

Introduction

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I phoned Professor Richard Norris in the spring of 2004 to ask if he would offer a lecture on Aristotle's ethics in my philosophy course at The General Theological Seminary. He replied, "Of course I will." Then he added, after some thought, "But you must return the favor and read an essay I'm working on, and give me some critical response." With apparent effortless, Norris dazzled us in his lecture, chuckling to himself through the presentation, taking delight in his own interior dialogue with Aristotle before giving utterance to it in the classroom. At the close of the hour he pulled out of his bag the essay that I was to read. It was the very essay now being published in this volume. And as you will discover, I was the double winner of this deal, recipient of his lecture, and chosen for the honor of reading the last essay he would write before his death.

Many of you will remember Richard Norris as an extraordinary translator, scholar, and writer, and gifted teacher and priest of the church. The vast range of his intellectual work, the boundless energy for exploring new territory, the keen insight and thoroughness are all trademarks you will recognize. He influenced nearly half a century of students at The General Theological Seminary and Union Theological Seminary, and his scholarly and teaching vocation reached the Episcopal Church nationally and the community of scholars internationally. He contributed a magnificent volume of lasting quality, *Understanding the Faith of the Church*, for the Episcopal Church's Teaching Series (1979). At the same time he responded to numerous requests from bishops and others to write on all manner of church concerns, including prominently the ministries of the church, considered both historically and in the present.

Typical of Anglican theologians more widely, Norris approached theology first historically, mastering biblical and patristic roots to core themes, then bringing the fruits of clear exposition into the form of insights for the contemporary church. He was an exemplar of the marks of liberal Anglo-Catholicism, identified by Michael Ramsey: striving to hold together faithfulness to the credal tradition, intelligibility in

the context of one's own culture, and persuasive and practical presentation of belief. A theology, to be adequate, needed to meet all three goals.

The essay in this volume, "Some Notes on the Current Debate Regarding Homosexuality," is not just Norris's last. It was also one of the very few non-commissioned works in the last years of his life. It was research and reflection he deeply cared about for its own sake. Yet as a theologian of the church, one also imagines that he wrote it from motivation to serve the church in a time when it wrestles with the question of sexuality. He was hesitant about the essay, concerned that it be thorough, honest, faithful to the full scope of commitments as scholar and priest, even though he considered himself no scholarly expert on the topic. I read two rounds of revisions, and I believe there were others involved in the task as well. Professor Richard Corney, recently retired Professor of Old Testament at The General Theological Seminary, found several different layers of revision, each painstakingly changing a detail of argument here, adding an insight there, demonstrating the professionalism he brought to his scholarly vocation.

"Notes" is a practice in the large scope of Norris's thought. He begins with an imagined utterance of a parishioner trying to come to terms with changes going on inside herself, and the church more widely, on matters of attitude toward sexual orientation and normative practices. Then Norris himself imagines the kinds of confusion within the church reflected in this parishioner's sincere but conflicting remarks. He does not belittle but rather finds opportunity in this ordinary experience to launch a reflection on homosexuality that addresses the incomplete, sometimes unhappy state of present debate: "The Bible states clearly that . . ." at one pole, and appeal to either sentimentality or "rights" language, at the other pole. Norris's argument moves through hermeneutical reflection on the few biblical texts alluding to same-sex relationship of some kind, patristic interpretative systems that deliver insight on hermeneutics, Aristotelian and Stoic moral systems, reflections on natural law theory in the context of Aquinas, and a last section on Kant's alternative moral system. This comprehensive span, so skillfully brought to bear on this topic in Christian moral theology, recognizes the transitions in moral frameworks for thinking about the identified topic, while remaining focused on the dynamics that press upon current treatment of same-sex relationships and the church.

This volume is structured around the Norris essay. Following the essay are responses from eminent scholars whose fields are treated in

the main essay. In light of Norris's tremendous range of historical and intellectual material brought to bear on this topic of homosexuality and the church, the editors of this volume worked together to prepare a list of contributors who might, from their respective expertise, offer responses to Norris's essay. The list would need to include a wide range of scholarship indeed. Moreover, to honor the stature of the work and its prospects for wide influence, we wanted to invite respondents whose own high professional accomplishments would best complement the main essay.

The caliber of respondents who accepted invitations to participate in this volume is truly remarkable, and gives added testimony to the significance of Norris's career and the wide appreciation for the quality of his work. We asked leading figures in classic philosophical tradition, biblical interpretation, natural law theory, modern philosophical and theological ethics, specialists in sexuality studies, and ecclesial and pastoral leaders. In addition we looked for some regional and interdenominational representation.

