

Homosexuality:

a review of the debate

E. DAVID COOK

Fifteen years ago the subject of homosexuality was barely seen and not usually heard. Recently, BBC2 repeated the showing of the film *Coming Out*. This was the story of five homosexual people and their experiences in announcing their homosexuality to parents and friends. Such a television programme would have been unthinkable for mid-evening viewing a decade and a half ago. It seems not only that homosexuals, but the subject of homosexuality, have come out into the open. Books about homosexuality seem almost as common statistically in ethics as homosexuals in society. The past two years in particular have seen in Great Britain the whole gamut of opinion within the Christian church expressed in print. Part of the cause of this rush of literature is the appearance of the Methodist and Church of England Working Parties' reports on homosexuality.¹ The Methodist report ran into serious trouble in their annual conference of 1979 and a revision was called for, particularly of the biblical material. The revised report has now been noted as a discussion document for Methodism, but has not been approved by Conference. The unease which greeted both editions of the Methodist report is expressed clearly in the Church of England's Board of Social Responsibility's Working Party report and the Board's own comments on that report, published in one volume. *Homosexual Relationships: A Contribution to Discussion* will be used as the basis for an account of how the church perceives the problem of homosexuality, the critical reactions to the report being examined as responses to the issue of homosexual relationships. Finally, some critical reflection of my own on the debate thus far will be presented under the provocative heading, 'Bad arguments I have heard'.

It was deemed necessary that there be some foreword to the actual report of the Working Party of the Board of Social Responsibility, and the Bishop of Truro sets the scene by stressing the status of the report. It has neither been adopted nor endorsed by the Board: 'Consequently publication in no way commits the Church of England or the Board.' The report is therefore the responsibility of the Working Party alone, and publication is a recognition of the diversity of attitudes to homosexuality within the Church of England. Truro argues that 'the Church of England is not yet ready to declare its mind on the subject of homosexuality' and that is is 'impossible to

contemplate a definitive statement at this moment.² He reveals that the report raised questions to do with the authority of Scripture and the church's tradition. In spite of this fundamental questioning, the report is published as expressing views held by some members of the Church of England. The Bishop of Truro then lists some of the Board's unease with the report: some members questioned the exegesis, the argument, and the omissions. To ensure adequate discussion, these uneases are recorded in Part II of the document.

The Working Party's report

The Bishop of Gloucester prefaces the report with an historical introduction and record of the Working Party's activities and methods. The early chapters are evidential, reflecting an understanding of the social, medical and biblical material. The remaining chapters grapple with the theological, ethical, legal and pastoral problems which this evidence raises. The key to the report is expressed as follows: 'Accepting its [i.e., the Bible's] authority as witness to the ways of God with men, and listening carefully to its teachings, we have at the same time laid claim, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to a liberty of judgement in discerning what God is saying to us here and now.'³ This approach is reckoned as within the main stream of Anglican theology. A noteworthy fact recorded in the preface is that the report was unanimous. There then follow chapters on the social setting of homosexuality, a medical view of sex, identity and human relationships, and the biblical evidence on homosexuality.

1) The social setting

The modern stress on sexuality and sexual fulfilment has led to polarized attitudes in society, in that there is both more support for, and more hostility towards homosexual people. There are two areas of uncertainty in contemporary understandings of homosexuality, apart from the major question of its cause:

a) The first relates to the problem of defining those to whom we are referring. Despite popular characterization of homosexuals, there are no necessary distinguishing marks.

b) The second is about the range of an individual's sexual feelings and the extent of change during a lifetime. Is there a continuum between exclusive preferences for the same sex or for the opposite sex, and do folk occupy different points on that scale? Some of the leading homophile organizations are listed and their work described. The fact of homosexual organization and the growth of a sub-culture centred on the basic desire for sexual expression are noted.

This impressionistic account of the social context shows that there

is no homogeneity in the homosexual scene and that future responses to the homosexual issue cannot be predicted with certainty.

