

Sexuality and the Image of God.

Peter Sedgwick

Introduction

During the last few years there has been debate across the churches about whether it is possible to offer same sex blessings, or marriages, by the church. Much has been made of the question as to whether it is inherent in our nature that men and women can only form relationships between the sexes, and not among them, in ways that allow for sexual expression or marriage. It has been argued, most recently by the report from the Church of England Faith and Order Commission in 2013, that sexual differentiation is built into the structure of creation, so that there was what the report calls a structure of intelligibility in creation which exhibits God's faithfulness, and which is capable of being appreciated by everyone. It speaks of this in inverted commas as a 'natural law.' Such differentiation would only allow for marriage between men and women.¹ This report draws on the theology of Karl Barth, but it is also worth noting that the Roman Catholic Church has developed a 'theology of the body' in recent years.

This paper puts a different position. It sees the nature of the image of the God in relationships, but the essence of those relationships is that they are free, responsive to God and to each other, and Christ like. That means that sexual differentiation need not have the central importance that it has come to have. That does not mean that same sex blessings or marriage need be the way forward. That would depend on many factors, but the argument of this paper is that they are not ruled out by the nature of God's creation. This paper sets out the nature of the image of God as a relational concept, and then looks at the opposition of Barth and some Catholic theologians to same sex relationships. It then sketches out a possible alternative way forward.

Rethinking the Image of God

Human existence is made in the image of the Trinitarian God, with the image having two dimensions, one 'vertical' in relationship and one 'horizontal'.² The vertical one refers to the

¹ Church of England Faith and Order Commission *Men and Women in Marriage* (London: GS Misc 1046 Church House Publishing 2013), paras 9 ('a structure of intelligibility'), 11 (sexual differentiation'), and 13 (the centrality of marriage between men and women').

² This passage follows the argument in Al McFadyen *The Call to Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

constitution of human beings in relationship to God, while the other sees human beings as fundamentally social beings. The Biblical theme of creation concerns the relationship between God and those whom God has made. Relationships are essentially of two sorts. On the one hand, things, and animals, are what they are. The second sort of relationship is one marked by freedom, responsiveness and dialogue. Even in the first sort, there is of course also in everything that is created a certain contingency, spontaneity and development that is also a feature of their lives: ecosystems evolve, animals change, and relationships of great sensitivity are developed. The sharp distinction between human beings and animals has been invalidated by the study of social evolution. Nevertheless, the biblical account of creation sees the relationship between God and human beings as personal. A personal relationship is defined by an encounter between those who are different, have some independence in the relationship, and therefore can meet each other not largely on the basis of predetermined attributes, instincts and physiology (though these cannot be set aside) but on the basis of freedom. Such a relationship means that actions are characterized by call and response, gift of one's being or withholding of it, and a dialogue.

The alternative to this is a view of relationships which are determined by the factors which make up our existence; in such a way that agency is no longer held accountable. The language of responsibility, obligation and blame becomes redundant. This philosophical position, typical of some modern moral philosophy, is not the understanding of the Bible. The Hebrew Scriptures, especially in the Psalms, portray human existence as part of a covenant people. The covenant is with the Creator, who is Lord of history, the saviour and redeemer. God is spoken of in the Jewish scriptures as Yahweh. Within that covenant people there is also a place for individual response, and the question of personal responsibility recurs throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The existence of a human being is one that is marked by address and response, with the address being external. It is a dialogue. Furthermore, it is the nature of God's being that God acts in love. Love requires autonomy and free response, but because this is a relationship created by God, and not simply a relationship between two human beings, God creates the very possibility of freedom, and dialogue. God therefore calls and creates in one action, in which the calling is itself creative. The language of the image of God in humanity is used to express theologically that human beings are called to be God's partner in creation, in a way unlike any other creature. That should not mean that creation is seen entirely as being there for the benefit of human beings, for animals also have a place within the creation. Nevertheless there is a unique status for humanity in creation, as Psalm 8 expresses. The image of God in human beings does not merely reflect the partnership with

God: the partnership is the divine image, and because it is a partnership, it can never be entirely lost, or there would be no possibility of further relationship with God. The image can be corrupted, but that very corruption is grounded in the power of God to allow freedom to humanity.

