potential for sin but also the potential to partake in the goodness God intends for all creation. They argue that same-sex relationships can be loving, life-giving and blessed and can fulfil human sexuality's non-conceptive ends, such as companionship, comfort, celebration, pleasure and intimacy. Such relationships are judged as uniting the couple more closely with God and as mediating God's presence in the Church and the world.

Christians on this end of the spectrum normally express their conviction in the following ways: they insist that all persons are to be treated equally; distinguish between love and lust, rather than between heterosexuality and homosexuality; affirm and support same-sex couples in their journey; celebrate and bless their love; insist that children raised by same-sex couples are just as likely to be well-adjusted as children raised by heterosexual couples.

Christians in this category emphasise the developing nature of Church teachings and explore new ways of doing theology. They uphold that being affirming of same-sex couples is not a contradiction of the gospel but is a logical extension of everything the gospel teaches. They also make gay and lesbian persons feel that they are co-responsible for what is happening in their Church or community.

Factors leading to this plurality of positions

Looking at this broad array of stances held by different Christians around the world one cannot help but ask how this is possible. The following section explores some factors which may lead to such a multi-faceted range of positions about same-sex relationships.

Polarised public debate

A major reason is that Christians do not live in a bubble but walk the Earth with their feet firmly implanted in the world – a world where the public debate over LGBTIQ+ related topics is polarised and divisive and differs from one country to another. Beyond the parameters of the Christian community, the reality of same-sex relationships remains a source of contention and one of the most intensely probed, politically volatile and personally troubling or liberating questions of our time (Farley, 1983: 93; see also Norbert, 2008: 15–16; Masci & Desilver, 2019; Connaughton, 2020; Poushter & Kent, 2020).

Some regions are witnessing a rapid evolution in public attitudes. One notes personal, collective and institutional awareness and affirmation of same-sex couples. In such contexts, homosexuality is regarded as an orientation with an equal right to public manifestation and respect as heterosexuality and gay and lesbian persons feel free to come out and voice their hopes and fears. Indeed, some argue that today the moral question of homosexuality is no longer about its acceptability, but about the opposition to it (Loughlin, 2018, see also Nelson, 1977).

Conversely, this shift is resisted by movements that rally in favour of the free exercise rights of those who disagree (see Laycock et al., 2008; Hunter, 2010). Furthermore, discrimination, harassment and rejection of homosexual persons exist in many places, in different formats and on various levels. In many contexts, the gay and lesbian individual experiences pejorative discourse or exclusion on a regular basis and is considered bizarre, sick and abnormal

(see Gramick, 1992: 23; Eribon 2004: 15–19). Many homosexual persons claim that there is nothing elegant about inhabiting a space which has historically, socially and theologically been regarded at best as risible and at worst as evil (Alison, 2001).

Extensiveness of the Christian landscape

Another factor leading to this plurality of positions is the extensiveness and complexity of the global Christian landscape. Christians around the globe number 2.4 billion. In other words, they constitute close to 30% of the world population, divided in two major branches: Western and Eastern. Each branch comprises different traditions, namely, Roman and Eastern Catholicism; Eastern and Oriental Orthodoxy; and Protestantism.

Furthermore, each of these traditions embraces a multitude of churches, denominational families and nondenominational movements or communities. Notwithstanding their common basis of the Christian faith, these all have their distinctive historical and cultural backgrounds, geopolitical settings, theological traditions, pastoral priorities and concerns. To complicate matters, some exhibit particular inclinations towards groups or ideologies from opposite sides of the political spectrum. In fact, one finds divergent, if not irreconcilable, positions on several topics both among and within these traditions and communities. Official teachings or statements by church leaders are at times questioned, resisted or contradicted both by pastors and at grassroots level. Even when a church or denomination reaches theological consensus, one might still find conflicting pastoral practices or disagreement on the sources and principles underlying these positions (see Toroczkai, 2016; Gallaher & Tucker, 2019; Sandstorm & Schwadel, 2019; Diamant, 2020).

Personal journey of life

A third factor could be the different personal experiences among Christians about the human person, sexuality and relationships. Like everybody else, Christians are shaped by their personal life journey. The family and culture one grows in; the upbringing and education one receives; the dominant discourse and stereotypes that one absorbs; the people one encounters; the expectations and constraints one faces; and the happy and less happy memories one has, all shape a person's perception and, possibly, determine one's mind-set. Furthermore, these dynamics influence one's creed, how one understands and lives the faith and how one integrates these beliefs with the fast-changing realities, perspectives and attitudes in today's world.

The positions of Christians on same-sex relationships are also impacted by how they experience sexuality and human relations in their own lives. Sexuality is an important part of the identity of every person. It shows who one is, whilst at the same time, allows one to relate and connect to others. Having said this however, sexuality and human relations are dynamic, complex realities that can lead to new, unfamiliar grounds. For some, human relations can be the source of deep friendship and life-giving intimacy, while for others they can result in traumatic or harmful experiences.