2) *A medical view*

Sexuality as a whole is the context of the medical discussion, but the medical evidence on homosexuality is presented as inconclusive. Definitions, freedom and determinism, and the incidence of homosexual practices lead into a discussion of gender and sexual orientation. There follows a brief account of abnormal sexual development, the development of homosexuality, genital intercourse, and the psychological understanding of homosexuality, before a consideration of the question of treatment. This necessary, though selective section, comes to a hesitant conclusion: 'At present medical science can give only a very incomplete account of the formation of sexual orientation. What we do know suggests that people have the responsibility for deciding whether or not to express their orientation in sexual acts, though the very strong nature of the sexual drive must be reckoned with.'⁴

3) *The biblical evidence*

This section is divided into the Old Testament background, the New Testament, and interpretation of the biblical evidence. The basic approach is to see homosexuality in the Old Testament in the context of cultic prostitution. The passages in Genesis 19 and Judges 19 are taken together and seen as having homosexual overtones, but primarily as failures to respect the duty of hospitality: 'The purpose of the homosexual attack is to demonstrate the ultimate breach of the obligation of hospitality.'⁵

The stress on the sinful aspect of homosexuality itself is regarded as a later attitude from the Jewish and Christian traditions. The Sodom account is understood as legend and a depiction of the corruption of Canaanite culture: 'It cannot be taken, as so commonly in the past, to record an instance of divine action intended expressly to condemn and punish homosexual behaviour.'⁶

The Levitical condemnations of homosexuality are seen as aimed at strengthening and preserving the family unit, reflecting criticism of idolatory and Canaanite religion, and thus aiming at establishing the separateness and distinctiveness of the people of God.

The key New Testament passage is Romans 1 and the doctrine of creation on which it rests. 'Because humanity in general has departed from the knowledge of the one-true God, so it fails to recognise the divine purpose in sex and hence misuses it, and of this misuse homosexual practices are the clearest example.'⁷ Paul's concern is interpreted as centring on the sinful state of the world outside the church,

i.e., what it means to be a heathen, rather than with homosexuality in itself. The references to homosexuality in 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians are of the same order. The paucity of biblical material on homosexuality is noted, but the report admits that 'nevertheless . . . what evidence there is seems clearly to show condemnation of homosexual behaviour.'⁸ This leads into the question of the kind of authority we are to give Bible statements in the moral sphere: 'Rather the issue is how far specific biblical statements on moral and ethical behaviour and attitudes provide . . . "timeless principles and patterns of morality".'⁹

The writer of the biblical section then stresses the relativity of biblical attitudes and standards in the light of historical, anthropological, sociological and psychological knowledge. The text of the Bible is fixed, but the church's understanding, use and derived attitudes and actions are not. A parallel with the church's attitude to the concept of 'holy war' is then drawn, and the shift in attitudes in relation to marriage and family life is noted.

When it comes to the interpretation of the biblical evidence the argument is that the homosexual issue cannot be settled by reference simply to biblical texts that deal with homosexuality. These are to be considered in the light of the underlying message of the Bible, taking account of theological, philosophical, medical and social knowledge not available in biblical times, as well as the moral instructions of the church.

It is argued that biblical writers appear to have no conception of the 'true' homosexual or exclusively orientated homosexual condition. There is no biblical support for the standard distinction between disposition and action. Thus possible objections to this treatment of the biblical material are considered. The first is that the New Testament reinforces the Old Testament attitude to homosexuality and therefore there can be no justification for the relaxation of condemnations of homosexual behaviour. This is rejected because the New Testament, like the Old, is a product of a particular age with its particular problems which were not the same as ours. At the same time, there is a break with the Old Testament, and the new fundamental demand is for 'unconditional love in conduct'. Church regulations on sexual behaviour should conform to that demand and accordingly may vary from time to time. The second objection rests on the biblical doctrine of creation and its rejection of homosexual activity: 'There is only one God-given pattern for human sexuality and to depart from it is to deface the image of God which makes humanity what it ought to be.'¹⁰ This consideration is rejected as inconclusive. There is no fixed pattern in nature which precludes change or development. The personal control of God is directly concerned with the condition and needs of every individual and therefore the church must exemplify this care. Even if complemen-

tarity, companionship and procreation are the divine pattern for sexual relationships, there remains the problem of the sexual fulfilment of those who can never achieve this ideal with members of the opposite sex.

