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THE MYTH OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Sexual orientation is an issue which has achieved a high degree of social recognition in the western world over the last 20 years. The importance currently attached to it, and the implications of the status which establishment thinking has given to it, are two crucial reasons why the whole concept needs a critical examination, not least by evangelical Christians.

King Sihanouk of Cambodia may not seem the most obvious initiator of a world-wide debate on the subject, but he put the issue very simply and clearly in a widely-quoted, if ungrammatical, pronouncement in February 2004. Speaking of gays and lesbians, he said: 'It's not their fault if God makes them born like that. Gays and lesbians would not exist if God did not create them.' [*The Daily Telegraph*, 25 February 2004]

Leaving aside his reference to God, what the 81-year-old Buddhist king is alleging is that gays and lesbian are born, not made. The sexuality which drives people into same-sex sexual practice is implanted in them before birth, and they therefore have no choice in the matter.

In recent years this assumption has gained a broad acceptance in the corridors of power throughout the European Union, and among the think-tanks and other influential groups who shape the ever-changing social ethos of societies and nations.

As a result, it appears that sexual orientation has across the civilised world been assumed to be as fixed as race, gender, age and disability. In consequence, it is regarded as just as shocking to discriminate against someone on the ground of their sexual orientation as it would be to discriminate against them on the basis of their age and ethnic origin. Laws have been passed which protect people from becoming the victims of discrimination because of their sexual orientation, and more regulations are currently under consideration.

The point being made here is not that there is a moral argument to be made in favour of treating anyone unjustly, but to show that sexual orientation has enjoyed a rapid rise to an exalted status which other defining characteristics, based on choice, preference or use, have not. For instance, there are no manual dexterity regulations attached to the Equality Act 2006 protecting left-

handed people from being discriminated against, and compelling hardware retailers to stock a left-handed version of every right-handed tool which they sell.

Since sexual orientation, for whatever reason, has been granted such a significant importance in contemporary society, one would have expected that the case for this degree of recognition would be overwhelming and almost self-evident – as strong as for the other fundamental distinctives. No-one would attempt to argue, for instance, that ethnic origin was a choice, nor that anyone can vary their age at any stage in life. Sexual orientation has been bracketed with these unalterables, to the extent that the doctrine of King Sihanouk is all but assumed to be an unassailable truth.

It is time that this assumption was seriously questioned, as all sections of the population with an interest in the subject area, and society as a whole, would benefit from an objective assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the case. If the present assumptions were proved to be valid, it would give greater credibility to the legal and social framework which has been based upon them. Those individuals and interest groups who were not predisposed to supporting legal protections based on sexual orientation would do so with better heart if a convincing case emerged from the investigation.

Conversely, if an examination and analysis demolished the whole castle of assumptions, this would not necessarily lead to the dismantling of the new social order – in the history of England, many a force has been led to victory from a ruined castle. But it would at least move the ground of the debate, and compel an admission that the new order was in place because it was desired, rather than warranted.

For evangelical Christians this is a crucial matter too. Far too many appear unthinkingly to have adopted the Sihanouk doctrine, leading inevitably to their being able to offer no hope or remedy to those hapless folk who find themselves in the category of those who, they suppose, have been born with a tendency to same-sex sexuality.

What will convince anyone that King Sihanouk might be wrong? This article seeks to set out a convincing series of reasons.

1. The biblical argument

In Romans 1:27 and Jude 7, homosexual practice is described as a 'perversion.' This certainly means that it is sinful, but it means something more than that. We must try to understand the difference between what is a perversion and what is merely sin – if the word 'merely' can ever be used to qualify 'sin.'

After the fall, there was still a pattern to this world which conformed to God's order, and one feature of that pattern was connected with the role and practice of sexual conduct. In God's order, this was wholly a heterosexual pattern. While it was possible for the practices and privileges of

this heterosexual framework to be abused, or exercised in a sinful way, such excesses, failures and sins are never described in the Scriptures as a 'perversion.'

The word 'perversion' is used in connection only with same-sex sexual relationships, the essential feature of which is that they are 'unnatural' – a perversion even of the fallen nature. Homosexuality transgresses not only the pure righteousness and the will of God, but the very order which God has put in place in man's world and society. When viewed in this way, it is impossible to accept, even in a fallen world, the Sihanouk principle that God has left man with two sexualities of equal repute and equally normal. If God had done that, then Romans 1:27 could not possibly have described homosexual practice as a perversion. If it is a perversion, this can only mean that it is a perversion of the normal order, and if that is what it is, then the two sexualities cannot be of equal standing.

The identification of a theological norm does not mean that there are no individual cases of genetic abnormality. The Fall has damaged every area of man's creation, and there will be those whose genetic make-up may create a tendency out of keeping with God's pattern, in the same way as there are individual cases of gender confusion as a result of an imbalance of chromosomes. What we are saying is that God has not put in place two types of normal sexuality. The sexuality God has created is heterosexual, and no other sexuality is either normal nor equal in status or worth.