Freedom is not the random possibility of alternative courses of action. God's freedom is not merely a gift, in the sense that it need not have happened, was done graciously, and without coercion. It is also a gift to become what God calls that person to be. God both 'lets be' the human creature, but also empowers humanity to become God's partner, and so to fulfil what humanity was called to be. Deep within each person, and within humanity as a whole, is a structure of freedom, of responsibility, and of potential response. It is the same as when a mother gives birth to a child, knowing that the main gift the parents can give to the child is what it will become, and choose to be. The image of God in human beings is therefore one of empowerment, love, grace and a calling into response. The true form of human response to this initiative of divine love and grace is one of thanksgiving and openness to God's initiative. As human beings use their freedom and creativity to respond to God their life is undistorted. As they turn in on themselves, they become dependent on their own power. However, human beings oscillate between grateful response to grace, and rejection of God's grace. Christians believe that God restored the wounded relationship by a further gift of God's self in Christ, and so the image of God could be called the image of Christ. Yet again this initiative by God respects the way in which human beings may respond, including the possibility of rejection. But where there is true response, God establishes human freedom, and humanity acknowledges the freedom of God as Lord. The image is therefore inherently dynamic: God creates humanity in freedom, and for freedom, and humanity in turn reciprocates God's love with gratitude and praise, letting God be God, so opening up new possibilities for God's action towards us, in an endless cycle of call and response. The image of God is not therefore a possession, such as reason, or any other attribute of humanity. It is not even what might distinguish humanity from the rest of the animal creation, difficult and sensitive though such a process might be to establish, such as language, rationality, or reflexivity. The image is, as McFadyen says, 'a way of being in relation which is made possible only because we have been addressed in a way which intends our free response.'³ God as I calls us as thou. We in turn are called to become I's, to become morally and spiritually self-aware creatures

³ McFadyen p.22

Nevertheless the uniqueness of personal identity is not the image. The image is the way of being which establishes the identity.

The Specific Content of the Image of God

The issue however is what content fills the nature of this unique personal identity. What are the components of our subjectivity which this on going and ever present communication with God establishes within us? There are formal components, such as autonomy, the capacity for response, and communication. Are there however material aspects of that subjectivity which God's call creates in us? In part, of course, God calls us both directly (the experience of vocation would be one such example) and through our interaction with others. Aquinas is clear that there are both natural and supernatural ends of human life, but the supernatural end cannot be the subject of knowledge for human beings, since it consists in direct union with God who is inaccessible to our conceptual knowledge. We can know the moral content of the life of grace by looking at the lives of those filled with grace, and interpreting such lives of holiness by interpreting them by natural moral wisdom.⁴ Even the experience of reflecting on one's life, and believing that God is calling one to an action, involves the exercise of practical reason. We cannot know directly the beatific vision of union with God.

We learn then to be subjects in interaction with God and other human beings, who communicate with us in ways that enable us to read, more or less well, their intentions towards us. The nature of our humanity in relationship to God is that we act as God's agent in creation. As God's agent, we embody what it means to be God's presence in the world which God holds in being eternally, as the object of his love. There would seem to be three aspects of the idea of agency, or representative, in terms of the image of God. First, we act as embodied persons in relationship to others. Certainly the Genesis story of the creation of man and woman shows the nature of this relationship, but it need not be binitarian, in the way Adam and Eve relate one to another. Rather this is a theology of communion, which is part of the divine intention for humanity. Nor is the rest of creation to be ignored, as though anthropomorphism was all that had to be said about creation. The Genesis story shows how God brings the non human creation into the covenant.⁵ Nevertheless, humanity has a particular relationship to God, and the gift of reason is one way in which a distinction is made

4 Jean Porter *The Recovery of Virtue* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster, 1990) p.66

5 Colin Gunton 'Trinity, Anthropology and Ontology: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the Imago Dei' in (Eds) C Schwobel and C Gunton *Persons Divine and Human* (Edinburgh, T and T Clark, 1991), p.58

between humanity and the rest of creation. While the gift of reason, and consciousness, is a divine gift to humanity, the image is not an internal attribute within human beings, on the basis of which someone may be said to be 'made in God's image.' Rather, the above account sees the image as relational and dynamic, instead of a property of an individual substance, such as the exercise of reason.