4) *Theological and ethical considerations*

This section is an examination of the main approaches in society to the moral questions posed by the phenomenon of homosexuality. The *traditional approaches* are stated as those based on Scripture and those based on natural law. These are rejected, as they are generally presented, for failing to provide an understanding of sexuality adequate to the task of forming a Christian judgement about homosexuality. The *libertarian view* is presented as individualistic and based on personal satisfaction. The *personalistic view* stresses the quality of personal relationships and this is most often the basis of the case for homosexual equality. The libertarian view is rejected because of its individualism and atomistic approach and its ultimate damaging effect on society and the individual. The personalistic approach is commended as doing justice to the importance of sexuality, but the form of personalism requires severe restrictions of sexual activity. The heart of the debate is whether 'the significance of sex is something individuals may or may not choose to give it . . . or the significance is something there to be discovered, which men ignore at their peril.'¹¹

The section then reviews the traditional approach, seeking to distinguish between the universal and permanent and the relative, from Scripture and tradition. The conclusion of this is 'that the norm for sexual relationships is one of mutual love, expressed and nurtured in life-long and exclusive marriage, based on the givenness of biological and psychological potential and open to the future in respect both of permanence and procreation.'¹² Accordingly, the response of the Working Party to the homosexual predicament is to accept 'that there are circumstances in which individuals may justifiably choose to enter into a homosexual relationship with the hope of enjoying a companionship and physical expression of sexual love similar to that which is to be found in marriage.'¹³ This is, however, not the moral or social equivalent of marriage. This reversal of the traditional condemnation is urged on *pastoral* grounds, with concern for those who cannot conform to the norm of marriage.

5) *A legal perspective*

There is a brief examination of the claim of discrimination against the homosexual minority and the concern for children and young people. The Working Party favours a reduction in the age of consent to eighteen, rejects a legal attempt to give homosexuality a parallel status to heterosexuality, expresses concern at the 'unpredictable

and arbitrary' behaviour of the police, and pleads for better communication and relationships between homophile organizations and the police.

6) *Social implications and pastoral care*

The last section of the report gathers many of the social and pastoral concerns together. Public expressions of affection, friendship, abstinence and celibacy, the media and education, and counselling are dealt with before the enunciation of two principles of pastoral care: the integrity of the individual and the integrity of the community to which the individual belongs. There then follows the suggestion that a homosexual priest who has 'come out' and lives in sexual union with a man should offer his resignation to the bishop. This is expressed as a moral obligation and begs no questions as to the response of the bishop. The final conclusion is to plead for 'responsible and increasingly informal study and discussion' with the aim that 'more of the truth, spoken and heard in love, may emerge.'¹⁴

Reactions to the report

1) *The Board's response*

Critical observations from the Board are recorded to reflect the Board's own reaction to the report. The main unease centres on the biblical and theological chapters, in that the Scriptures are 'explained away', and the interpretation seems to have followed from an *a priori* conclusion rather than from the evidence. The detail of the Board's unease is directed not simply at the method of argument, but at the use of the conclusions from the biblical treatment as the premises for the theological and ethical considerations.

These criticisms reflect the divisions and different emphases within the Board. Some rejected the Working Party's acceptance of some homosexual relationships and the suggestion of lowering the age of consent. Some felt the resignation based on conscience was a failure of the church to take proper responsibility. Others accepted the main conclusions of the report, but dissociated themselves from some of its arguments.

2) *The general response*

The way in which both reports have been received has reinforced the picture of a divided church in the midst of a significant moral diversity. The 'gay' community condemned the Working Party report as going not far enough. The traditionalists condemned it as going too far. This might seem to suggest that the report 'got it right'. Certainly, as an expression of the diversity of views, the total document from the Board of Social Responsibility expresses this diversity. The problem is the relative weights given to these views. Thus, by way of addition, four sources seem particularly helpful to those concerned to gain a

fuller grasp of the issues and the different viewpoints. An edition of the magazine *Christian Action*, which is entirely devoted to the question of homosexuality, is a clear and valuable expression of the homophile case from those in sympathy with, and those within the 'gay' community.¹⁵

Recent books by Green, Holloway and Watson,¹⁶ and by Lovelace¹⁷ serve as evangelical responses to the homosexual problem and give clear expression to a very different approach to Scripture and authority. There are two further books which serve as background material in different ways. Peter Coleman's provides an unpolemical study of the biblical, historical and legal background¹⁸ This is a vital book for bringing us to the present point in time and forming a basis for understanding what are the issues involved. David Atkinson's *Latimer Study* is a guide to the modern debate in terms of its literature and issues.¹⁹ He provides a short-cut to reading most of the relatively recent literature. Rather than seek to contribute yet more to a well trodden area of literature, it seemed a worthwhile exercise to examine some of the key arguments used by the different viewpoints. Such an examination revealed fundamental weaknesses and flaws in the arguments such that not only was truth obscured, but clarity was threatened. The rest of this article is given over to an examination of the flaws in some of the arguments in the hope that it will lead to greater clarity and thus bring us all nearer truth.