Such a conclusion is crucial to the pastoral responsibilities which evangelical churches have towards individuals in their care, and in the wider world.

If evangelical Christians believe that some people are born heterosexual, and others homosexual, and that in a fallen world these are both normal and unalterable conditions, and we have to put up with the consequences, then we will inevitably find ourselves in the middle of a huge pastoral dilemma. We will have no comfort for the brother who admits that he feels a strong urge to engage in homosexual practice and seeks pastoral advice. All we can say to him is that in this fallen world there are two types of sexual tendency with which people are born, and that his is the one which God has strictly forbidden to be practised. Heterosexual overdrive, however dominant, distracting and distressing, can be directed by pastoral sensitivity and wisdom towards the goal of marriage. Powerful homosexual instincts, however, can only be addressed on the basis of 'ask God to take it away.' This in many cases will bring the sufferer to despair, consigning him to a pastoral wilderness, without comfort or hope. Can we believe in so capricious a God? Of course not.

This is not to doubt the reality and force of the instinct being felt – only its source. If it has come about through environmental and social influences of various kinds, it can be equally removed by other, better, environmental and social influences. No-one is pretending that this is as simple nor as immediate as taking a course of tablets, but it does offer some logic and hope to an extremely troubled mind and soul.

The evangelical tendency to deny the legitimacy of homosexual practice, while having no sympathy or solution for those strongly tempted and attracted by the gay agenda, leaves the impression that evangelicals are a sad bunch of people. We don't need to be like this. We can be much more positive if we operate on the basis of a better and true theology.

Proof of the way in which grace can rescue a person from homosexual tendencies and practice is found in 1 Corinthians 6: 9-11. The reference in verse 9 to male prostitutes and homosexual offenders – which conjures up an image, not of individual, isolated experiences, but of a widespread decadent gay culture – is followed by the altogether more hopeful statement in v 11: 'And that is what some of you *were*. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.' There is hope of definite and complete change.

2. The statistical argument

A major survey on *Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles* took place between May 1990 and November 1991 and was one of the most thorough investigations ever conducted. Its findings were published in 1994.

This was no instant telephone poll, cold-calling 900 people in an exchange lasting a few minutes. In-depth personal interviews were conducted, in the homes of the people being interviewed, over the 18 months of the research, with 20,000 men and women. The research team was carried out by a team of four, including Kaye Wellings, currently professor of sexual health and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and the project was financed by the Wellcome Trust after the government, which was to have sponsored it, withdrew.

The first significant finding of the research was the uneven spread of the incidence of homosexual experience. Of the sample interviewed, the proportion of the male interviewees who admitted to having ever had sexual experience with another man varied between 11 regions of the country from 3.2% in the North to 11.9% in Greater London. In fact in six of the 11 regions, the incidence was under 5%. The South-East was the second highest, with 7%, followed by East Anglia with 6.3%. A curious anomaly was that while the proportion was 6.2% in the East Midlands, in the West Midlands, not very far away, it was only 3.7%.

Various theories have been advanced to explain these discrepancies, including the obvious one that homosexuals might relocate to where they think they can find the acceptance and the gay ambience and culture which they might be seeking. The Wellings survey did find a much greater tendency to relocate to London among those with homosexual experience (35.2% of men) than among heterosexuals (10.4%). However the extent to which those in this category became homosexuals after relocation, as against already being homosexuals, is not clear. There would obviously be a much greater likelihood of someone encountering the gay scene for the first time in London than in the Regions, and so it could just as easily be a consequence of the move as a reason for making the move.

But the most telling figures from the survey are those which deal with the exclusiveness of sexual experience to one sex.

Of the men in the survey, 90.1% had only ever had sexual experience with women, and an even bigger percentage of the women, 92.7%, had only ever had sexual experience with men.

In contrast, of the men who had at some time in their life had a male sexual partner, as many as 90.3% had also had a female sexual partner. The percentage for women was even higher, 95.8% of those who had had a female sexual partner having also had a male partner.

These statistics convincingly show a striking difference between the two sexualities. They show a heterosexual disposition to be generally exclusive and invariable – exactly what fits the description of ‘natural.’ On the other hand, the same-sex drive seems to be less permanent and to have very little exclusiveness – characteristics which strongly support the contention that they are driven by non-genetic, factors.

3. The historical argument

A quick study of the history of sexual orientation reveals that the concept has no history whatever.

The whole idea of a diversity of sexual orientations is extremely recent, and even where it has been defined – for instance in brief definitions in a number of recent editions of popular dictionaries – in no case is *orientation* defined as an innate drive, the favourite definition being *preference*.