Secondly, agency is about stewardship, and taking responsibility for the care of creation which God has entrusted to our care. This is a prominent theme in modern theology, in which we live out the idea of dominion as that of preservation and nurture, rather than in terms of power. This is not a role that should lead to domination, but rather in following Christ who is the true image of God the idea of sovereignty is transformed. Psalm 8, which speaks of dominion, must be read in the light of Christ's expression of God's love. We are called to be transformed into the image of God in Christ, as in 1 Corinthians 15:45.

Thirdly, there is our destiny, which is expressed not simply in terms of dominion over creation, but in terms of a deepening fellowship with God. This understanding is found first in Genesis, where Gen 17 speaks of fellowship between Abraham's posterity and God. The covenant is about this relationship, where God says to Abraham that he will be their God. This is then extended by the Jewish wisdom tradition to the whole of humanity, where humanity participates in the divine glory, as Adam did before the Fall (Wisdom 2. 23-4). Participation in God is possible because humanity was endowed with wisdom at creation (Wisdom 9:2). The incarnation of Jesus is a fulfilment of this destiny, which will be finally completed at the end of history.⁶

Sexual Differentiation and the Doctrine of the Image of God.

How far does the idea of being in relationship presuppose the fundamental reality of sexual differentiation, as an intrinsic part of God's good creation? Gender differentiation refers to the social or cultural differences between men and women that can be constructed in light of the biological differences between male and female. Certain roles can be assigned in marriage as masculine or feminine, but that is not the same as whether the reality of the two sexes actually matters theologically. Sexual differentiation is about the biological differences between male and female. Genesis shows the creation of humanity as male and female. On the one hand, there is the relationship of men and women. In the Jahwist account in Genesis,

⁶ Both the above paragraphs follow the argument in W Pannenberg *Systematic Theology* Volume II, (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, ET 1994) , p231.

humanity is considered incomplete before the creation of Eve.⁷ The issue however is whether this is seen as an encounter between two individuals, who enter into communion together, and with God, or on the basis of their strict sexual differentiation. There has been a great theological debate about this in recent decades. Thus, from the 1950s onwards, theologians such as Karl Barth and Pope John Paul II take as axiomatic that part of the intrinsic value of the created order is its structuring along lines of sexual differentiation.⁸ However much contemporary western culture has produced a much more fluid account of sexual differentiation and the relationships of human beings, nevertheless both what might broadly be called Barthian theology and contemporary Catholic theology resist these cultural developments strongly. Churches in Britain have also had to confront the introduction of same sex marriage and the Act allowing this has now passed the Westminster Parliament. The recent Church of England report entitled *Men and Women in Marriage* is opposed to this development. It echoes this theological debate in its understanding of creation.⁹ Paragraph 11 relates the cultural, intellectual and spiritual aspects of our humanity as created by God to this fact of sexual differentiation:

The vocation of being human in all its dimensions, social, cultural, intellectual and spiritual, rests on the distinctive form of nature we humans are given. We share with many animal species the sexual differentiation of male and female, serving the tasks of reproduction and the nurture of children, but we do more than share it; we build on it to enhance the bond between the sexes culturally.

Paragraph 29 picks up the theme of freedom and creativity which are an integral feature of the image of God in humanity, but one again relates this freedom to the limits set by the intrinsic order of creation:

In God's image we bring spiritual creativity to our natural endowment without denying or overthrowing it. As male and female we have a foundation for growth, cultural development, moral responsibility, intellectual and practical fulfilment, and for the end to which God summons us individually and together, worship and fellowship with himself.

7 McFadyen p.32

8 Christopher C Roberts *Creation and Covenant The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 2007) is the best recent survey of the debate. The references to Barth in subsequent paragraphs are from his chapter on Barth.

