

Freedom, Religious Liberty, and Sexuality

Christianity has played a foundational role in shaping key concepts of personal, religious and political freedom – concepts that are too often assumed nowadays to be secular in origin. The creation of all humanity in God's image; God's forging of covenants with Israel, Jesus' command to love one's neighbour and the Reformed doctrine of Common Grace – these and other key Christian beliefs catalysed subsequent movements defined by liberty of conscience and emergent forms of rights and democracy. Yet whereas these principles were rooted in profoundly communal commitments to church and godly society, certain Enlightenment philosophies came increasingly to present individual and societal freedom as freedom from belief in God and from the Church and its moral teaching. This movement gained significant momentum in the 1960s, finding expression most particularly in a new sexual permissiveness enabled by the contraceptive pill. Towards the end of that decade and beyond, liberalised laws on sex and relationships challenged classic Christian and Evangelical ethics still further. Now, in the 21st century, LGBT+ rights have begun to trump religious liberties, with the latter increasingly cast as a mask for innately 'abusive', 'hateful' and 'harmful' belief, speech and practice. This section of the Pre-Forum conference will explore the divergence of 'freedom' from its biblical roots and will examine how that divergence now threatens liberties hard-won by Christians over the centuries. In doing so, we will consider various case studies related to sexual ethics in particular.

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1. Evangelical Alliance UK Statements on Sexuality

Marriage is the only form of partnership approved by God for sexual relations and homoerotic sexual practice is incompatible with His will as revealed in Scripture... We commend and encourage all those who experience same-sex attraction and have committed themselves to chastity by refraining from homoerotic sexual practice. *Biblical & Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality*, 2012, Affirmations 3, 7.

The creation narrative speaks of two distinct and compatible biological sexes. Cross-gender identification is a concern because it distorts the creational order of male and female. We live in a fallen world where not every biological or psychological experience is a reflection of God's will. Within this narrative, gender dysphoria is understood as a result of living in a fallen world, not a result of personal moral choice... EA, *Transformed*, 2018, p.29.

1.1 The increasing challenge of articulating these views in wider western society

2. The Changing Cultural Situation

2.1 Changing Terminology

- 2.1.1 From homosexuality to LGBT+
- 2.1.2 First, Second and Third Wave Feminism
- 2.1.3 From binarity to fluidity: Queer Theory and sexual pluralism
- 2.1.4 From sex v gender to sex and gender as *both* culturally constructed (Judith Butler, Lisa Isherwood, Linn Marie Tonstad)

2.2 Changing Attitudes & Laws (Case Study: the UK)

- 2.2.1 Liberalised sexual mores since the 1960s
- 2.2.2 Mainstreaming of LGBT+ lifestyles
- 2.2.3 LGBT-affirming legislation: 1967 Sexual Offences Act; 2001 Equal Age of Consent; 2004 Civil Partnerships; 2014 Gay Marriage (excl. NI); 2020 Gay Marriage in NI?

2.3 Social Out-Workings

- 2.3.1 Educational campaigns (e.g. 'Gingerbread' charts)
- 2.3.2 Lobbying for gender self-recognition
- 2.3.3 Tensions: Second Wave Feminists v Trans Activism
 - 2.3.3.1 Splitting Stonewall
 - 2.3.3.2 Germaine Greer & Jenny Murray
- 2.3.4 'Transgender Kids'
 - 2.3.4.1 Tavistock Clinic referrals
 - 2.3.4.2 Safeguarding paradoxes?
 - 2.3.4.3 Desistence
- 2.3.5 Transgender Sport

