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SEXUALITY AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION: INNOVATION AND FIDELITY, ANCIENT AND MODERN

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This essay aims to clarify the debate over same-sex unions by comparing it to the fourth-century conflict concerning the nature of Jesus Christ. Although some suppose that the council of Nicaea reiterated what Christians had always believed, the Nicene theology championed by Athanasius was a dramatic innovation that only won out through protracted struggle. Similarly, despite the widespread assumption that Christian tradition univocally condemns homosexuality, the concept of sexuality is a nineteenth-century invention with no exact analogue in the ancient world. Neither hetero- nor homo- sexuality is addressed directly in Christian tradition; for this reason, the significance of older authorities for the modern debate is necessarily indirect. The dichotomy between progressive and conservative positions is therefore misguided: it is necessary neither to abandon tradition for the sake of progress nor to oppose innovation for the sake of fidelity.

The debate among Christians over same-sex unions often seems intractable. Conservatives claim that Christians have unanimously condemned homosexuality throughout Christian history, and so they conclude that fidelity requires that Christians condemn homosexuality today. Progressives often respond by arguing that this consensus is overruled by the rights of gay people, which we moderns have come to appreciate. Both sides agree that Christian tradition condemns homosexuality; they differ in whether to treat tradition as outmoded artifact or ironclad constraint. Faced with a conflict between the past and the present, conservation and progress, Christians are asked to choose between incompatible perspectives.

I will argue that this alternative rests upon a misunderstanding. Throughout Christian history

issues have arisen that were not resolved by established authorities; under these circumstances, the appeal to tradition cannot be automatic. This point is neatly illustrated by the fourth-century dispute over the nature of Jesus Christ. While some claim that the Council of Nicaea decisively reasserted what Christians had always believed, close examination of the historical record shows that the situation was much messier. Because the question at issue was genuinely new, a wide range of positions could claim the support of tradition, and so consensus was forged gradually, through the slow work of discernment.

My claim is that the dispute over same-sex unions requires the same labor. As with Nicaea, many scholars assume that the significance of tradition is obvious, but in both cases it is ambiguous. As others have shown, the concept of homosexuality is an invention of the nineteenth century; whereas it is often conflated with *sodomia* (from medieval Latin) and *arsenokoitai* (in the Greek New Testament), its meaning is importantly different. Although it is tempting to suppose that ancient authors share our preoccupations, Christian tradition does not address committed same-sex partnerships, whether for or against, and so its relevance to the modern debate is necessarily indirect.

The dichotomy between “progressive” and “conservative” positions is therefore misguided. I argue in light of Nicaea that it is necessary neither to abandon tradition for the sake of progress nor to oppose innovation for the sake of fidelity. I aim to show that Christian history warns against the hasty solutions that characterize the debate over same-sex unions. If I am right that Nicaea and the modern situation are similar in key respects, it is wrong to suppose (as many do) that tradition offers unambiguous answers; instead, following the fourth-century example, tradition offers expansive possibilities for reinterpretation within an unpredictable process of discernment. If we have the courage to revisit old texts with fresh eyes, the significance of tradition will sometimes surprise us.

I. The Case for Circumspection

The shape of the debate

All sides in the debate over same-sex unions generally agree that Christian tradition condemns

homosexuality.¹ The Vatican's 2003 communication on same-sex unions states that "sacred Scripture condemns homosexual acts 'as a serious depravity,'" adding that "this same moral judgment is found in many Christian writers of the first centuries and is unanimously accepted by Catholic Tradition" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2003). Similarly, Stanley Grenz claims that "explicit moral references to [same-sex activity] in the Christian tradition were consistently negative. This suggests that Christian ethicists from the second century to the twentieth forge an unbroken chain" (1998, 80). Those who argue that Christians should affirm same-sex unions likewise concede with surprising frequency that tradition stands against them. Thus, Walter Wink admits that "the Bible quite clearly takes a negative view of homosexuality" before going on to claim that "the issue is precisely whether that biblical judgment is correct" (1979, 1082; compare McNeill 1994, 51 and R. Williams 2004, 14). The way that both sides frame the issue suggests that Christians must choose between fidelity to the past and accommodation with the present.

Oliver O'Donovan is among the most thoughtful advocates of a non-affirming position on same-sex unions, but he too assumes that the traditional teaching is clear. O'Donovan believes that same-sex unions are immoral, but he recognizes that there are many questions in play and that more than two positions are possible. In an essay from 1997 he argues that "our first and last duty in this sphere is to discern the light the Gospel sheds on the gay movement," and he quickly adds: "Let nobody presume to announce in advance what we are going to learn before we come to learn it!" (2004, 24). O'Donovan insists that we should not take for granted that we know exactly what homosexuality is, recommending instead "a self-conscious strategy of exploration" (2004, 25). Nevertheless, despite this circumspection he refers offhand to "the judgment, so strongly supported by Scripture, that in the sexual act performed between persons of the same sex we confront a manifestation of the fallen and sinful character of our humanity" (2004, 32). Although O'Donovan is committed to a debate that operates "in an open theoretical field" (2004, 25), his assumption that Christian tradition opposes homosexuality forecloses consideration of what that tradition actually teaches.

¹ Throughout this essay I use the term "tradition" to refer broadly to recognized authorities; in a Christian context, this includes the Bible as well as non-canonical sources. Because many Christians accord the authority of Scripture a particular weight, in what follows I pay particular attention to biblical texts.