9 Church of England Faith and Order Commission *Men and Women in Marriage* (London: GS Misc 1046 Church House Publishing, 2013).

The echoes of Karl Barth's theology in this document are very clear. Barth sees God creating for the sake of relationship, desiring a partner for God's self. "By the divine likeness of man in Genesis 1:27 there is understood the fact that God created them male and female, corresponding to the fact that God exists in relationship and not in isolation."¹⁰ Barth likewise does not locate the image of God in humanity's intellectual and moral capabilities, but rather in the intrinsic reality of creation by God, with humanity's relationship and differentiation.¹¹ Why is sexual differentiation so important for Barth in his account of the Image of God? It is not because of procreation or the family that the full significance of sexual differentiation can be accounted for. Barth's argument is subtle, and worth responding to carefully. God makes a covenant of grace with humanity. The covenant has both an inner reality, and also an embodied, creaturely, basis. This external reality moves towards grace by God's love in a teleological manner, or in more simple language the covenant has a purposeful direction. Out of this come a series of events: the meeting of men and women, their friendship, partnership and marriage, having children (procreation) and the upbringing of families. Barth argues three points about sexual difference: it is absolutely given by God; there is revealed freedom; and therefore in this givenness and freedom is what Barth calls "the divine likeness."¹² Equally Barth resists any move from sexual differentiation to gender differentiation. He denies the validity of descriptions about men and women as having particular roles, psychologies or attributes. There is sexual differentiation, which results in the structures of social life, such as marriage, and also the reality of sexual hierarchy. Beyond that "what distinguishes man from woman and woman from man even in this relationship of super- and subordination is more easily discovered, perceived, respected and valued in the encounter between them than it is defined."¹³

Barth's argument is therefore three fold. First, sexual differentiation is an integral part of the image of God, in the relationship of men and women with each other and with God, and as such must be respected. Secondly, that creaturely reality is part of the covenant of grace in which God calls, or summons, individuals by his love towards his grace. That calling does not simply happen 'inwardly', or only in human subjectivity, whether mind, emotion or will. The divine calling, which is the image of God in humanity, has a physically embodied reality,

10 Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics (henceforth CD)* III/4, (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1961) , p. 117

11 CD III/ 1, p.185

12 CD III/1 p.195

13 CD, III/2, p.187

of humanity created as male or female. As such, both men and women relate in their own ways to God, but also to each other. Thirdly, that reality expresses itself in relationships between men and women of subordination or super-ordination, and so also in marriage, but it is a mistake to extrapolate from these two previous theological claims any statements about knowledge of gender roles or sexual psychology. Nevertheless there are such differences “this distinction and connexion. He has lived in no other way in time, and he can live in no other way in eternity. This is something which he cannot lose.”¹⁴ For Barth, the implications of this theology are clear. Men do have a role in human relationships which is different from women, and which implies a priority over women. Equally, homosexuality is always immoral, and against God’s command. It cannot be justified, because of how God has made the nature of creation. For Barth same sex relationships are a rebellion against God’s rule, denying God’s clear command to rejoice in the encounter between male and female, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh (Genesis 2:23).¹⁵

Barth has set the terms of the debate for the next half century on the doctrine of what it means to be human, and made in God’s image, and it is reasonable to expect that his influence will continue. (It should also be noted that those such as Pannenberg have put far more emphasis on the destiny of human beings in history as the shape of the image of God than Barth did. While a very significant debate, it is not directly relevant to this paper.) There have been two responses to Barth. On the one hand, the nuptial theology school in the Roman Catholic Church also took up the significance of sexual difference for the image of God. On the other hand, those who follow Barth in seeing the image of God in human beings as relational and dynamic nevertheless do not wish to follow him in drawing attention to the theological distinctiveness of male and female for our understanding of the image of God. The paper sets out these responses below.