Bad arguments I have heard

1) Definition

In reading the literature, the first area that is so often mishandled is that of definition. What is a homosexual? Are we talking about orientation or behaviour, disposition or practice, inversion or perversion, a statistical abnormality or a disease, a personal problem or a sin? It is not clear that writers all mean the same thing, or that they use the term 'homosexual' in a consistent way. Crucial to this definition is the problem of whether or not there is genuine and irreversible inversion. Are there people who are so exclusively attracted to members of their own sex that there is no possibility of change? Advance publicity from some as yet unpublished work by Masters and Johnson suggests that there may be a possible 'cure' for at least 40% of supposed inverted homosexual people. Such claims must be tested, but with counter-claims based on medical evidence, there seems little hope of any final medical or psychological definition of homosexuality. It seems clear that in practice there are two sorts of homosexual people. Put crudely, there are 'those who do and those who don't'. There are people who feel attracted to members of the same sex and who express these desires in sexual and genital activity. There are others who feel the same attractions but do not express these desires in practice. We must be clear, when we discuss homo-

sexuality, whether we are talking of practising or non-practising homosexuals.

2) *Chastity/ celibacy*

The confusion over definition is compounded by a confusion of celibacy for chastity. When talking of whether or not the homosexual person should be permitted or encouraged in the expression of his or her sexual desires, there is often a positive response to this because it seems that the church is demanding a celibate life. Celibacy is a vocation to which not all are called: therefore some sexual expression must be permitted. The error in this argument is in the notion that if the church denies genital activity to the homosexual, it is therefore demanding celibacy. In fact, the church is demanding *not* celibacy, but chastity. Such chastity may be demanded both of the heterosexual and the homosexual, regardless of their particular sexual predilections. The call to be chaste need not specify which sex is attractive, yet to be refrained from; nor is this equivalent to the notion of rejecting sexual activity for the glory of God and the cause of the gospel. Chastity may be required from all. Celibacy may not be so required.

3) *Sexuality/genitality*

Equally common a confusion may be seen in the discussion of sexuality. What is a proper sexual expression for a person, whether hetero- or homo- sexual? This question is interpreted in the light of the fact that we are all sexual beings, and sexuality pervades all we are and do. Accordingly, it is suggested that sexual intercourse may not be ruled out for the homosexual without danger of serious harm. This is to equate sexual expression with genital activity. As male or female, it is a truism that we are sexual beings. Even the bisexual has a sexual being, albeit a confused one. It is not necessarily the case that every sexual expression is genital, nor that sexuality is simply a matter of genitalia. Proper expressions of sexuality for the single, the widowed, the married, the homosexual and the heterosexual are to be discovered and encouraged, if we believe that God has made us sexual beings. But this is not at all the same thing as suggesting that genital activity is such a proper expression. *Not* to indulge in genital activity is *not* to deny one's sexuality.

Part of what lies behind some of the bad arguments on this theme is the notion that the denial of genital activity is harmful to personality. If I may make the point by means of a comparative example, the moral element may be seen just as clearly and with less emotion. There is much cruel humour about spinsters. They are seen as frustrated, and the comment quickly comes: 'What she needs is a man'. Even if this were true, it does not seem to be obvious on most moralities, never mind Christian morality, that we should therefore provide one. That this is her need is not in itself a reason to meet that

need. In essence, the talk of fulfilment in relationship as *the* sole criterion by which the rightness or wrongness of an action is to be judged means that there can be no morally significant distinction between homosexual and heterosexual practices. However, in response to the question of whether we have different criteria for judging homosexual relationships as opposed to heterosexual relationships, it is perfectly possible to say that the criteria are the same. Nevertheless, there is a category of heterosexual relationship, i.e. marriage, which is of a different kind and order and forms no parallel with even the highest and best form of homosexual relationship. That context of marriage is the proper one for the exercise of genital activity in a loving, fulfilling way.