In the major dictionaries which determine the English language, such as the Oxford English Dictionary, the expression *sexual orientation* only achieved its first entry as recently as the 2004 edition.

This entry gives the earliest reference to the expression ‘sexual orientation’ (*J P Lichtenberger, Divorce xv. 369*) as 1931. In this reference it is clear that Lichtenberger is not using the expression in the way it is understood today. He is using the word *orientation* as a much less specific word, and he applies it in the context of courtship. He is describing the extent to which the minds of the couple are being turned towards sexual matters generally, rather than defining a particular sex drive, or differentiating between distinct types of sexuality or sex drive. The earliest use of the expression in the way that we understand it today (*G H Seward, Sex and Social Order xi. 153*) dates from 1946.

All this is highly significant. It means that Oscar Wilde in the 1890s, insofar as he engaged in homosexual practice, would not have said: ‘I am doing this because of my sexual orientation – i.e. because my natural, genetically-determined sexual condition makes it inevitable.’ Rather, he would have said: ‘I am doing this because I want to do this.’

If a same-sex drive is as natural as a heterosexual drive, then this would have been the case throughout man's history. Same-sex sexual practices have occurred since Sodom and Gomorrah. Why therefore has no-one thought, until recently, that this was the result of a predetermined natural disposition, rather than the expression of a preference or choice? Were previous generations that dull? The answer is obvious. No-one believed that the urge to practise homosexual sex was the fulfilment of a tendency innate from birth.

The fact that no-one believed a homosexual sex drive to be an innate tendency does not prove beyond a doubt that it wasn't. Ignorance of a fact does not mean that it is not a fact. But it would be surprising and extraordinary if, when the Prayer Book Marriage Service can talk about 'men's carnal lusts and appetites' in connection with heterosexuality, it never occurred to anyone to say that these were of two kinds, and to encourage society to consider the implications of that. Even allowing for the fact that Bible values were dominant in British society for much of the period from 1535 to 1950, and that there would be strong social pressures against discussing the subject at all, it is still astonishing that if this was a latent truth all that time, it was never 'outed.'

4. The deferred realisation argument

If a baby is born with spina bifida, this is known immediately. If a baby is born deaf, this can take days or weeks to discover. If it is born with some forms of learning disability, the degree and nature of this may take months, or even a year or two, to become clear. This is by definition not the case with sexuality. Any ante-natal factors connected with sexuality will not have any effect on sexual preference or sexual practice until adolescence – the precise moment will vary, but on average we are talking about some 12 years later. Of course before that moment comes there will be all kinds of variety in the nature and experience of the childhood of individuals – the tomboys, the crushes, the boys who prefer dolls to Action Men. Such issues have fascinated child psychologists for decades, but they are not relevant to whether those children will develop same-sex attractions in later life.

The point here is that by the time young people have reached the stage of sexual practice, they have already been exposed to a wide range of possible influences which may have helped to shape and direct their sex drives. By influences we do not just mean the possibility that children may have seen subversively erotic videos, or come into contact with deeply disturbing printed material – though that may have happened in a few cases. Nor are we speculating that there are large numbers of cases in which same-sex attraction is brought about as a result of direct sexual abuse of children, though again there are cases of direct sexual abuse, and it would not be surprising if in individual cases this caused a distortion of biological and sexual norms.

Every child, however, has lived his or her childhood within an influential social structure. This has not had the character of the traditional nuclear family for everyone. Increasingly, the home environment – sometimes two home environments – has consisted of a broken and confusing scene. Many children grow up without security, which can make them more emotionally

dependent upon a particular individual within the family circle. Others lack a balance of role models, leaving them unduly dominated by one parent. Some struggle to come to terms with the presence of a parent's new partner. Whether the issue is dependency or antipathy in their closest relationships, who is to say that such experiences have no effect on the child's emotional attitudes to people of a particular sex? This is not a fanciful notion. In the 1946 quotation from the OED mentioned above – when sexual orientation was a very young concept indeed – G H Seward wrote (*Sex and Social Order xi. 153*): 'Deviant sexual orientation in later life may originate in the child's inability to identify himself with his like-sexed parent.' No-one is saying that the inevitable outcome of dysfunctional relationships between family members is the development of a same-sex sexuality, but it would be equally strange to rule this out as an impossible theory.

In the light of the statistical picture, we need to remind ourselves that we are not only talking about adolescents and young people. Mature adults are exposed to similar influences which can contribute to changes in their sexual outlook and conduct from what it was in early adulthood.

5. The lack of evidence from genetic research

Possible links between genes and behaviour have been explored in a number of research projects over the past 12 years.