The Roman Catholic Theology of Sexual Differentiation

The Roman Catholic debate is described ¹⁶ as an ‘innovative theology of gender difference’, and began with the weekly addresses given by Pope John Paul II, published in 1984 as *The Theology of the Body*.¹⁷ Later development of this is the study *The Nuptial Mystery* by the influential Cardinal of Milan, previously Cardinal of Venice, Angelo Scola, who was for

14 CD, III/2, p.296

15 CD III/2, p.285

16 Fergus Kerr ‘Catholic Theology’ *Expository Times (ET)*, 122 (8) pp 365-73, 2011. See also Fergus Kerr *Twentieth Century Catholic Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp 176-9, on ‘nuptiality.’

many years a professional theologian close to John Paul II.¹⁸ This theology weaves together Genesis 1: 27 and Ephesians 5. Kerr comments in his article:

Spousal love becomes the principal analogate of every kind of relationship. Whereas in classical theology, including Aquinas, we are said to be created in the image of God because of our rationality, the essential datum for John Paul II is sexual difference – ‘male and female he created them’.¹⁹

The gender difference is related to Trinitarian, Christological and ecclesiological understandings, so Scola can speak of the hypostatic union of humanity and divinity in Christ as a spousal union of heaven and earth. Likewise the consecration of the Eucharistic elements as a gift of Jesus own self to receptive communicants (bridegroom as Jesus/ church as bride) is analogous to the conjugal union of husband and wife in sexual intercourse. Barth used the imagery of the Song of Songs in his writings to illustrate sexual difference, but Scola and John Paul II make the analogy of spousal intercourse the paradigm for theology. To quote Fergus Kerr again:

The narrative of salvation history, we might say, runs from the original couple in the garden of Eden to the descent of the holy city, ‘coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband’ (Rev 21:2) – via the Song of Songs, which becomes the canon within the canon, so to speak.²⁰

Unlike Barth, Catholic nuptial theology does make claims about gender roles as well as sexual differentiation, and also extends nuptial theology to the idea of consecrated virginity, with Christ as the bridegroom, using Mariology that unites virginity and motherhood. Some women are called to be mothers, others virgins, but both in their spousal union (one with their husband, the other with Christ) illustrate the divine image as dynamic, relational and having sexual difference as fundamental. It also goes without saying that the close union of procreation and sexual difference for Scola makes contraception something to be rejected. The task of the church is to witness against the loss of sexual difference, including androgyny. Androgyny has two effects. First, it denies femininity and masculinity, but

17 Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books, 1997). Christopher West, *The Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II's 'Gospel of the Body'* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books, 2003).

18 Angelo Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery* (Grand Rapids Michigan/Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2005).

19 Kerr ET p. 369.

20 Kerr ET p.369

secondly by making rationality the touch stone of our humanity, we lose touch with our emotions and become beings that split mind and body. Scola, like Barth, rejects homosexuality. For Scola, as for other Catholic theologians, it is a denial of the divine image. He also attacks contemporary English theologians for attempting to justify homosexuality. John Paul II sought an embodied theology. He denied that Genesis 2 described the creation of man as male who was without a woman. Man for John Paul II was undifferentiated sexually, and so the loneliness mentioned in Genesis 2:18 refers to man's awareness that he lacked embodiment. Consciousness is always consciousness of the body, as well as consciousness of self-determination and agency.²¹ Hence John Paul II rethought the doctrine of the image of God, reframing it in terms of relationships, but also of spousal communion.

The Image of God and same sex relationships

What criticism can be made of this emphasis on sexual differentiation? Some theologians deny that the distinction between male and female carries with it either the implications which Barth or the Roman Catholic theology studied above claim. McFadyen argues that "the biblical creation narratives closely relate human existence as male and female and God's image without equating them."²² The relationship is what matters in the image of God, and not either sexual differentiation, or sexuality. Neither heterosexual relations, nor monogamous marriage as the form of enduring dialogical commitment, constitute the image. Marriage is closely related to the paradigmatic form of humanity at creation, but they are not the same. The image of God is the result of what could be called 'a created primal event', in which God calls humanity, and men and women respond, both to God and to each other, as members of humanity. Such a response includes both differentiation and sexuality, as part of material corporeality: the sheer physical embodiment in which love is shown by a physical smile, and bodily gestures, are the warp and woof of the world God has made. We are not disembodied beings. However it is one thing to argue that physical being is important, and that human beings are distinguished by their sexuality, male, female, and a small number of those to whom these categories do not apply, such as the transsexual. It is another thing to let this distinguishing aspect of our created humanity determine what it means to be made in God's image.