4) *Gay rights*

When the black community rioted in Watts, Los Angeles, they discovered a simple rule. Riot means publicity and government money. The more strident the demand and the more extreme the behaviour, the more successful it seemed. This has led the Gay Rights Movement strongly to encourage homosexual people to adopt a high profile and to 'come out'. It has created problems. For while in some ways there has been increased tolerance and acceptance of the homosexual, there has also been strong reaction to the homosexual community. This reaction is reinforced and made more complex by the sliding scale of demands made by the gay movement. There are the demands concerning the lowering of the age limit for homosexual activity to eighteen, the bringing into line of the Scottish and northern Irish legal status of homosexuality, the end to discrimination against homosexuals in jobs and in promotion, and the end to police and legal discrimination. These demands have often been supplemented by attacks on the family concept, and on the basic patterns of childrearing and education. Children should be brought up with homosexuality presented as an equal alternative. This reveals a slide from apparently 'reasonable' demands for legal equality and protection, to fundamental changes in family life in response to a minority demand. There is a distinction between protection of a minority's interests and the adaptation of society totally to fit in with that minority. Such extreme demands lead not only to extreme reaction, but to the rejection of the reasonable. Moderation in demands seems more in keeping with the alleged tolerance of the gay community. Are they prepared to accept and tolerate the majority preference and life-style?

What makes the last question a real one, is the growing separation of homosexuals from the rest of society. In rejecting the conventions of so-called 'straight' society, the gay community replace those conventions by their own and by structures to reinforce them. There is a gay culture with its own language, customs and signs. Obviously

this reveals not only a desire of like to be with like, but also to be in a setting where needs are met, support and understanding given, and acceptance is the norm. Minority groups are bound closer together by persecution from others, and such negative reaction helps the growth of the minority grouping and reinforces the sense of identity. Even in church circles there are particular churches which cater for the gay community, e.g. the Metropolitan Community Church. The gay movement and society in general need to ponder this pattern of demand and reaction, which is leading to greater separation.

To hear many folk talk, all male homosexuals are effeminate and all female homosexuals 'butch' and masculine in appearance. Too often we carry a stereotyped picture of people, especially of the homosexual. Television comedy, 'popular' humour, and some behaviour of homosexuals themselves reinforce the stereotypes. In rejecting these in favour of a more honest realization of the variety of people who describe themselves as homosexuals, we must recognize that there are new stereotypes which are acceptable to the homosexual community. The picture of the extremely sensitive person, who is non-dominant and who may have a vital contribution to make to the traditional male and female struggle, is a stereotype propounded by many homosexual activists, especially in the church. This reveals that it is not stereotyping *per se* which is unacceptable, but its expression in particular ways. We must exercise care: if we demand a breaking away from stereotypes, then we cannot smuggle them back in new and more acceptable forms.

5) *Medicine*

In most writing on the subject of homosexuality, there is a section on medical views. This soon exposes the inadequacy of the present state of medical knowledge on the nature and causes of homosexuality, and also reveals a strong reaction from the homosexual viewpoint. 'It makes us angry to see the heading "A Medical View"', is the title of a section by Jim Cotter in an article in *Christian Action*.²⁰ This reaction will not do. Traditionally homosexuality, especially in the last hundred years, has been seen as a medical problem. Indeed, for some people it still is a medical problem, and doctors and psychiatrists are still consulted. It is odd also to find a rejection of the medical area when so often the presentation of the case supporting homosexuality rests on the shift in medical attitudes and evidence. This is having your cake and eating it. Likewise, in talking with homosexuals, one finds an unwillingness to seek the cause of their condition. They say 'I have accepted myself as I am; why can't you?' Nevertheless the cause is significant, even if it may be hard to discover. To know something of the cause is to know why one is as one is and properly to understand what one is. To know the cause is to know whether or not change or 'cure' is possible or appropriate. Realistically the medical,

physiological, biochemical and psychological evidence is insufficient to form a basis for an ethical view. We must beware of building our ethics too closely on a particular view of the medical evidence, for if that changes or collapses, what then of our ethics?

6) *The Bible*

One is dismayed to read the twists and turns of some exegesis in the attempt to present a positive view of the Bible's attitude towards homosexuality. In essence, this reduces to five essential positions. The first is to stress that the Genesis 19 and Judges 19 accounts are ultimately concerned with breaking the law of hospitality. The second position is to interpret the Leviticus, 1 Kings and other Old Testament condemnations of homosexuality as condemnations of Canaanite, heathenish practices and not of homosexuality in itself. The third is to claim that Paul and the other New Testament writers were unaware of the distinction between 'inverts' (those attracted only to their own sex) and 'perverts' (those attracted to members of the opposite sex, but who indulge in sexual activity with members of their own sex). The Pauline condemnation is thus the condemnation of perversion and not of invert homosexuals. The fourth position is to stress that Paul and all the Old Testament and New Testament writers were men of their age and culture and that their teaching and attitudes must be corrected by modern knowledge and insight. The fifth position is to stress the love principle as the essence of Christianity, with all else to be judged by that principle. Some comments on these five lines of argument are necessary, for they are inadequate as they stand.