A project by the University of Western Ontario whose results were published in the journal *Science* in April 1999, concluded: 'Our data does not support the presence of a gene of large effect influencing sexual orientation.' This study found that particular genetic features sought were no more common in gay men than would be expected. The findings overturned indications from a smaller 1993 study which found evidence of a strong genetic factor in male homosexuality. Both studies compared the DNA of pairs of brothers. The earlier study found that 83% of the pairs shared five key markers, whereas the later study found that only 46% shared three key markers. The expected norm in both cases was 50%. The 1993 study had previously been regarded as 'the most powerful piece of evidence for a strong genetic factor in male homosexuality.'

In 2002 a study, *Opposite-sex twins and adolescent same-sex attraction*, published in the *American Journal of Sociology* by Columbia/Yale researchers P S Bearman and H Bruckner showed in a sub-study which formed part of that project that in identical male twins, if one twin had same-sex attraction, there was only a seven per cent chance his twin also had same-sex attraction. The percentage for identical female twins was only five per cent. These low genetic factor findings confirmed previous studies by S L Hershberger, *A twin registry study of male and female sexual orientation*, published in the *Journal of Sex Research*, in 1997, and J M Bailey, M P Dunne and N G Martin, *Genetic and environmental influences on sexual orientation and its correlates in an Australian twin sample*, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, in 2000. Another warning with regard to the findings of some of these studies is that the definition of same-sex attraction is in some instances not quite the same as the definition of sexual orientation.

Also in 2002, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics produced a report on a possible link between genes and behaviour, including sexual orientation, and concluded: 'There are numerous problems with genetic and other biological research into sexual orientation which means that any reported findings must be viewed with caution.'

This report also expressed the view that many genetic research studies were based on samples too small to justify definite conclusions.

All that can be said with any certainty about the quest for genetic evidence is that there will be many further research projects which will continue to fuel the nature-nurture debate.

6. The scepticism from the gay lobby

An iconic figure of the gay lobby, Peter Tatchell, has expressed his own scepticism about the idea that there might be a genetic predisposition. In an interview published in the London free newspaper *Metro* in 2002, Tatchell was asked: 'Is there a gay gene?' In reply, he said: 'I'm sceptical – it neither explains bisexuality nor people who change sexual orientation in mid-life. There may be genetic predispositions but I think family and social factors are equally significant. With greater social acceptance of lesbians and gay men, more people will be open to same-sex experiences – perhaps not for all their lives but maybe for periods. I experimented with heterosexuality – I don't see a problem with straight people experimenting with homosexuality. If you don't like it, you don't have to do it again.'

Another exponent of gay rights, Alan Wardle, Director of Parliamentary and Public Affairs for Stonewall, has commented about the genetic issue: 'This is an interesting debate and there may well be a genetic element, but it's not conclusive. It does not really matter whether it is nature or nurture – the important thing is getting equality for homosexual people.'

Readers will form their own judgements about whether they are convinced by the arguments presented in this article. If they are, what is the appropriate response? Here are four which come to mind:

- There are pastoral benefits – the evangelical world needs to build a strategy of restoration and hope on behalf of those who have fallen victim in various ways to the influences of the gay culture.
- We need to clarify whether the recent raft of legislation covering sexual orientation has been put in place (by our government and others in the EU) on the assumption that sexual orientation is an innate condition or a personal choice. If the former, we should challenge this as a fact; if the latter we should question its being regarded as a public policy necessity, desirability or priority, since in those circumstances it would merely amount to the arbitrary selection of one from many areas of life to which individual choice applies. Our case should be directed to government, government agencies, and

appropriate academics, institutions and opinion-formers. It may seem late in the day to embark on such a 'campaign,' but the debate itself cannot possibly do the evangelical cause any harm.

- The journey of the gay lifestyle from criminality (up to 1967 in the UK) to public recognition and celebration as civil partnership has been remarkably swift. It has gained from a continuing tension between two hypocrisies. The gay lobby has accepted the privileges granted (however falsely) on the basis of genetic inevitability, while not believing in the genuineness of that basis. The government, along with other European governments, has linked sexual orientation to the issues of age, disability, race and gender, as though all these factors were of a similar fundamental nature, when the evidence against that being the case is there for all to see. Whenever public policy is being built on false assumptions and flimsy and socially-damaging foundations, this needs to be opposed and resisted, and the misleading nature of the motivating principles pointed out.

- We must make sure that we have the same view about same-sex relationships as God has. It is easy to adapt to the spirit of the age; to become weary of ethical conflict; and to drift into a tacit acceptance of fashionable social ideas. Intellectually we may assent to the unnaturalness of same-sex relationships, and even call them perverse; but we also need to view them as detestable (Leviticus 18:22), as this is how God describes them. However, this must not lead to our becoming homophobic, nor to our nursing anything other than a Christ-like attitude of compassion towards those who are caught up in this unhappy and unfulfilling lifestyle

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