21 Kerr, *Twentieth Century Theologians*, p.178, quoting John Paul II, p.25

22 McFadyen p.37

It is also the case that procreation is certainly a blessing for humanity as a species, since it ensures the continuation of the species, and therefore the continuation of the image of God in time as well as in space. Neither procreation, sexual intercourse nor marriage are exclusive for human nature: those for whom these relationships do not apply are not less human, nor subordinate to those who do engage in them. It is not merely the infirm, impotent, and those with same – sex orientation that are in question here. There are also those who are celibate and who witness by their lives to the call of God. Marriage and family is equally a blessing for humanity, since existence as parent and child show how relationships between people exist in a unique way through time. Men and women, child and parent also show how relationships exist through space.²³

Gender distinction, and gender relatedness, are certainly related however to the image of God in human beings. This is an important connection, but the importance is because it points to the nature of relationship, encounter and distinction which makes up humanity. How the fact of this physical encounter, and the different ways in which people express this, is related both to gender distinction and to sexual differentiation is the crucial issue. Neither Barth nor those such as Scola will allow the relationship to be other than the relationship of the opposite sex, with its resolution in marriage and procreation. The question that is now at issue is whether this confines the image of God too closely to particular cultural forms. It is true that Barth himself resisted equating supposed gender characteristics with physical sexual distinctions, but he also insisted on the primacy of marriage, and condemned same sex relationships strongly. He was even critical of communities of same sex religious orders. Yet some theologians have argued that the relational nature of the image of God is expressed through the encounter of human beings, whatever their gender.

Two such approaches might be mentioned, among many that have contributed to this debate. The first is that of the close link between the image of God, relationships, intimacy and human friendship. The second goes further in actively denying the importance of sexual difference. This approach is found in a number of modern theologians, such as Graham Ward and Eugene Rogers. Rogers has especially argued the case for same – sex marriage. Both approaches not only critique Karl Barth, as McFadyen has done, and the ‘theology of the body’ of Pope John Paul II, but actively seek to recast the debate in terms that embrace the possibility of positive models of same sex relationships. What is important doctrinally is that the writers cited below do not simply present a different ethical position from Barth,

23 Ibid p.38

conservative evangelicals, and the official position of the Roman Catholic Church, but also put forward a different reading of spirituality (in the case of Vasey) and of the image of God (Ward and Rogers). They are therefore significant theologians in the debate about the nature of humanity in relationship to God and God’s creation.

The first approach is represented by Michael Vasey. He was an Anglican liturgist in the Church of England from the evangelical tradition. In 1995 he wrote *Strangers and Friends*.²⁴ He pointed to the classical tradition of passionate friendship between same- sex people, and the way it was celebrated by some Christian writers, notably Aelred of Rievaulx. Aelred was a medieval Cistercian abbot who wrote a treatise on *Spiritual Friendship*. In this he argued that to lose friendship, and the emotional intimacy it brings, was to lose our essential humanity.²⁵ Vasey claims that erotic attraction to men was a dominant force in his life. After he became a monk and left the court of King David of Scotland Aelred wrote about sexual love as “ belonging to the carnal...and yet this friendship except for trifles and deceptions, if nothing dishonourable enters into it, is to be tolerated in the hope of more abundant grace, as the beginnings so to say, of a holier friendship²⁶. Aelred rejected friendship that was entered into simply because of the desire for carnal pleasure,²⁷because in this action although there is natural affection and enjoyment of the physical body there is no good will. He could write of the role of passion and sexual desire in marriage²⁸ (‘without passionate desire he would not have given himself over to his conjugal obligations’), but that sexual desire must always be regulated by chastity. Aelred places friendship at a very exalted level in the Christian life. Adam and eve are the first models of friendship, so the very relationships that we have seen in modern theology exhibit the image of God are for Aelred an example of natural and blessed intimacy. “nature first impresses on the human mind the desire for friendship, then experience encourages it, and finally the authority of law regulates it.”²⁹ Jesus must be loved