One must commend the desire to give Scripture a role and authority in the debate. The motive is obviously a concern to make Scripture fit with modern attitudes and thus to maintain links with tradition and with those for whom Scripture is the norm. The main problem with the discussion of the Old Testament references is the apparent denial of the homosexual element and its significance in all the passages mentioned. At best the invert/pervert argument is an argument from silence. That Paul in Corinth did not know of those who engage purely in homosexual activity and of others who indulged with both sexes seems unlikely, given the (im)moral climate of that place. The biblical condemnation of homosexual activity cannot in honesty be denied. We have already noted the Working Party's comment that 'what evidence there is seems clearly to show condemnation of homosexual behaviour',²¹ and Peter Coleman also summarizes, 'Whatever status is granted to them [the biblical texts] by contemporary Christians, the texts sufficiently show that the biblical writers condemned homosexual practices.'²²

The problem then is not what the Bible says, but what authority should be given to what the Bible says in our own and the church's life. This is where the issues of relativism and the normative role of

the love principle are crucial. To describe Paul and the other biblical writers as men of their age is a truism. We are all men and women of our age. We all speak from particular contexts and settings. So what? The 'so what' depends on a shift from describing the biblical writers as context-dependent, to evaluating that context as less significant for moral decision-making than the modern context. The problem with such a stance is that it is in itself a denial of the essence of relativism. It is all too easy to relativize the relativizer. If we all speak from and within a context, then nothing is any more or less context-dependent than anything else. We cannot therefore make the modern context absolute over other contexts without adding a further principle to that of cultural relativity, i.e. that modern man knows best. But does he? Even if he does, the argument from cultural relativity does not establish that. If one believes in revelation and the sovereignty of God, it seems no less likely that a revelation in a particular context may have universal and timeless application, than that modern man has arrived at an ultimate absolute which, if a difference occurs, is the basis for rejection. It depends where one's authority rests. Those who wish to take Scripture as that final authority must beware of picking and choosing only what they feel comfortable with, and not responding to those passages which are difficult and apparently unacceptable. If Scripture is the final authority, it must be just that. For if qualifications of that authority are expressed, then one is indistinguishable from those who claim that all Scripture is to be tested by the love principle alone.

There are some problems for those who argue both for the cultural relativity of Scripture and the normative function of the love principle. Does the love principle escape the trap of cultural relativity? If so, how is this so, and why this principle alone? There is an oddity about using a principle derived from the Scriptures to reject all other principles derived from these same Scriptures. It is not only the status of the principle which is difficult to establish as the sole absolute, but there are problems about its content. So often it appears to imply tolerant acceptance and a non-judgemental attitude. The implied battle lines in the homosexual debate seem, on this account, to be between the stern, judgemental, intolerant biblicist and the loving, tolerant, non-judgemental personalist or contextualist. Both attitudes are equally judgemental, for both draw lines, have standards and make judgements. What is different is the presuppositional basis and the locus of final authority. To draw lines does not mean no love, no understanding and no possibility of change. Within the definition of love different presuppositions characterize different aspects. A biblical concept of love does not mean anything goes or that all is permitted. Acceptance and love does not mean letting the other do whatever is desired, nor saying 'please yourself'.

Some folk are unhappy with the drawing of lines, for it leads to

exclusiveness and to some being outcasts. The fact of the matter is that both traditionally and presently Christianity is exclusive. It draws lines between Christian and non-Christian, light and darkness, goodness and evil. Holiness means 'set-apartness' and that implies not only *for* God but also *from* other life-styles and authorities. Such exclusion is not always the result of the Christian drawing a line and refusing to allow the outcast to cross the line. Rather, the 'outsider' may equally draw lines and refuse to enter the Christian context. The outsider may exclude himself—or have himself excluded. The debate within the church is *not* a matter of judgemental versus non-judgemental, or of acceptance and non-acceptance of others: it is rather a debate about the nature of love and the authority of Scripture in our lives.