As I describe below, some argue that what O'Donovan calls "uncompromisingly negative references to homosexuality in Scripture" (2004, 28) do not concern homosexuality at all, but the problem is not that O'Donovan has taken a position on the textual debate—it is that he implies that no debate exists.² O'Donovan's *Church in Crisis* (2008), which engages with the controversy, argues that neither side should predetermine the required process of discernment, but by taking the traditional position as unambiguous, he constrains reflection from the start. Because O'Donovan takes for granted that progressives contradict the clear teaching of Scripture, he underestimates the extent to which some see the affirmation of same-sex unions as the best way to be faithful. He complains that by affirming gay partnerships "the North American churches merely acted, in default of a thorough deliberative process of their own, under the force of strong cultural pressure" because "an ill-conceived doctrine of pluralism persuaded them that thinking was unnecessary labor" (2008, 53). O'Donovan insinuates that "they may have suffered an implosion of their powers of practical reason, the result of long habits of irresponsibility" (2008, 53), but there is reason to doubt whether O'Donovan has reckoned with the best arguments for affirming gay unions.³ In any case, his portrayal of progressives might have been more nuanced if he had acknowledged that some progressives take tradition seriously—but interpret it differently.

O'Donovan criticizes the tendency of some to conflate the authority of Scripture with a given interpretation, and it is this commitment to open-ended reflection that makes his approach so appealing. He writes, "We must not, then, in the supposed defense of a 'biblical' ethic, try to close down moral discussions prescriptively, announcing that we already know what the Bible teaches and forbidding further examination" (2008, 79).⁴ Nevertheless, because he takes for granted that Christian tradition is clear in its condemnation of homosexuality, O'Donovan complains that a collection of essays by progressive authors "appears to be in deep denial: denial about the record of the past"

² O'Donovan acknowledges (with weary irony) that some doubt that 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1 refer to homosexuality (2004, 28), but he seems to assume that Romans 1 construes homosexuality as degradation (2008, 66).

³ The only progressive O'Donovan engages at length in this book is Robert Adams; either Mark Jordan or Eugene Rogers might have offered a more challenging interlocutor (for example, Jordan 2005 and Rogers 1999). Both of them engage carefully with Christian Scripture and tradition; neither of them correspond to O'Donovan's caricature of theological liberalism: "The self-validating ethical convictions of modern civilization are the final criterion for judging all else; they are the very image of God that it bears anonymously as its birthright" (2008, 9-10).

⁴ O'Donovan discusses authority in broader context in 1986, 124-27 and 1996, 17-20.

(2008, 5). The irony is that, although he complains that liberalism “treats the moral questions of the age as moral certainties” (2008, 13), O’Donovan prematurely supposes that the significance of tradition is unambiguous. Because his book aims to lay the groundwork for a productive debate, O’Donovan’s failure to acknowledge the extent to which the interpretation of tradition is contested does not simply bolster one side—it precludes honest consideration of progressive attempts to seriously reckon with the demands of fidelity.

History and homosexuality

It is tempting to suppose that the things praised or condemned by Christian tradition are the same things familiar to us today, but this assumption often obscures what the texts have to tell us. Although we have become accustomed to categorizing sexual identities as “homosexual” or “heterosexual” according to whether the object of desire is of the same or the opposite sex, this distinction only emerged in the late nineteenth century. Károly Mária Kertbeny coined the German term *homosexualität* in 1868; it entered English in 1892 with Charles Gilbert Chaddock’s translation of Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (see Beachy 2010). In 1897 the British psychologist Havelock Ellis complained that “homosexual” combined heterogeneous Greek (*homo-*) and Latin (*sexualis*) roots, and in fact there was a host of alternative options. These categories were by no means equivalent: some preferred the term “urning,” which described a person with a male body and a female psyche, while others spoke of the “invert,” a person of one sex who takes on the affective and behavioral patterns of the other sex. Each of these terms categorizes sexual identities in different ways, and each differs from the concepts that came before.⁵

Some cite the medieval censure of sodomy as evidence that Christians have always condemned homosexuality (see Stott 1998, 19), but this is misleading. The Latin term *sodomia* was coined in the eleventh century by Peter Damian; for the medievals it referred neither to same-sex intercourse in general nor to the act of anal penetration in particular (Jordan 1997, 162). On the

⁵ Unlike many biblical scholars, Victor Furnish recognizes that biblical interpretation should acknowledge the novelty of the category “homosexuality,” but imprecision muddies his argument. He writes, “‘Sexuality’ is an abstract concept for which we are indebted to modern psychological investigations and theories. . . . There were no such concepts and no terms for them in the ancient world. It was universally presupposed that everyone was ‘heterosexual’” (1994, 18-19). It is a mistake to suggest that the ancients assumed that everyone was heterosexual: Furnish’s own argument entails that a different set of categories was in play.

contrary, the category denoted any male sexual activity without a procreative aim, which includes most forms of intercourse between a husband and wife. To take one step further back, the term "sodomy" was itself designed to obscure the distance between the Bible and the Middle Ages. In the Genesis story of Sodom, Lot offers his daughters to be ravished by a mob; one might therefore suppose that the sin of Sodom consists in rape, or in the abuse of one's children. References to Sodom elsewhere in Scripture indicate that the sodomitic vice was social in character—Ezekiel explicitly states that "this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (16:49). Against these indications, Damian makes sodomy a category of acts performed with a penis (with a willing partner, or with oneself).

By reading medieval mores back into the Genesis narrative, Damian makes his position seem older than it actually is, and something similar happens with modern attempts to find homosexuality in Scripture. The term "homosexuals" enters the Bible in the 1946 Revised Standard Version as a translation for the terms *malakos* and *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6. Because the two terms are different, combining them in one English word is imprecise, and other twentieth-century translations take different approaches. *Malakos* and *arsenokoitai* are sometimes construed as "self-indulgent" and "sodomites" (*English Jerusalem*, 1985), "homosexual perverts" and "sodomites" (*New American Catholic*, 1970), or "boy prostitutes" and "practicing homosexuals" (*New American Catholic*, 1987). Some translators are evidently keen to find homosexuality in the text of 1 Corinthians, but they cannot agree where to put it, and there is reason to think that their interpretive choices are guided more by modern polemic than by textual analysis.⁶ Because the sodomite and the homosexual are both post-biblical inventions, it is misleading to insert them into the text of Scripture.