24 Michael Vasey *Strangers and Friends* (London:Hodder, 1995) p.82

25 Aelred of Rievaulx *Spiritual Friendship* (Kalamazoo Michigan ; Cistercian Publications 1974 p.82 (section 2.52)

26 Aelred p. 113 (section 3.87)

27 Aelred p. 59 (section 1.39-42) and discussion in the introduction by Douglas Roby on p.23

28 Aelred, *Sermo de oneribus* 25, cited in John R Sommerfeldt (ed.) *Aelred of Rievaulx On Love and Order in the world and in the Church* (New York: Newman Press, 2006) p.104

29 Aelred *Spiritual Friendship* section 1.61, cited in John R Sommerfeldt (ed) *Aelred of Rievaulx Pursuing Perfect Happiness* (New York: Newman Press, 2005), p. 77

as a “most intimate friend,”³⁰ and Jesus himself exhibited friendship, especially in John 11: 5 where Jesus' friendship for Martha, Mary and Lazarus is very clear.

Vasey argues that Aelred's writings are some of the texts that the modern church needs to discover, for they provide “a different vision of society and neglected models of human relating”.³¹ He further argues that there is biblical justification for widening the notion of covenant not simply to relationship between God and his people, and to marriage, but also to friendship. In particular he cites Psalm 55: 20 and I Samuel 18:3. Friendship is for Vasey a moment of revelation about God and creation, although he also says that the cultural context within which he was writing always confines the bonds of affection to marriage. Vasey does not end his book with a clear recommendation of a covenant of friendship although he certainly discusses this, instead ending with a portrayal of Jesus the outsider. However Vasey does not argue for same sex marriage. Perhaps this reflects the period when he wrote in the 1990s. It is also the case that Vasey's arguments about friendship could lead to a case being made for same sex blessings, but not marriage, although it is important to know that Vasey's death in 1998 at the age of 52, three years after the publication of his book, robbed the churches of a major contributor to the debate.

The alternative position is represented by Ward and Rogers. Ward agrees with Barth in rejecting natural theology, and accepts Barth's link between sexual difference and the image of God. But he does not see these differences as revealing something irreducible about creation. Instead they show the importance of difference within the Trinity. The economy of desire between men and women is a vocation to be for the other, and is based on the love within the Trinity, emptying oneself for the other. If this is the case, Ward believes that Barth fails to see that women cannot exist simply to fulfil what is lacking in men. Instead Ward echoes McFadyen and sees the relationship between men and women as that of relationship, fellowship, covenant and I/Thou. Barth often translates the language of sexual difference into this different set of terms, but he draws back from no longer talking of biological complementarity. Ward instead proposes a “covenant constituted through reciprocal desire... the economy of relations constituted through reciprocal desire within the Godhead. God does not see male and female, he sees human being in partnership, in covenantal relationships of I and Thou, One and the Other, reflecting his own triune nature.”³² It is true that as Yahweh is portrayed in scripture as Israel's husband, and Israel is Yahweh's wife, so they are ‘one flesh’.

30 *Pursuing Perfect Happiness* p. 79 citing Aelred *Sermo in adventu Domini* 1.14 and *De Institutione Inclusarum (A Rule of Rule for a Recluse)* 3.31