7) *Tradition*

Much is made of the role of tradition, and the danger of flying in the face of tradition if homosexual activity is permitted. The Bishop of Truro suggests that 'many homosexuals have in the past and today given up opportunities for sexual relationships in obedience to Christian teaching; the Church must avoid any possibility of the deduction being drawn, from a reassessment of homosexuality, that they have made an unnecessary sacrifice.' This seems to be a variation on the 'tradition must be upheld' theme. It is, however, never enough simply to state that we cannot permit or countenance homosexual activity because the tradition is against it. We must study and question the tradition, but in such questioning there are two things required if the tradition is to be set aside. It must be shown both that the tradition is inadequate and that the alternative proposed is better. The nature of scientific revolutions reveals that a traditional law may be inadequate and perceived as such, yet it continues until a more adequate alternative comes along. The Gay Movement within the church must show that the tradition is itself inadequate and not simply that it is not to the liking of homosexual people. Then they must show that the alternative propounded by the Gay Movement is more adequate. Such adequacy must be along the lines of coherence, consistency with the facts, and that it works better. Their case to date is 'not proven'.

8) *Natural?*

Peter Coleman is particularly helpful in drawing attention to the different ways in which the word 'natural' is used. It may mean what occurs or exists in the world. It may refer to a primeval state of things, or it may point to some ideal either past or present which is what God intended. The word 'natural' is misleadingly bandied about by many different authors to say everything from 'homosexuality is

“natural” because it occurs’, to ‘homosexuality is against nature because the human body is fitted for the opposite sex.’ Careful usage is essential, but that still leaves the case of natural law to be considered. The heart of that case is that homosexuality is incomplete sexuality. This is why the Working Party report stopped short of countenancing homosexual ‘marriage’, and partly why gay church people have responded so negatively to the report. In essence, there is the claim that homosexuality is incomplete in that it is less than the ideal of heterosexuality. This incompleteness is not purely a statistical fact based on heterosexuality as a norm. It assumes that the norm of heterosexuality is complete in psychological and biological senses, and accords with God’s plan. Such talk of God’s plan causes unease to those who prefer the notion of process as a description of God’s activity and relation to the world. However, even if one were entirely committed to ‘process theology’, the very notion of process depends on a view of aim, direction, ideal or plan. Without some understanding of a plan, there could be no recognition of any process. The point at issue between the various opinions should not be whether or not there is a plan, but rather whether that plan or ideal is attainable, and what provision ought to be made if some level of failure is inevitable. In some aspects of Catholic reflection on natural law, there is a strong sense of the ontological status of marriage, which runs parallel to the use of that notion in the remarriage debate. The difficulty with such a notion is how to offer proof for it. It seems rather like an expression of faith in an intangible reality. The basis of such faith needs to be clarified.

9) *The psychological reduction*

Many homophile writers accuse those who take a contrary position of expressing their homophobia. It is argued that homosexuality raises questions about one’s own sexuality and forms a threat. Accordingly, the response tells you more about the sexual ‘hang-ups’ of the person concerned than about the issue of homosexuality. This kind of argument is open to the ‘*tu quoque*’ response. If everything the anti-homosexuality writer says is a result of his or her homophobia, then it is just as likely that everything the pro-homosexuality writer says is the product of his or her homophilia. If such a line of argument were true, then it would signal the death of all discussion and argument. What was said would be irrelevant. What mattered would be what caused us to say what was said. Furthermore, if it were true that all negative comment on homosexuality was based on psychological fears or repressions, this would make the homophile immune from all criticism. There would be no ground for the critic to occupy. Such immunity from criticism seems more than a little odd.

In fact, even if it is true that all negative critique stems from psychological causes, that only provides an explanation of its origin,

not of its present force or correctness. The genetic fallacy is lurking clearly here. The mad man may still speak truly, and what is said must be tested for truth, not simply dismissed as madness.

10) *The pastoral problem*

For so many of us the theory is easy to accept, but the harsh realities of people in need in the pastoral setting make our practice often different from our theory. From Pittinger on, the essence of the homosexual lobby within the church has been the stress on the fulfilling lives that homosexual couples may have and the witness to love and hope that this expresses. This may sound a bit like arguing that because people actually live successfully in this way, it is somehow all right. But the case is more subtle, and rests on the notions of personal and mutual fulfilment and wholeness. But does the recognition of the worth and reality of personal fulfilment and wholeness necessarily mean the abandonment of traditional standards?