In fact, scholars are divided over the meaning of the terms in question. John Boswell suggests that *arsenokoitai* means "active male prostitutes" (1980, 344), but David Wright argues that Syriac and Greek sources suggest that the term refers to homosexuality more broadly (1984). William Peterson complains that Wright neglects the fact that Greek and Latin categories refer to sexual acts whereas the

⁶ Dale Martin comments: "A curious shift takes place in the mid-twentieth century. The translation of *malakos* as 'effeminate' is universally rejected and some term that denotes a particular sexual action or orientation is substituted. . . . The shift in translation resulted not from the findings of historical scholarship but from shifts in sexual ideology" (1996, 124).

modern term “homosexual” names a personal identity; Peterson points out that Wright’s translation is additionally misleading insofar as it includes celibate homosexuals and homosexual women (whereas *arsen-*, the root of *arsenokoitai*, refers to men) (1986, 189). Dale Martin notes that when *arsenokoitai* appears in vice lists (in the Bible and elsewhere) it is typically grouped with vices that concern exploitation rather than specifically sexual sin, while *malakos* refers to a conception of effeminacy that characterizes many modern heterosexuals (1996, 120).⁷ Whichever philological argument one finds most convincing, there is good reason to doubt whether the biblical references to *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* refer to same-sex intercourse as such.⁸

The other New Testament text that might seem to settle the question is Romans 1, but here too there is cause for caution. Paul writes, “Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural. . . . Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error” (1:26–27). Read in light of modern preoccupations, the meaning of this passage might seem clear, and yet the text neither specifies which acts are shameless, nor does it state that the women in question engaged in intercourse with each other. In light of analogous discussions of unnatural intercourse in classical literature, James Miller argues that the first part of the passage simply refers to “non-coital sexual activities which are engaged by heterosexual women” (1995, 10). Richard Hays claims that for Paul homosexuality exemplifies “the unrighteousness of fallen humanity” (1986, 189), but Dale Martin responds that Romans 1 describes the origin of idolatry (rather than the narrative of creation and fall) (1995, 334). If Martin is right that Paul’s aim is to condemn idolatry by appealing to stereotyped prejudices held by Jews about Gentiles, Romans 1 says nothing to imply that same-sex intercourse violates the created order.

Whatever the valence of Paul’s argument here, there is reason to think that what Romans 1 describes is different from modern homosexuality. For Paul’s Roman contemporaries, sexual identities

⁷ Martin explains, “In the ancient world a man could be condemned as effeminate for, among many other things, eating or drinking too much, enjoying gourmet cooking, wearing nice underwear or shoes, wearing much of anything on his head, having long hair, shaving, caring for his skin, wearing cologne or aftershave, dancing too much, laughing too much, or gesticulating too much” (1996, 128).

⁸ Anthony Thiselton claims that “no amount of lexicographical manipulation over *malakoi* can avoid the clear meaning of *arsenokoitai* as the activity of males (*arsên*) who have sexual relations with, sleep with (*koitês*) other males” (2004, 167). However, as Dale Martin points out, “It is highly precarious to try to ascertain the meaning of a word by taking it apart, getting the meanings of its component parts, and then assuming, with no supporting evidence, that the meaning of the longer word is a simple combination of its component parts. To ‘understand’ does not mean to ‘stand under.’ . . . Thus, all definitions of *arsenokoites* that derive its meaning from its components are naive and indefensible” (1996, 119).

were assigned according to a logic of domination: to penetrate was acceptable regardless of whether one was penetrating a woman or another man, while to be penetrated was shameful (for freeborn adult males) because of its association with femininity.⁹ When Paul refers to “shameless” Gentile sexual practices, one could reasonably conclude that he condemns erotic exploitation without drawing any conclusions concerning same-sex intercourse as such.¹⁰ As Martin points out, other ancient authors saw same-sex intercourse as an excessive expression of the same desire that encourages marital coitus; in this light, Martin argues that Paul’s key Greek phrase *para phusin* ought to be read as “beyond nature” rather than as “unnatural” (1995, 343). Because the dominant forms of same-sex eroticism in the ancient world involved the abuse of power, one may reasonably conclude that Romans 1 leaves open the possibility that there might be forms of same-sex intercourse that do not violate appropriate limits.

Because it is possible to reasonably conclude that Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6 refer to inordinate or exploitative acts (rather than to same-sex intercourse as such), it is irresponsible for O’Donovan to take “the biblical references to homosexuality” as a datum that all sides must reckon with (2004, 28). O’Donovan might respond that, even if the term “homosexual” was invented in the modern period, the phenomenon to which the word refers is consistent across times and places. He stipulates that “‘homosexual’ refers simply to the psychosexual patterns of emotion” (in contrast to the cultural movement, which O’Donovan calls “gay”) (2004, 26); on this definition, it might seem unproblematic to find homosexuality in Scripture, for men and women have taken pleasure with members of their own sex since time immemorial. The trouble is that even this apparently neutral definition is marked by its modern context.

Although “the psychosexual patterns of emotion” O’Donovan names are found in different times and places, the association of these patterns with a particular sexual identity is historically specific. As we have seen, whereas homosexuals and heterosexuals are distinguished according to the

⁹ Craig Williams notes that between 200 BCE and 200 CE adult freeborn Roman men “were not encouraged to make any meaningful distinctions between homosexual and heterosexual practices as such. What was most important for a man’s reputation was that he be thought to play the insertive and not the receptive role in penetrative acts. If he played the insertive role, he might do so with either male or female partners, or both, as he pleased” (1999, 247; also see Lieu 2004, 184). As with the Bible, pagan authors are little interested in the sexual experience of women.