3. Church Tensions

- 3.1 **Classic:** EAUk; FIEC; Baptist Union; Presbyterian Church NI; United Methodists; Church of England; Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic
- 3.2 **Revisionist:** Quakers; URC; Presbyterian Church USA; Episcopal Church USA; Methodist Church GB? Church of England? (Living in Love & Faith report: 'Radical new Christian inclusion'; 'Proper 21st century understanding' of sexuality)
 - 3.2.1 Revisionist Theological Approaches:
 - 3.2.1.1 *Exegetical* - 'Biblical texts don't mean what we thought' (Bill Countryman, James Brownson, Matthew Vines etc.)
 - 3.2.1.2 *Thematic* - 'Core pastoral imperatives (love, compassion, fidelity) override micro-exegesis' (Jeffery John, Andrew Davison, cf. William Webb)
 - 3.2.1.3 *Canonical* - 'Biblical texts on LGBT+ outmoded & discardable' (Dan Vio, Walter Wink, Diarmaid MacCulloch, Luke Timothy Johnson)
 - 3.2.1.4 *Therapeutic* - 'God wills wellbeing; exegesis must affirm LGBT+ folk' (Mark Achtemeier, Vikki Beeching)
 - 3.2.1.5 *Illuminist* - 'God showed me that LGBTQ lifestyles are ok' (Jayne Ozanne, but cf. Rosaria Butterfield, Jackie Hill Perry)

3.2.1.6 *Ecumenistic* - Accommodate revisionism for 'greater good' of unity
(Marcus Green, CofE?)

3.2.2 Revisionist Political Rhetoric: Classic View as:

3.2.2.1 Abusive (Jayne Ozanne; Vicky Beeching)

3.2.2.2 Analogous to racism (Jessica Joseph, Antonia Honeywell, Coretta
Scott King, cf. Rod Dreher)

3.2.3 Revisionist Evangelicals: 'Affirming', 'Including' & 'Accepting'

3.3 Resisting Revisionism: Biblical Hermeneutics

The same canons of cultural analysis, which show a liberalising or less restrictive tendency in the slavery and women texts relative to the original culture, demonstrate a more restrictive tendency in homosexuality texts relative to the original culture...

[T]he criteria applicable to the issue suggest that the biblical prohibitions regarding homosexuality, even within a covenant form, should be maintained today. There is no significant dissonance within the biblical data. **William Webb**, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, p.250.

3.4 Resisting Revisionism: Critiquing Whig Progressivism & Chronological Snobbery

3.4.1 Herbert Butterfield & C.S. Lewis

3.4.2 Camile Paglia

3.4.2.1 *Sexual Personae*

3.4.2.2 Gender fluidity and cultural dissipation

4. Resisting Revisionism: Upholding Religious Liberties and Gospel Freedoms

4.1 Freedom in Scripture

4.1.1 Freedom *from*: Oppression, Evil, Suffering, Sin, Death, Eternal
Condemnation

4.1.2 Freedom *for*: Love, Fellowship, Service, Witness

4.2 Secular Divergences from Biblical Freedom since The Enlightenment

Throughout the Middle Ages, the highest intellectual achievements and energies of Western European society had been concentrated on religion and theology...Yet by 1650...more and more importance was coming to be attached to **affirming the value of the things of this world rather than the next.**'

Diarmid MacCulloch, *Christian History*, pp.218-9

4.3 Secular individualist models of freedom as influences on sexual mores

4.3.1 *Utilitarianism – greatest good of greatest number*

4.3.1.1 Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

4.3.1.1.1 Good as maximal pleasure (hedonism)

4.3.1.1.2 Quantity of pleasure on par with quality

4.3.2 *Classical Liberalism*

4.3.2.1 Individual autonomy distinct from state

4.3.2.2 Minimal government intrusion

4.3.2.3 John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

4.3.2.3.1 Education to foster ‘higher’ pleasures

4.3.3 *The ‘Harm Principle’*

4.3.4 Freedom curtailed only by threats to *others’* freedom, e.g. Physical violence, Incitement to violence, Censorship

4.3.5 Law and military primarily for protection of individual freedoms

4.3.6 Extension of harm principle to ‘hate speech’ in more recent legislation: harm as psychologized and subjectivized

4.3.6.1 Classic Evangelical sexual ethics deemed innately ‘harmful’ and ‘hateful’

4.4 Secular societal models of freedom as shaping sexual ethics

4.4.1 *Social Contract*

4.4.1.1 Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

4.4.1.2 People relinquish *certain* freedoms for overall wellbeing - ‘General Will’

4.4.1.3 Not just Utilitarian rule of majority – also for protection of minority views/groups – including LGBT+ groups today

