

A Response from Mark D. Jordan*

The documents—the reports and rejoinders—gathered under the title *Same-Sex Relationships and the Nature of Marriage: A Theological Colloquy* cut across a large number of exegetical, historical, ethical, and scientific topics in relatively few pages. I am asked to comment on them in fewer still. My comment can then only treat generalities. So I will confine myself to the frame that has been put around the reports and rejoinders. As it happens, I suspect that some of the most important lessons to be learned from these documents concern the tacit limits imposed by the framing.

1. To my mind, the most obvious frame of the report is also the most troubling—I mean, the division between the “traditionalists” or “conservatives” and the “liberals.” These are not Christian identities. They are neither rooted in scriptural narratives nor conferred by sacraments. They are drawn instead from the polemical vernacular of contemporary politics. Several consequences follow.

a. An emphatic opposition between two points of view tends to reduce both. The dichotomy makes it seem as if there were only two views, clearly delineated and logically related as contraries. The reduction is particularly notable in the pages by the “traditionalists,” who speak consistently of “*the* liberal argument” or “*the* liberal position.” Those who urge a change in the celebration of marriage share no single argument or position. Believers on both sides of the debate arrive at their views for a host of motives, often mixed, along innumerable routes of prayer, spiritual reading, community life, and disciplined reflection.

b. The political dichotomy has the effect of aligning these texts with large systems of other secular texts. The rhetoric of American “conservative” critique is reproduced verbatim by the authors of the first paper. Consider, for example, both their grand narrative of moral

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decline (with its familiar echoes of pre-millennial dispensationalism) or their tendentious choice of scientific authorities on questions of sexuality (e.g., note 41, p. 35). The dichotomy encourages the substitution of a ready-made platform for fresh theological reflection.

2. The names or tags affixed by the dichotomy are misleading. They suggest that one side in the debate wants to preserve pristine Christian tradition (conceived as singular) while the other side wants to change it. This is true only at the most superficial level. In any larger perspective, the “traditional” position will show itself to be fundamentally modern. It relies on clinical categories, exegetical presuppositions, models of marriage, and valuations of healthy sexuality that are no more than 150 years old.

a. The most notable example of the modernity of this traditionalism is the unexamined use of the category of “homosexuality,” which is a nineteenth-century juridico-clinical category that cannot be imposed retrospectively either on Scripture or on Christian theological traditions. “Homosexuality” is hardly a neutral term. It has specific conceptual contents that can only be parsed in relation to other categories ranged around it. The clusters of terms have changed rapidly and irrationally in the theological English of the last sixty years. For example, when a committee associated with the Church of England’s Moral Welfare Council published its report on the “problem of homosexuality” in 1954, it insisted that the significant category for theological reflection was “inversion,” which, following Havelock Ellis, it defined in contrast with “homosexuality.” To recall this now might seem pedantry, but discontinuities in the history of moral categories are quite important—as D. S. Bailey, the moving force behind that earlier committee, demonstrated in his *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (1955). When contemporary Episcopalians conduct debates around a borrowed moral category that has no exact antecedent in scriptural or traditional texts, they cannot simply cite Scripture or tradition to prove their points about it. For a treatment of male-male erotic desires or genital attractions to be fully traditional (and Christian textual traditions are overwhelmingly about men), it would have to begin with the categories actually used by the traditions—with *peccatum contra naturam*, *peccatum nefandum*, *stuprum masculorum*, *sodomia*, and so on. It would then have to prove—this was Bailey’s whole point—that those categories have significant conceptual continuity with secular coinages of the late nineteenth

century. This is no easy task. When one ignores it, when one begins by adopting the category of homosexuality without critical examination, one can no longer plausibly claim to be traditional.

b. A related discontinuity results from cutting little pieces out of inherited Christian teaching on sex. There are indeed many condemnations in older Christian texts of male-male erotic desire or genital activity. There are also condemnations of many other sexual practices now considered perfectly acceptable—along with denigrations of marriage, elaborate codes of purity and pollution, and lurid depictions of the demonic dangers posed by women. Many genital activities now approved within heterosexual marriage were counted by earlier authors as unnatural and even sodomitic. To pluck out one topic of condemnation while ignoring all those around it is the worst sort of proof-texting.

c. Similar problems of distortion and misrepresentation arise in appeals to “traditional” Christian marriage. The Reformation’s exaltation of marriage against celibacy and its qualified approval of divorce are significant breaks in Western Christian traditions about marriage. The same should be said of the contemporary acceptance in many Episcopal churches of contraception, unrestricted divorce, masturbation, and premarital fornication. Even a frank recommendation of sexual pleasure within marriage cuts against centuries of suspicion about all sexual intercourse after the fall. So what is often lauded as traditional Christian marriage is in fact late-modern, companionate marriage lived according to “liberal” notions of sexual entitlement.

3. In these and other ways, the debate outruns the dichotomy imposed to organize it. The problem is not only with the limits imposed by that framing dichotomy, but with the limits of the report as a genre. These documents show that the debate (which is in fact not just one debate) has by now become both sufficiently complicated and sufficiently vexed to resist useful treatment in any report—or any series of reports and rejoinders. We stand at the end of five or six decades during which many Anglican bodies have reported on the “problem of homosexuality.” If we may still hope that a new “synthesis” will emerge some decades hence, it will not come, I suggest, through the making of more reports. It must come rather from a variety of sustained works that reflect on the whole range of pertinent evidence, including the lives of faithful Christians who live the grace of same-sex marriage.