¹⁰ Stacy Johnson develops this argument with characteristic lucidity (2009). For a broader discussion of the analogy between Gentiles and homosexuals, see Perry 2010.

object of their desire, *sodomia* concerns the intentionality of ejaculation. Since the medievals were concerned with procreative purpose rather than object choice, the medieval condemnation of sodomy does not directly apply to the modern situation. Likewise, in ancient Rome sexual ethics centered on the distinction between manly virtue and effeminacy, which concerns social status rather than the object of desire. Whereas this system sanctioned the sexual exploitation of subordinates, the modern concept of a homosexual identity allows for committed, consensual same-sex relationships.¹¹ Although scholars are divided over whether Paul condemns coerced intercourse or some broader category of erotic acts, the distance between the modern and ancient contexts calls for caution when discerning the application of these texts to modern questions. Because homosexuality is a modern invention with no exact analogue in the ancient world, fidelity cannot consist in simply repeating the opinions of the past, for the terrain has shifted under our feet.¹²

II. *The Complexity of Tradition*

The Nicene situation

Whereas many commentators on the debate over marriage and sexuality act as if the teaching of Christian tradition is obvious, attending to the historical distance that separates ancient texts from modern questions indicates that the question is complicated. As I have argued, O'Donovan exemplifies the way in which many commentators, whether conservative or progressive, oversimplify the significance of Christian tradition.¹³ Although this error is widespread, it is eminently avoidable: as Christian history shows, Christians have often encountered issues that were not resolved by established authorities. I will focus on the example of the Council of Nicaea, which represents one of the most

¹¹David Halperin may be right: "Homosexuality translates same-sex sexual relations into the register of sameness and mutuality. Homosexual relations no longer necessarily imply an asymmetry of social identities or sexual positions, nor are they inevitably articulated in terms of hierarchies of power, age, gender, or sexual role. . . . Exclusive, lifelong, companionate, romantic, and mutual homosexual love becomes possible for both partners" (2002, 133-34).

¹² Some suppose that the proscription in different times of homosexuality, *sodomia*, and *arsenokoitai* express the same judgment using different concepts, but I have argued that these three concepts are sufficiently different that the judgments at issue are not identical. I do not mean to imply that ancient and modern understandings of desire are entirely discontinuous—after all, social status remains relevant to sexual identities today, and there are analogues between the medieval figure of the sodomite and the modern figure of the homosexual. My point is simply that, because the modern terminology is importantly novel, the relevance of older authorities to the modern debate is necessarily indirect.

¹³ The problem is not limited to intra-Christian debates: Michael Warner oversimplifies the significance of Christian tradition in order to dismiss it altogether (1999, 4-6, 13).

broadly accepted markers of Christian identity—preceding, as it does, the divisions that characterize modern Christendom.¹⁴ It is the first council to bear the title “ecumenical,” gathering bishops from throughout the Christian world, and it gives its name to the creed regularly recited in many churches.¹⁵ Because the issue it treats concerning the nature of Jesus Christ is central to Christian thought, it provides a crucial test case for the way in which Christians think through doctrinal disputes. I will argue that then, as now, it was ambiguous which side had the support of tradition, and so fidelity required the creative reinterpretation of authoritative sources.

The broad outlines of the Nicene controversy are clear. In the early fourth century a crisis erupted that threatened to destabilize the church. An Alexandrian priest named Arius taught that, whereas God the Father is without beginning, the Son came into existence by the Father’s will.¹⁶ Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, preferred to say that the Son was generated from the Father eternally, and so in 321 he excommunicated Arius. Arius was not without supporters, and soon he was vindicated by separate gatherings of bishops in Bithynia and Caesarea. In response, a group of bishops sympathetic to Alexander met in Antioch early in 325 to reassert Alexander’s theology, condemning Arius again (see Pollard 1960). Concerned by this burgeoning conflict, the Emperor Constantine called bishops from throughout the empire to meet in Nicaea in May 325. This gathering condemned Arius once more and produced a doctrinal statement that came to be seen as definitive of orthodoxy.

In one widely-accepted narrative, the council decisively dispatched the Arian heresy by reasserting an orthodox Christology. Writing some time after the fact, Athanasius of Alexandria claims that “the Bishops who all assembled from all parts at the Council of Nicaea, began to hold their ears at these [Arian] statements, and all with one voice condemned this heresy on account of them, and anathematized it, declaring it to be alien and estranged from the faith of the Church” (1971b, 229

¹⁴ Some Anabaptists have raised concerns regarding the emperor’s involvement at the council (see Finger 2004, 61-76). I take it that the example of Nicaea is instructive whether or not one views the council’s conclusions as binding.

¹⁵ The creed used in most churches actually dates from the later Council of Constantinople, but the fact that it is nevertheless called “Nicene” underscores the older council’s continuing authority.

¹⁶ It is important to note that it is hard to tell what Arius actually taught and that Arius himself seems not to have been very important anyway. Athanasius invented “Arianism” for polemical purposes: those who get called “Arian” would not have applied the name to themselves, and they would not have cared what Arius taught (see Gwynn 2007, 234).

[2.13]).¹⁷ On Athanasius's account, the leaders of the worldwide church were unanimous in their horrified rejection of Arianism, and many modern scholars simply take Athanasius at his word. Writing in his own voice, Thomas Torrance reports that "on hearing these [Arian] statements the fathers of Nicaea began to hold their ears, and unanimously acted to exclude the Arian heresy in the most categorical way" (1988, 137). As others do, Torrance credulously accepts Athanasius's assertion that the council simply expressed an existing consensus.