If a bishop sends a man to theological college with the strict proviso that he must pass all his examinations, the following scenario may occur. The man comes to college and there he flourishes. The atmosphere, the liturgical life, the study, all combine to make him a better person, and indeed help him to begin to minister better to others. He passes all the examinations bar one: he has failed it clearly and irredeemably. The college tutor thinks he may make a good pastor, and may know that failure will destroy the man's confidence and even his hope of the priesthood. The tutor may well realize that the bishop will stand firm; nevertheless, he cannot make a failure into a pass, no matter the worthiness of the motive or the excellence of the possible consequences. Personal fulfilment and wholeness are not the only morally significant criteria.

'The lives of people as they are actually being lived put question marks against inherited frameworks.'²⁴ It is correct that they raise questions, but in order to overthrow an inherited framework, the evidence must be overwhelming. Yet here the counter-evidence from homosexuality urges caution. The instability and breakdown of homosexual relationships and their aftermath, the evidence of those homosexuals who are able to be chaste and yet fulfilled, and the testimony of those who are changed from their homosexual orientation all counter-balance the evidence of fulfilled homosexual relationships and the good that may ensue from them. How are we truly to judge the quality and evidence of fulfilled lives? The subjective judgement of an individual is hard to distinguish from personal prejudice: objective criteria are necessary. This is made even more complex when the force of the moral claim seems to rest entirely on the motive or on the consequences. Will it be loving? Will it be fulfilling? But how are we to know the motives or foresee the consequences? Are there no actions which are either right or wrong in

themselves? There is an unwillingness to allow any sexual action as something right in itself, but to look to the motives and the consequences as the sole criteria for moral judgement. This seems to me inadequate. The morality of an action is concerned with the totality of that action—its motive, itself, and its consequences. Christian morality, with its emphasis on revelation, cannot escape from the deontological element of morality. Duty and right are not simply functions of motive or consequence.

There is, too, a need for clarification of what constitutes fulfilment, whether personal or mutual. It does not mean getting what we want or even what we need. There is a biblical doctrine of wholeness, of *shalom*, which involves notions of hope and of salvation. The good news is about change for us all into more completeness and greater likeness to Christ. This wholeness may be bought by suffering and crucifixion: 'The servant is not greater than his Lord.'

11) *Moral diversity*

The issue of homosexual activity is not a new one. Nor is the diversity of moral attitudes in the church something novel. Paul had more to say on morality than his passages on homosexuality or women. In Romans 14 and 15 he deals with the topic of moral diversity. Among a number of helpful guidelines, he gives the following advice to Christians—those in Christ, who know something of the Christian tradition and a little of the Old Testament, and who have been confronted with moral diversity in the church:

- a) Be fully persuaded in your own mind
- b) Recognize that you will give answer to God, for all of us are judged by God
- c) Do not cause your brother to stumble or fall
- d) Pursue the things that make for harmony and the growth of one another's character

The following of such advice and the avoidance of some bad arguments may make us all conform more nearly to Christ.

Dr E. DAVID COOK is senior lecturer in modern theology at Westminster College, Oxford, lecturer in Christian ethics at Regent's Park College, and chaplain of Green College.

NOTES

- 1 Division of Social Responsibility and Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church, *A Christian Understanding of Human Sexuality*, London 1980; General Synod, Board for Social Responsibility (BSR), *Homosexual Relationships: A Contribution to Discussion* (CIO : London 1979).
- 2 BSR, op. cit., p i.
- 3 *ibid.*, p 4.
- 4 *ibid.*, p 26.
- 5 *ibid.*, p 27.
- 6 *ibid.*, p 28.
- 7 *ibid.*, p 31.
- 8 *ibid.*, p 32.
- 9 *ibid.*, p 33.

Homosexuality: a review of the debate

- 10 *ibid.*, p 37.
- 11 *ibid.*, p 45.
- 12 *ibid.*, p 50.
- 13 *ibid.*, p 52.
- 14 *ibid.*, p 79.
- 15 *Christian Action*, Autumn 1979.
- 16 M. Green, D. Holloway and D. Watson, *The Church and Homosexuality* (Hodder and Stoughton : London 1980).
- 17 R. Lovelace, *Homosexuality and the Church* (Lamp : London 1979).
- 18 P. Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Homosexuality* (SPCK : London 1980).
- 19 D. Atkinson, *Homosexuals in the Christian Fellowship* (Latimer House : Oxford 1979).
- 20 *Christian Action*, Autumn 1979, p 19.
- 21 BSR, *op. cit.*, p 32.
- 22 Coleman, *op. cit.*, pp 277-8.
- 23 BSR, *op. cit.*, p ii.
- 24 *Christian Action*, Autumn 1979, p 18.