One's ideas and assumptions about sexuality and relationships are also formed by cultural and social developments, secular politics and by the fact that people, including gay and lesbian individuals, are more open to share their lives and stories openly with others (see Taylor & Barnes, 2015; Denk, 2019; S. Hagger-Holt & R. Hagger-Holt, 2019; Surdovel, 2021). Moreover, one's convictions and preoccupations are shaped by the tradition/s one belongs to or participates in. These traditions present broad standards by which particular beliefs and actions are judged to be good, right, desirable or worthy of respect. These standards and values may vary between groups or societies and there could be divergences in their interpretation (MacIntyre, 1985: 221-222).

Interpretations of the Bible

Another factor concerns the hermeneutics of Scriptures, that is, how Christians receive, interpret and apply the Bible to different life situations. Even though all Christians uphold the Bible as a key point of reference in their life and faith, when it comes to certain issues – such as questions about sexual diversity and same-sex relationships – one finds conflicting readings and interpretation of the Scriptures (see Himbaza et al., 2012; House of Bishops, 2013, 2020; Sprinkle, 2016; PBC, 2019; Wijngaards, 2021).

There are Christians who refer to a number of biblical texts (e.g., Gen 1:27-28, 2:18-24, 19:1-29; Lev 18:22, 20:13; Judges 19; Rom 1:26-27; 1Cor 6:9-10; 1Tim 1:9-10) to demonstrate that same-sex relationships are a sinful distortion of God's plan for the human person and that marriage between male and female is a divinely ordained and unchangeable order of creation. They show that the Leviticus legal pronouncements and the Sodom and Gibeah stories denounce homosexual behaviour. The passages of the New Testament mention forms of homoeroticism that constitute a departure from a life of holiness. Some also take Paul's comments in the Letter to the Romans as a universal condemnation of same-sex relationships in all times and all places (see e.g., CDF, 1986; Harvey, 1987, 2007; Gagnon, 2001).

Yet, there are also Christians who insist that just as the Bible was in the past misused to support slavery or segregation, today it is equally being used to justify discrimination against LGBTIQ+ persons. They argue that the above-mentioned passages are inconclusive and no longer relevant to the current discussion about same-sex relationships, mainly due to cultural, historical, and linguistic discrepancies between their setting and the contemporary experience. Certain contemporary ideas and ideals, at least of the Western world (e.g., romantic love; men and women are equal; sexual acts should be consensual and mutually pleasurable) are not found in the Bible. Scholars and theologians in this group maintain that nowhere in the Scriptures can one find a reference to homosexual orientation or to committed same-sex relationships as we know them today, particularly between lesbians. There is also the argument that the Bible has been mistranslated or misinterpreted from a very heteronormative lens. Christians on this side of the spectrum are convinced that verses from the Scriptures cannot be read in isolation but within the climate of the broader biblical passage. Furthermore, one must even look at how these passages function within the entire holistic biblical message of faith, service, justice and salvation, and with direct interaction with the expanding insights and knowledge of human rights, medicine, anthropology, psychology and other natural and social sciences (see e.g., Scroggs, 1993; Hays, 1996: 379–406; Helminiak, 2000; Wright Knust, 2011; Renato Lings, 2013; Nissinen, 2014).

Anthropological, philosophical and theological approaches

Another cause of disagreement among Christians concerns different anthropological, philosophical and theological approaches.

Christians who embrace a deontological approach to morality, that is, a duty-based order also known as Kantian, argue that there are eternal moral truths which are always valid and that an act is morally right or wrong on the basis of set criteria. Then there are those who favour a teleological approach to ethics. These are concerned with the finality or end (*telos*), that is the flourishing of the individual and of the community. They acknowledge that every person can reach this end by cultivating specific virtues. Those who embrace this worldview are willing to enter the realms of moral complexity and personal struggle and understand the human person as a mystery who needs to be known or uncovered through encounter and accompaniment.

Many Christians adhere to the natural law tradition. They uphold that the ‘natural’ is in accordance with God’s plan for creation and hence it is good. Yet, even here, there exist different interpretations. For instance, those who adopt

a physiological interpretation of natural law regard biological sex, gender and gender roles as 'natural' and stable realities. People in this group presume heteronormativity and see the human race divided into males and females, with both groups being ontologically different from each other. They also uphold that the purpose of marriage is procreation. Thus, sexual relations outside of marriage are always wrong and any definition, identity or action which does not conform with one's expected gender or orientation is an 'unnatural' aberration and a rejection of God's plan in creation. Many believe that this interpretation of natural law is part of the ancient tradition of the Christian Churches (see e.g., Finnis, 1994; CDF, 1986; Harvey, 1987, 2007; Pakaluk, 1993; John Paul II, 1995: 90; Grenz, 1998: 107–109; George 2001).