While Athanasius claims that "the holy and veritable heralds of the truth agree together, and do not differ" (1971c, 153 [2.4]), a careful reading of the sources in question demonstrates that there was deep disagreement both before the council and for some time afterward. The creed produced at Nicaea states that the Son is "of one substance with the father," *homoousion to patri*. The key term is a compound of the prefix *homo-*, for "same," and the noun *ousia*, which denotes being, nature, or substance.¹⁸ Over the course of the fourth century the *homoousion* took on a technical theological sense, but its meaning prior to the council was confused and problematic. In the third century a synod held in Antioch condemned Paul of Samosata for teaching that the Son is *homoousion* with the Father; in this context, it seems that the term means "of the same stuff," with materialist connotations (see Athanasius 1971d, 473-74 [3.45]). A second theologian, Sabellius, was condemned for using the term *homoousion* to deny any distinction between the Father and the Son; in his usage, the term signifies total identity (see Hanson 1988, 74). Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus of Lyon associate the term with their Gnostic opponents, who apparently took *homoousion* to mean similarity of nature. The term never appears in Christian Scripture, and prior to Nicaea it was associated with condemned perspectives. In this light, the fact that Arius resisted this innovation seems cautiously conservative.¹⁹

Although Athanasius asserts that his opponents reject the plain sense of Scripture (1971b, 224

¹⁷ The first set of numbers in citations to Athanasius refer to the page number in 1971a. The second set refers to the chapter/part and section number.

¹⁸ Stuart Hall comments, "*Homoousios* means 'same in being', and is therefore ambiguous. 'Same' can mean 'identical', 'one and the same' . . . , or 'exactly like'. . . 'Being' is also ambiguous. We speak of 'a being' as a concrete individual, as an angel is a spiritual being and a child a human being; but we might also say that the angel *has* spiritual being . . . , and the child has a human one" (1992, 133).

¹⁹ Although earlier Christians had asked how the Son relates to the Father, the question of whether they are of one substance was new in the relevant sense: it had not been resolved by established authorities. R. P. C. Hanson comments, "To say that the Son was 'of the substance' of the Father, and that he was 'consubstantial' with him were certainly startling innovations. Nothing comparable to this had been said in any creed or profession of faith before" (1988, 166-67).

[1.3]), Arius's theology may be interpreted as an attempt to do justice to the biblical description of a Jesus who sleeps, weeps, dies, and prays to God, yet who is also the source of salvation. Around 320 Arius writes, "We acknowledge One God, alone Ingenerate, alone Everlasting, alone Unbegun, alone True, alone having Immortality, alone Wise, alone Good, alone Sovereign" (quoted in Athanasius 1971d, 458 [2.16]). As Maurice Wiles notes, the first three of these terms were widely used by earlier theologians, and the remaining five are scriptural (1996, 10). Because the Gospel of John refers to "the only true God, and Jesus Christ" (17:3), there is scriptural justification for distinguishing between Jesus and divinity as such, and so Arius describes the Son as "perfect creature of God, but not as one of the creatures; offspring, but not as one of things begotten" (quoted in Athanasius 1971d, 458 [2.16]). For Arius, the Son is uniquely exalted, subsisting directly through the will of God, whereas created things come into being through the Son. Arius takes pains to distinguish his position from Gnostic, Manichaean, and Sabellian views, which either imply that God can be materially divided or that there is no real distinction between the Father and the Son. He thus strikes a delicate balance between preserving the independence of the Son and his unique intimacy with the Father, and he does so in a manner that was widespread at the time.²⁰

Continuing contests

Athanasius claims that the council of Nicaea asserted what Christians had always believed, but the reality was much messier. There was considerable diversity prior to the council, and the council itself did little to clarify matters. Although Eusebius of Caesarea was among Arius's supporters, he signed onto the creed of Nicaea, but he takes pains to explain to his church that the creed's strange language was not opposed to their understanding of the Trinity. Eusebius emphasizes that "we did not let it pass without inquiry in what sense they introduced 'of the essence of the Father,' and 'one in essence with the Father'" (Eusebius of Caesarea 1971, 75 [5]). Although the term was obviously problematic, Eusebius explains that it simply means that "the Son of God bears no resemblance to the originated

²⁰ Rowan Williams writes, "The statements of Arius and Eusebius about the Son's otherness in *phusis* and *ousia* from the Father are not bold and provocative innovations, but repudiations of a usage which is at best conventional rather than traditional, and at worst deeply damaging to orthodoxy" (1983, 56). For more on the sources of Arius's thought, see Williams 2002, 97-99.

creatures, but that to His Father alone Who begot Him is He in every way assimilated, and that He is not of any other subsistence and essence, but from the Father" (1971, 75-76 [7]). On Eusebius's reading, the *homoousion* simply indicates that the Son is unlike creatures and that he had no source except the Father, but these are statements that Arius himself affirmed. Instead of decisively excluding Arianism, the creed of Nicaea was evidently susceptible to an Arian interpretation.

Nor was the council treated as decisive in its immediate aftermath. Although Arius was condemned at Nicaea, he was quickly readmitted into the church by a synod convened at the Emperor's behest. Athanasius himself was condemned by an Eastern synod in the 330s only to gain the support of the Bishop of Rome in 340. When reconciliation between East and West was attempted around 342 in Sardica, the Easterns objected to the presence of the deposed Athanasius and withdrew from the proceedings. The remaining Westerns deposed their opponents and reinstated their allies, and the Easterns immediately reconvened in Philippopolis to do the same. The chaos continued until the 350s, when a growing number of theologians settled upon a compromise position, which held that the Son was *like* the father (*homoios*, rather than *homoousios*). It was at this point that some turned to Nicaea in order to strengthen their opposition to this development, and it was not until the end of the fourth century that the Cappadocians consolidated pro-Nicene theology by introducing a distinction between the Greek terms *ousia* (as that which is common to the Trinitarian persons) and *hypostasis* (as that which distinguishes them) (see Ayers, 2004, 134-40).