The editors are very grateful for, and impressed with, their excellent and informative responses. They respectfully commend, criticize, and add new insight to what Norris has delivered to us. They have each carefully heard the editors' request to respond to the main essay specifically from the perspective of their own professional expertise, thus giving the readers access to points of view that reflect the state of questioning from these specialties.

I appreciate Mark Jordan's claim that while Norris's essay is biblical and historical, its primary aim is philosophical insofar as he strives throughout to identify and unravel the logical confusions lurking under the currently stated positions on homosexuality, based in Christian belief and practice. One benefit to such an approach is that by it we achieve increments of improvement in public debate and self-critical understanding as we face the weaknesses of our reasoning. Another may be that if our best reasoning is exposed as flawed or inconsistent, we are perhaps a step closer to facing other motivational factors at work in our commitments—for example, deep-seated and culturally rooted emotional responses to same-sex relations, issues of power and entitlement which shape the historical context of commitment, and so forth. The point is that Norris honors the philosophical dimension as a significant aspect of constructive progress, even in the midst of other powerful factors. This by no means signals that he (or we) must find rational argument the last and only approach, or that he didn't care about the motivational substructure of thought. There is

room to see Norris's task of rational analysis as preliminary and complementary to the archeology of power and emotional substrates which postmodernists have rightly taught us to consider. Norris's approach does resist the tendency to reduce reasoning to analysis of power, and affirms that the human practice of reasoning does real if modest work and must be carried out with discipline, diligence, and humility.

At his death in 2005, Richard Norris was still in the process of completing what was probably to be the last section of the essay before drawing conclusions. We have printed it in its unfinished form. However, in her brief "Norris's Intentions," which precedes the main essay, Kathryn Tanner, the Dorothy Grant Maclear Professor of Theology in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, and coeditor of this volume of the *ATR*, has described the kinds of conclusions toward which he likely was moving. Tanner carefully integrates the final section of Norris's essay back into conclusions he had reached earlier. Her summative commentary is quite informative regarding the flow of the argument, and judicious and conservative in approach in order to honor the writing of Norris as we have it.

Although this volume offers a range of scholarly responses, the editors did not intend to present the wide spectrum of views held in the church today on the topic of sexuality. We could have attempted a very different list of respondents in an effort to achieve the look of balanced representation in this respect. But, in fact, this would not have been a very genuine and honest strategy for making this material broadly useful. The goal instead was to contribute to the debate by offering to the church this essay for considered reflection. It has a point of view, and it is approached carefully and with respect for those who would disagree. It is, in many respects, a model of how we might proceed as teachers and learners engaged in discourse that matters. One feels in the background of Norris's essay a lesson learned from Plato's dialogue, *Gorgias*: The object of dialogue is not the pursuit of power, in which case rhetorical force is sufficient unto itself. The object is the pursuit of truth, which means that ideally dialogue nurtures community in the mode of its practice.

As coeditor with Kathryn Tanner and Richard Corney, I further wish to express my gratitude for the indispensable role each played. Professor Tanner took a very important lead in conceiving the criteria for selecting respondents, developing a list of respondents, and working with them editorially. It was a major and invaluable labor on

her part. And to Richard Corney we owe a great debt for days and weeks of careful searching through the boxes of paper and electronic files in Norris's intellectual estate, both to locate the most up-to-date copy of this essay (it may seem straightforward but it was not), and to uncover many other unpublished works, some of which we most certainly will see in print at a later time.

I wish to acknowledge and thank Bishop Mark Sisk, who met with the editorial team early in its formation as we reflected on how best to organize and present this volume. His reflections and encouragement got us off to a good start. No issue of the *ATR* reaches the reader without the careful management and guidance of managing editor, Jackie Winter, who also worked with the guest editors from beginning to end. And with this volume in particular she wisely navigated many complex variables. Her energy and organizing strength kept us all smiling and on task. It should not be overlooked that Jackie Winter also is the principal fundraiser for this volume. Because of her efforts, and the contributions from those who responded, this volume will be distributed to every bishop and theological library in the Anglican Communion worldwide. I wish to express a most hearty thanks to the donors who responded to her call and who have made this expanded distribution possible. It is a valuable contribution to the ministry of the *ATR*. Finally, I wish to thank Timothy Sedgwick, President of the Board of the *ATR*, and its Editor in Chief, Ellen Wondra, for their leadership and their wisdom in giving direction to *ATR* publications. Many of you have noticed the effects of their thoughtful guidance, and here no less they have stood behind the process of developing this volume.

In closing, this volume of the *ATR* is offered with two purposes woven together: to honor Richard Norris, one of the great teachers and scholars of the church in his generation, who has much to teach us in the years ahead; and to serve the cause of wider understanding and enhanced reflection on the theology of sexuality, and the ground of moral debate in the church on this topic.