4.5 Rights-based models as driving sexual pluralism

4.5.1 Rights as non-negotiable claims

4.5.2 Rights as universal and innate to individual human identity

4.5.3 Key charters and laws: UN Declaration 1948; European Convention 1950; EU Charter & UK Act 2000; Growth of LGBTQI+ rights

4.5.4 The development of LGBT+ rights

4.5.5 Divergences from classic Evangelicalism

4.5.5.1 Rights as Secular religion? (John de Witte)

4.5.5.2 Anthropocentric v. theocentric

4.5.5.3 Heedless of sin (incl. sexual sin)

4.5.5.4 Heedless of responsibilities (incl. sexual fidelity)

4.5.6 Resonances with classic Evangelicalism

4.5.6.1 Image of God

4.5.6.2 Covenant

4.5.6.3 Common Grace

4.6 The Missing Link: Christian Freedom through Servanthood & Sacrifice

4.6.1 Free from sin; slaves to God (Rom 6:18-22)

4.6.2 Free from sin; servants of others (1 Pet. 2:16-17; Phil. 2:1-3)

4.6.3 Free for eternity (Rev. 22:17)

4.6.4 Free in Christ ‘our sacrifice’...

4.6.5 Free in obedience, after the pattern of Christ

4.7 Religious Liberty & Toleration: History

4.7.1 Reformation tensions as crucible for religious liberty

4.7.2 Treaty of Westphalia (1648): Doctrinal disputes henceforth ‘settled within states, not between them’ (Kenneth Cragg)

4.7.3 John Locke: Philosopher of Religious Toleration

4.7.4 Evangelical Alliance campaigns (1846ff)

4.7.5 World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberties Commission

- 4.7.6 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief' (1981) – in tension with LGBT+ rights...

5. Religious Liberty and Classic Evangelical Sexual Ethics: Recent Tensions and Test Cases

- 5.1 Case Study 1: Asher's Bakery & Coerced Speech
- 5.2 Case Studies 2: Peter and Hazelmary Bull – religious liberty v. commercial duty
- 5.3 Case Studies 3: John Craven – freedom of religion & speech v LGBT 'protection from harm'
- 5.4 Case Study 4 – Adrian Smith: freedom of religion & speech in the pro-LGBT workplace
- 5.5 Case Study 5 - Seyi Omooba: Employer rights v. freedom of religion & speech
- 5.6 Case Study 6 – Conversion Therapy

Suggested Readings:

Evangelical Alliance UK, Evangelical Alliance, *Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality*. Evangelical Alliance, 2012.

Evangelical Alliance, *Transformed: Understanding Gender in a Changing Culture*. London: Evangelical Alliance, 2018. p.29..Available online at: <https://www.eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/transformed-understanding-transgender-in-a-changing-culture>

Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Text and Hermeneutics*. Abingdon, 2001.

Glynn Harrison, *A Better Story: God, Sex and Human Flourishing*. IVP, 2017.

Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith (2nd Expanded Edition)*. Crown & Covenant, 2014.

Evangelical Alliance UK, *Speak Up: The Law and Your Gospel Freedoms*. EA, 2017. <https://www.eauk.org/assets/files/downloads/Speak-Up-FULL.pdf>

Michael Farris, *The History of Religious Liberty*. New Leaf, 2015.

Joseph Loconte, *God, Locke, and Liberty: The Struggle for Religious Freedom in the West*. Lexington, 2014.

John de Witte Jr & F.S. Alexander (eds), *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction*. CUP, 2010.

Paul R. Beaumont (ed.), *Christian Perspectives on Human Rights and Legal Philosophy*. Paternoster, 1998.

Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. Sentinel, 2017.