One reason Nicaea was not used as a standard of orthodoxy until well after the fact is that the very idea of a binding creedal definition of Christian doctrine was a later invention (see Chadwick 1972, 135). Lewis Ayres writes, "The idea that the creed would serve as a universal and precise marker of Christian faith was unlikely to have occurred to anyone at Nicaea simply because the idea that any creed might so serve was as yet unheard of" (2004, 85). As Ayres describes, in this period baptismal creeds were used in catechesis and liturgy, but these formulae were not taken to distinguish true from false belief. Creeds continued to proliferate following Nicaea, and no one so much as mentions the council for nearly fifteen years (Hanson 1988, 170). Athanasius himself does not make much of the council until 353, at which point he insists that "he who does not hold with Arius, must needs hold and

intend the decisions of the Council" (1971c, 164 [5.20]). It is plausible to suppose that Athanasius begins to brandish Nicaea at this point because he himself had been condemned by the Sirmium council of 351 (see Ayres 2004, 144). Whatever the reason, this gesture is a dramatic innovation.

As with the modern debate over marriage and sexuality, many commentators flatten the complexity of this history. Thomas Torrance writes that "when the conception of the oneness of being between the incarnate Son and the Father was formed and given explicit expression in the clause *homoousios to Patri*, . . . the Church could not go back upon it, because the evangelical substance of the faith . . . had been secured in its mind and understanding in a permanent way" (1988, 145). In fact, although Athanasius argues after the fact that *homoousion* denotes the essential identity of the Father and the Son, its meaning at the council was far more ambiguous. The term's problematic associations made it suspect to many, and it was open to an Arian reading. Far from representing a decisive blow against heresy, the Nicene *homoousion* was an intentional fudge, sufficiently vague to attract the support of the diverse perspectives represented at the council,²¹ and it was simply one point of reference among others in a strenuous process of discernment that continued throughout the fourth century. Although the rosy lens of retrospection might make the formation of Christian doctrine seem like a straightforward affair, the fourth century was a period of unsettled struggle.

III. The Significance of History

The Athanasian achievement

Much as Athanasius collapses his distance from the authoritative text (of Nicaea), modern commentators frequently assert that Christian tradition univocally condemns homosexuality. In both cases, a careful reading shows that the history at issue is more complicated. Athanasius inveighs against his opponents, "Can we then any more account such men Christians? or what sort of faith have they who stand neither to word nor writing, but alter and change every thing according to the times?" (1971d, 470 [3.38]). However, it is Athanasius who is advocating for change—first by defending Nicaea's

²¹ Ayres comments, "Eusebius' discussion nicely demonstrates the extent to which the promulgation of *homoousios* involved a conscious *lack* of positive definition of the term" (2004, 91).

dangerous innovation, later by developing a more specific meaning for the *homoousion* than it carried at the council itself. Although it might be comforting to suppose that Athanasius simply reasserted what Christians had always believed, his achievement is more interesting and ambiguous. I aim to suggest that, just as Athanasius's contribution was brilliant but contestable, the modern debate likewise requires the creative reinterpretation of traditional authorities.

Whereas the meaning of the *homoousion* was uncertain at Nicaea itself, Athanasius developed a technical meaning for the term that clarified the disputed question concerning the relation between the Father and the Son. In response to the worry that the term denies any real distinction between the Trinitarian persons—or, alternatively, that it implies that God is made of matter—Athanasius takes it as an expression of the intimacy between the Father and the Son, who nonetheless remain distinct. He writes, “If we confess that [the Son] is not a work but the genuine offspring of the Father’s essence, it would follow that He is inseparable from the Father, being connatural, because He is begotten from Him. And being such, good reason He should be called Coessential” (1971d, 475 [3.48]). Although it was not obvious that the claim that the Son is generated from God entails that they are of the same substance, the idea that the persons of the Trinity are essentially united proved to be fruitful, issuing in compelling accounts of the character of salvation (see Tanner 2001, 39 and 2010, 6). Although he claims to express the clear teaching of Christian Scripture and tradition, Athanasian Christology was an imaginative construction that went beyond prior consensus—in fact, this is its strength.

Proverbs 8:22 was a central text in the fourth-century debate: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work.” Because the passage was commonly taken to refer to Jesus Christ, Arian authors justifiably argued that it implies that the second person of the Trinity was created. As Frances Young points out, because Arius was extending the traditional reading using a widely accepted mode of interpretation, “the answer to Arius could not therefore be simply a conservative reversion to a previous exegesis” (1997, 37). Instead, Athanasius ingeniously argues that the text refers to the incarnation rather than to Christ’s nature as such (1971c, 158-9, [3.14]). Athanasius thus distinguishes between statements that refer to the being of the second person of the Trinity and those that describe the Son as incarnate, but this distinction is not present in the text of Proverbs, nor does the text require

a Christological reading—after all, before the first century CE it would not have been read in that way. From Athanasius’s perspective, this is no objection, for on his view the meaning of Scripture is multivalent.

Against the background of Christian history, modern exegesis seems strangely constrained. Derek Sherwin Bailey gives voice to the widespread assumption that “St. Paul’s words can only be understood in the sense which he himself would have attached to them” (1975, 38; see Scroggs 1983, 127–28 and Furnish 1994, 24). Both progressives and conservatives generally suppose that the meaning of Romans 1 (for instance) is determined by what Paul was thinking while he was writing, which reinforces the view that we must either repeat Paul’s prejudices or reject the texts in question. In contrast, all sides in the fourth-century debate agreed that the authority of Scripture lies in the text itself rather than in the psychology of its human authors. Although inquiring into Paul’s interior life may be necessary to address strictly historical questions, early Christian interpreters did not treat Paul’s opinions as decisive.²² Whereas modern scholars often assume that the text’s significance is constrained by historical-critical scruples, others have held that it is the Bible itself (rather than the person of Paul) that authoritatively illuminates what Christians should believe and do. As Athanasius demonstrates, when read in this way, the text itself is capacious enough to allow interpretations that would have been inconceivable to the authors themselves.