Contrastingly, there are those who do not understand the word 'nature' in the sense of 'natural' and 'unnatural' but rather in terms of 'human nature'. For them, human beings differ from other non-human beings in that humans are not concerned only with self-preservation and continuation of the species but are also endowed with reason. Christians in this group argue that sexuality should not be perceived in a narrow physicalistic and merely generative sense but in a wider, more comprehensive one. In fact, they assess what is 'natural' from a historical, anthropological, psychological and experiential perspective and conclude that the homosexual orientation is a natural minority variant of human sexuality. They point out numerous similarities between heterosexual and same-sex relationships and also speak of love's fecundity in terms that go beyond biological reproduction, to include adoption and service to the common good (see e.g., Rowse, 1977; Häring, 1979; Curran, 1983; McNeill, 1988; McCormick, 1989; Pope, 2007: 148–167; CSTF, 2017).

One also finds Christians who go beyond these traditional approaches and follow the paths of liberation theology and social justice. These argue how God's concerns are best understood through the eyes of the outcast and oppressed. They examine how Christianity has been constructed throughout history and ask questions about what voices and experiences have been excluded. They also question whether the issue of same-sex relationships is primarily about social justice or about sexual ethics. Should one treat gay and lesbian people as essentially the same as everyone else because of their common humanity, or should one treat them differently because of their sexuality? Many Christians insist that one must always defend sexual teachings that proclaim the heterosexual standard. Others believe that social justice is more compelling than sexual ethics when one is dealing with people's total lives (DeBernardo, 2011: 6; see also Gutierrez, 1988; Rowland, 1999).

There are also Christians who follow the path of queer theory and queer theologies. Beside the general definitions of 'queer' as 'odd' and as 'a collective grouping for non-normative identifications of gender/sexuality', in the context of theory and theology, queer also means to 'disturb' or 'disrupt'. Christians in this group tend to push boundaries by asking radical questions, challenging accepted ideas and allowing new theologies to emerge from queer contexts. They insist on engaging with the experiences of the people and the human sciences that reflect on them, and on reminding people of the radical love which must be central to Christianity (see Loughlin, 2007; Cheng, 2011; Greenough, 2019).

The significance of contemporary science, anthropology and psychology is also debatable among Christians. Questions arising from these fields are not always integrated into sound theological and pastoral reasoning about human sexuality. Some Christians are sceptical of the reliability of these approaches, whilst others highlight sources of evidence from the various natural and social sciences and from practising professionals. There are also those who claim that the scientific research that we have today is still not enough to understand sexual orientations. To complicate matters, today's digital culture presents us with overwhelming and instantly accessible amounts of studies, a number of which are hardly reliable. Yet, even solid and legitimate research is at times abused by Christians on different sides of the spectrum by manipulating, editing and selecting context and content with a view to sway people's opinion.

Notions of Church, truth and authority

A final factor leading to this plurality of positions could be the differing notions of Church, truth and authority.

Many Christians perceive their church or community as a hierarchical pyramid and maintain that only pastors are authorised to declare or hand down what is true and morally acceptable. Voices within this group tend to argue against synodal processes since these can challenge official long-standing teachings and lead whole ecclesial communities into disunity. There are also those who believe that the teaching of the Christian community does not need to be contextualised historically since it has been consistent over the centuries.

Others say that the teachings of the Christian churches and communities are open to historicity and progress. They show commitment to historical methodologies and hermeneutic sensitivity. They believe that the personal stories of Christians – including gay and lesbian persons, their families and

their friends – also constitute an experience of the Church that proclaims the truth about humanity. To them, the teaching and learning elements within the Christian communities should be viewed from a horizontal perspective. This process is dialogical, alongside people as opposed to above them. It happens sideways, not top-down.

To some, the most important question remains what the Christian community should say to gay and lesbian persons about God and about their life, whilst to others it is about what message the Holy Spirit is conveying to the Christian community and to the world through the stories of gay and lesbian persons. Obviously, these differences and dynamics raise more profound questions about ecclesiology: What does one understand by Church or Christian community? Who has the authority to teach in such contexts? What is the relationship between the centre and the periphery of the Christian communities and between Church leaders, theologians and the grassroots?

Conclusion

This article explored the plurality of positions among Christians about same-sex relationships and the different factors that may lead to this variety; however, it is unwise to assume that it covers all the existing perspectives. The fact that Christians come from all the corners of the world conditions many judgements and ideas (Romero, 2015). There could be Christians whose viewpoint resonates with elements of more than one position, or does not fit in any of the outlined stances. Besides, the amount of literature on this reality is voluminous and the global landscape is continuously developing. For example, the blessing of same-sex relationships is an issue about which Christian churches are in ongoing disagreement.

In our digital culture, tensions between conflicting views are more accessible and reach a wider audience, but interlocutors often talk past one another resulting in little to no engagement between those advocating different positions. It is hoped that this brief study not only entices the reader to push beyond surface labels and reach a new awareness and understanding of the existing different perspectives, but also facilitates dialogue between Christians at various standpoints. Genuine dialogue presupposes encounter between people who are capable of admitting they are wrong, and yet take responsibility for what they say. One of the things about Christian dialogue is that, in addition to these two dimensions, it should be charitable and generous-spirited towards differing opinions within the discussion (Alison, 2007).

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