31 Vasey p.228

In turn this means that at the heart of erotic love is kenotic self giving, covenant and the transformation of sexual desire into a reflection of inner Trinitarian life. This clears the way for Ward to argue that those individuals in same-sex relationships should be able to enter into a marriage which the church performs and blesses. There is a divine ordering to life which God creates, and male and female are no more (though also no less) than symbolic positions in this narrative. Ward's argument is succinct. Desire is desire of the other, and male and female are ways of speaking of the other in an economy of desire. However they are neither to be seen as biologically determinative of the image of God, nor are they other than symbols of distance. Within the Trinity difference between the persons of the Godhead is not expressed this way, nor need it be so on earth. This is the most dramatic move in the argument so far. The image of God in human beings reflects the Trinity in the Christian account of the divine- human relationship. Those outside the church will not understand this, but Ward is concerned at all costs to frame his argument in terms of Christian theology. So he goes on in his many other writings to show how this economy of desire in Christianity can out argue any other economy of desire, such as the modern city found in the culture of modern capitalism, with its endless opportunities for recreation, consumption and pleasure. Rogers also disagrees with Barth. Rogers argues that Barth ignores the work of the Holy Spirit. Christ's addition of divine agency to the Genesis one flesh passage shows that God can by grace use even flesh and sexuality for sanctification. Rogers' primary concern is that of sanctification. 'One flesh' is not a straightforward term for Rogers. If it is taken as Adam and Eve exemplifying the union of sexual difference in one enfleshed unity then much is lost. It has to be seen as used by Christ as a redemptive and grace filled term. Rogers also took part in the Episcopal Church's study of same sex unions. While the report does not indicate that particular authors were responsible for certain passages of the text, there is one passage which echoes Rogers book *Sexuality and the Christian Body*.³³ The passage in the report runs as follows:

The Book of Common Prayer invokes the controlling New Testament interpretation of Genesis. Paul does not associate marriage with procreation or with complementarity, but with typology: with God's plan to love and save his people, one God, one people. Same- and opposite-sex couples seek to participate in this typology of marriage. It belongs to the church's mission to introduce them into that witness and discipline.³⁴

32 Graham Ward "The erotics of redemption- after Karl Barth" *Theology and Sexuality* 8 (1998). The passage is discussed closely by Roberts in pages 187-198.

33 Eugene F Rogers, Jr *Sexuality and the Christian Body* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) chapter 8, "Unintended Abstraction in Barth's Account of Gender: Retrieving Co- Humanity." Pp180-191.

The question of all human relationships for Rogers is intimately concerned with the place of the Spirit, in the messiness of history. In the chapter where Rogers critiques Barth's use of the image of God, Rogers does not argue for same sex relationships. That comes elsewhere in his book. However he does show that Barth's account of the image of God yet again falls into biological determinism, without allowing for the way that Christ transformed the use of 'one flesh'

Conclusion

It is sometimes claimed that same sex relationships is a matter of justice, and that may well be so in secular society. Nor should the church ever seek to justify cruelty, whether in homophobia, sexism or any other display of hatred. It has often done so, and it is with sadness and shame that the church looks back at its attitude to same- sex people. Nevertheless, the question of what the image of God means is not to be determined by issues of ethics. Barth and John Paul II were absolutely correct on that point. If there is a divine ordering to the world which does not allow for certain relationships, then ethics cannot have the final word. Instead there must be a way of preserving a divine order which is not cruel, or capricious, but which witnesses humbly and faithfully to God's Word. That is the task to which many evangelical and traditional Roman Catholic theologians feel called. Christopher Roberts' fine and well –argued book on sexual difference, entitled *Creation and Covenant*, argues the case well for both the theologians mentioned above. Roberts himself converted to Roman Catholicism after writing the book. However, there are now a growing number of systematic theologians who argue that Barth and John Paul II did allow themselves to read more into the image of God in terms of sexual difference than can be justified. The debate will continue, and Roberts himself criticizes Ward and Rogers. This paper surveys the debate, but it seems to me that sexual difference came to prominence in the period 1950- 2000 among many theologians, in a way that the traditional doctrine of the image of God did not allow. Nor am I arguing for a return to reason, or language, as the key meaning of the image of God. Instead relationships, freedom and response in dialogue seem to constitute the meaning of the term, in a way that echoes God's call to human beings, and Christ's remaking of that call, and of ourselves. Again that does not indicate whether the answer lies in friendship, and same – sex blessings, or same sex marriage. Vasey opts for friendship, or marriage, while Rogers

34 *Same-Sex Relationships in the Life of the Church* (The Theology Committee of the House of Bishops, The Episcopal Church, 2010), page 50.

and part of the report from The Episcopal Church advocates same sex marriage as the way of sanctification. That is a further argument.