Expansive possibilities

If fidelity were constrained by the opinions of biblical authors, Christians would be forced to reject the doctrine of the Trinity and to accept the legitimacy of slavery. After all, in Exodus 20 God tacitly sanctions slavery in commandments three and ten, and the New Testament repeatedly enjoins slaves to obey their masters.²³ Although Christian tradition provides stronger support for the defense of slavery than for the condemnation of same-sex unions, few commentators claim that Christians must

²² As David Steinmetz describes, ancient and medieval Christian authors would have thought it odd to limit the meaning of a text according to the sensibilities of its human author, for they believed that the primary author of Scripture is God (1980, 31).

²³ John Noonan writes, “St. Paul told slaves to obey their masters. St. Augustine accepted the institution of slavery as a consequence of sin. St. Gregory the Great purchased slaves. St. Thomas Aquinas defended slavery as a useful addition to natural law. St. Pedro Claver commissioned the purchase of slaves. St. Alfonso de’Liguori owned a personal slave” (2005, 208). See Ephesians 6, Titus 2, Colossians 3, 1 Peter 2, etc.

share Paul's apparent conviction that a person may legitimately own another person. Nor does the fact that slavery is never condemned in Scripture prohibit Christians from arguing that the implicit momentum of the biblical texts requires that slavery be rejected. Louis Crompton argues that "nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations" (2006, 114), but this does entail that the first chapter of Romans condemns homosexuality. As I argued above, even by the standards of historical-critical scholarship there is reason to doubt whether Paul condemns same-sex intercourse as such, but the point is broader: Paul's own opinions do not determine what the text of Romans means, for Christian doctrine develops by attending to what is implicit in the text of Scripture. For Athanasius, as for modern abolitionists, such silences allow Christian tradition to speak unexpectedly to new situations, for discernment works by exploring interpretive possibilities in relation to a world that is constantly changing.

The example of Nicaea suggests that, if tradition is to speak to new situations, we must resist premature closure. To take one example, the clearest reference to same-sex intercourse in the Old Testament comes in Leviticus, which states that "you shall not lie with a male as with a woman" (18:22). Victor Furnish claims that "there is no question that the Levitical rule in 18:22 and 20:13 explicitly and unequivocally condemns male same-sex intercourse" (1979, 60), but this conclusion rests upon suppositions that are external to the text itself. The key phrase (*miskebe 'issa*, "the lying down of a woman") is an obscure circumlocution (see Olyan 1994), and the most common rendering in English ("as with a woman") is similarly oblique. Taken literally, the text only condemns intercourse that treats a man like a woman; because the text says nothing against a man lying with a man *as with a man*, it need not be taken to proscribe all intercourse between men. Some scholars argue that Leviticus proscribes any form of erotic activity involving two men (Wright 1989, 292) while others claim that that the texts refer only to the anal penetration of a free adult Israelite (Walsh 2001, 209). Because both readings are possible, we ought to acknowledge that the texts' significance for the modern debate is not obvious. To preclude interpretive possibilities that the text itself leaves open is a failure of discernment.

Whereas many moderns conclude that Leviticus is clearer than it really is, ancient Christian practice suggests that the significance of authoritative texts is expansive and unpredictable. It is

therefore odd that many expect Christian tradition to provide a direct and unambiguous answer to the tangle of questions raised by the debate over same-sex unions. O'Donovan writes, "There is the interpretive task of discerning *what the text means*, on the one hand; and there is the conscientious task of discerning *ourselves and our position as agents in relation to the text*, on the other" (2008, 58). Unlike some of his peers, O'Donovan recognizes that both the text of Scripture and the modern situation require interpretation, and yet he continues: "The most mysterious question anyone has to face is not, *what does Scripture mean?* but, *what does the situation I am facing mean?*" (2008, 59). Although O'Donovan recognizes that both questions require real work, I have argued that his assumption that the Bible condemns homosexuality imposes a false clarity upon the texts in question, which in turn deforms his well-intentioned attempt to reflect responsibly upon the issues at stake. The past and the present both call for discernment, and we should beware the temptation to assume that the meaning of either is obvious.²⁴

It is difficult to appreciate the significance of history, for we continually forget the extent to which we are contingent. Because we have come to categorize sexual identities according to the (homosexual or heterosexual) object of desire, it is easy to suppose that is simply how sexuality works, and many scholars make this mistake. However, as we have seen, because ancient Romans assigned sexual identities in terms of social status while medieval Europeans were especially concerned with procreative intent, there is no such thing as a traditional position on the subject of homosexuality, for the phenomenon is genuinely new. As it happens, few are inclined to revive the rhetorical figure of the sodomite, and fewer still demand that married couples observe the medieval prohibition against intercourse during menstruation, pregnancy, nursing, Sundays, Fridays, saints' days, Lent, and Advent.²⁵ The claim of twenty-first century conservatives to preserve the past thus masks profound shifts in

²⁴ Timothy Bradshaw writes with apparent bitterness, "Detailed exegesis of the text and context has been forced on the Church by radical revisionist readings; only careful painstaking scholarship even on single words has prevented wish-fulfillment glossing the core ethical treatise in the New Testament" (2004, 228n30). My argument suggests that Bradshaw's assumption that Scripture stands self-evidently on his side is itself an example of wish fulfillment. If only Bradshaw's Church were committed to careful exegesis even without disagreement.

²⁵ Merry Weisner-Hanks comments that "this left about fifty days a year when a married couple could legitimately have sexual intercourse, and even this was hemmed in by restrictions as to position (prone, man on top), time of day (night only), and proper dress (at least partially clothed)" (2000, 42). Although it does not settle the question, this suggests that the modern proponents of natural law arguments against same-sex unions are distant from the medievals they might seem to resemble.

thought.²⁶ Similarly, where progressives often suppose that their affirmation of same-sex unions contradicts traditional teaching, this is because they superimpose present-day preoccupations upon the past. Modern commentators are therefore wrong to assume that the debate over same-sex unions requires that we choose between recapitulating the past and accommodating the present. On the contrary, the example of Nicaea suggests that Christian tradition is by its nature open to unexpected development through imaginative reinterpretation.

IV. The Work of Discernment

The example of Nicaea suggests that in disputes over doctrine Christians should not expect tradition to directly resolve new questions, nor are they required to repeat the prejudices and opinions of their forebears. Fidelity cannot entail simply repeating the past, for the world is continually changing, and we are carried with it. Nor can we simply leap beyond the past into the future; although we can try, the past unpredictably persists within us. For this reason, the dichotomy between “conservative” and “progressive” perspectives masks the fact that all sides are engaged in the same labor of interpretation. This modest observation does not decide the issue; on the terms of my argument, affirming and non-affirming positions on same-sex unions both remain possible. Nevertheless, my argument entails that reasonable people may disagree over the issues at stake, and it rules out the hasty solutions attempted by both sides. Because premature certainty is evidently tempting, I have argued that we must be willing to reconsider the significance of tradition, even when it seems obvious. By resisting premature closure, discernment opens a process of interpretation that attends to the expansive possibilities latent in authoritative texts.

Although the work of discernment is never done, its continual striving has a particular shape.²⁷

Athanasius judged that affirming that the Son is *homoousion* with the Father was the best way to do

²⁶ Mark Jordan writes, “Many of the rhetorical devices now deployed in religious polemic against homosexuality were used against inversion a hundred years ago—but they were then also applied to masturbation, nocturnal emissions, and a host of other sexual activities now counted innocent” (2011, 26). He observes elsewhere that “the staunchest advocates of ‘traditional’ Christian marriage typically defend a notion not more than 150 years old” (2005, 141).

²⁷ In my account, discernment is an eschatological concept, an unrealized ideal that nonetheless guides and regulates action here and now. Which is to say, in theological terms: discernment depends upon grace and grants no quarter to self-righteous certainty.

justice to a range of texts that included the gospel narratives, epistles and apocalyptic, and the implicit echoes of Incarnation in the Old Testament. In relation to slavery, Christians came to believe that the command to love thy neighbor implied that one should not reduce a person to property. In neither case was this conclusion obvious; both developments prioritized certain texts above others. Whereas Athanasius reads Proverbs 8:22 in light of Hebrews 1:3—"He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being"—his Arian opponents could just as well read from the other direction. (If one begins from the conviction, gleaned from Proverbs 8, that the Son was created, Hebrews 1 provides no support to the *homoousion*: after all, the imprint of being differs from the being itself, and a reflection differs from its original.) Because postbiblical authorities were likewise conflicted,²⁸ it was necessary to discern which approach made better sense of the entire network of texts in question, of the practices of Christian communities, and of the experience of life in the world.

As in the aftermath of Nicaea, all sides in the debate over same-sex unions may claim the support of tradition; they differ over which aspects of the tradition govern the interpretation of others. If one emphasizes those texts that portray marriage as an ascetic practice by which God sanctifies the parties, it would seem both foolish and cruel to exclude gays from this means of grace (see Rogers 1999, 71). If, on the contrary, one begins from those texts that express a suspicion of sexual pleasure, it might seem that intercourse is only legitimated by the possibility of procreation, perhaps to the exclusion of same-sex couples.²⁹ Because both readings are possible, it is impossible to choose between them without considering the texts in broader context. For that reason, appeals to tradition cannot foreclose the evidence of experience; on the contrary, they require us to reflect upon what the actual practice of life-in-relationship has to tell us.

Traditions sometimes seem ready-made and monolithic, but they are not given in advance: fidelity is forged by discerning *in media res* which sources speak most effectively to a new situation and

²⁸ Hanson comments, "On the central subject of the dispute, how divine is Jesus Christ, there was in the year 318 no universally recognized orthodox answer . . . Origen had given one answer to the question at issue, Tertullian another" (1989, 143-44).

²⁹ Along these lines, Robert George aims to defend to "the historic definition of marriage" over and against "the revisionist conception" (George, Girgis, and Anderson 2010, 249). Insofar as my argument suggests that this alternative is misleading, it is relevant beyond a specifically Christian context: whereas Justice Samuel Alito of the U.S. Supreme court asserts that "it is beyond dispute that the right to same-sex marriage is not deeply rooted in this Nation's history and tradition" (See *United States v. Windsor*, 570 U. S.[2013]), I have argued that claims of this kind misunderstand how traditions actually function. The legal and theological debates over marriage both hinge upon whether established traditions actually *require* the affirmation of same-sex marriage, as some claim they do. Contra Alito, this question is eminently contestable.

how they are to be read (see Tanner 2003).³⁰ Our interpretation of the text and our understanding of the world might both require adjustment, but the example of Nicaea suggests that there is no way to circumvent the work of continually discerning each in relation to the other.

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³⁰ After all, this is what my own reading of Nicaea has done. I have argued that Athanasius's interpretive practice has advantages over dominant modern approaches, but his vicious misrepresentation of his opponents is nevertheless problematic. On one report, "[Athanasius] carried off a bishop of the Lower Country and shut him in the Meat Market, and a priest of the same region he shut in the lock-up, and a deacon in the principal prison . . . and . . . he caused seven bishops to leave the country" (quoted in Bell 1924 ; see Gwynn 2012, 36). Even an authority like Athanasius requires discerning retrieval.

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