

Sexuality and Christianity

From Advancing Sexuality Studies:
a short course on sexuality theory and
research methodologies

Schedule

Learning activity	Time allowed
Introduction & aims	5 mins
Session 1. Christian approaches to sexuality: four key themes	170 mins
Brainstorm	65 mins
Lecture & brainstorm	15 mins
Lecture & group work	70 mins
Lecture	20 mins
Session 2. The key themes in action	120 mins
Group work	60 mins
Discussion	60 mins
Session 3. Scope to engage?	65 mins
Mini-lecture	15 mins
Hypothetical strategising	50 mins
Conclusion & personal reflection	15 mins
Total	375 mins

Module aims

- To:
 - Provide an account of Christian approaches to sexuality, through examination of four key themes
 - Examine a range of Christian responses to contemporary sexuality issues
 - Encourage students to challenge taken-for-granted interpretations of sexuality within Christianity

Participants will:

- Be able to identify four key historical and philosophical themes that underpin Christian understandings of sexuality
- Develop a critical understanding of the application of Christian beliefs and practices on sexuality in the contemporary world
- Consider strategies for engaging positively with Christian communities on issues of sexuality

Session 1.

Christian approaches to sexuality: four key themes

Brainstorm

What might Pope Benedict XVI say about...

Men, women and human nature?



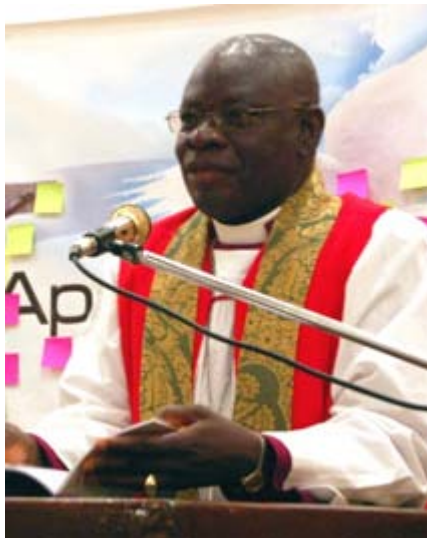
What might Pastor Martin Ssempe of the Makerere (Protestant evangelical) Community Church, Uganda, say about...

Protection against HIV?



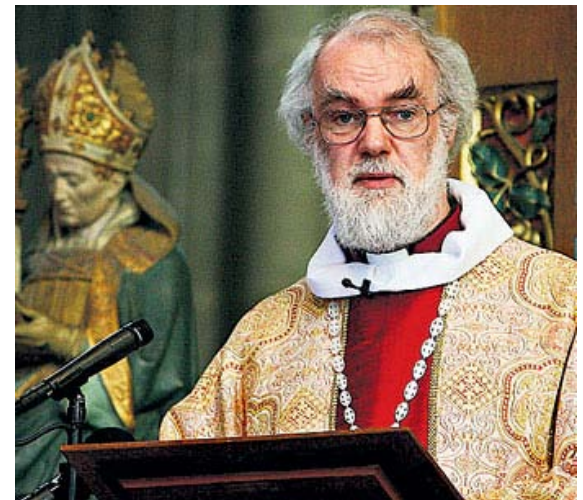
What might the Most Reverend Peter Akinola, Archbishop of Nigeria, say about...

Homosexuality?



What might the Most Reverend Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, say about...

Marriage?



What they actually said ...

Pope Benedict XVI on men, women and human nature:



The Church must protect people against self-destruction ...and so we need something like human ecology, properly so called ... the Church speaks of human nature as 'man' or 'woman' and asks that this order of things [the Natural Law] be respected. (2008)

Martin Ssempe on protection against HIV



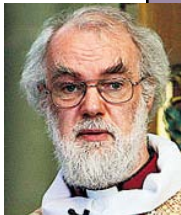
Some of you know about the HIV/AIDS conference. It's not a Church. It's like Sodom and Gomorrah just to be there ... should the godless be the only ones telling us what to do about HIV? ... we know that if we kept sex for within marriage and if we waited for sex within marriage AIDS would go away ... the way to protect ourselves from HIV/AIDS is in [the Bible] ... abstinence ... laws must bow down to Jesus. (2007)

Peter Akinola on homosexuality



Same sex marriage, apart from being ungodly, is unscriptural, unnatural, unprofitable, unhealthy ... un-African and un-Nigerian. It is a perversion, a deviation and an aberration that is capable of engendering moral and social holocaust in this country ... [and] should never be allowed to take root in Nigeria. Outlawing it is to ensure the continued existence of this nation. (2009)

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, on marriage



The gospel is about a man who made his entire life a sign that speaks of God and who left to his followers the promise that they too could be signs of God and make signs of God because of him ...sexual love becomes sacramental when it involves a lasting ...fidelity. (1994)

Four key themes

- Observance of the Natural Law
 - Human knowledge of right and wrong + 'The eternal will of God'
- Fidelity to what the scriptures say
 - 'The word of God'
- Both reinforced through the sacraments
 - Given for particular forms of behaviour; 'God's blessing'
- All linked to promotion of the practices of continence, celibacy & abstinence, chastity & virginity

Natural Law: theory & practice

- The Natural Law is that body of principles that aligns:
 - How human beings know what is good, and do what is right *with*
 - The 'eternal law', or the rational plan by which God orders the whole universe
- In practice:
 - We use our conscience to reason from principles about what is good to guidelines about how good is to be pursued
 - The end *never* justifies the means
 - You cannot do something intrinsically wrong to achieve something good

- According to Catholic Church teaching on Natural Law:
 - You cannot abort a child to save a mother's life, because it is killing the child
 - You cannot use condoms to prevent disease, because it is preventing procreation
 - You cannot have gay sex to build or support a loving relationship
 - You cannot have sex before marriage, because the family is the base of social life and sex is for procreation

The scriptures

- Every Christian church draws on the scriptures
 - Set of writings that comprise the Bible; Old & New Testament
 - Some churches rely more heavily than others on the scriptures to support their views on sexuality
 - Usually called: fundamentalist, evangelical or bible-based churches
 - Other churches give more explicit weight to tradition, practice or the teaching authority of their leaders
 - Evangelical churches still rely on their leaders to select among and interpret various Bible texts to sustain beliefs and positions
 - No single agreed interpretation

Brainstorm

- What aspects of sexuality are usually of concern to the Christian church? (5 mins)
- How the scriptures are interpreted in relation to just two aspects of sexuality:
 - Marriage and divorce
 - Homosexuality

Scriptures: marriage & divorce

- Gospel of Matthew 19:4ff
 - Pharisees came up to [Jesus] and tested him by asking: 'Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?'
 - He answered: 'Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said: "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.'

- They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?’
 - He said to them, ‘For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery’
- St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians 7:10ff
 - To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband)—and that the husband should not divorce his wife

Scriptures: homosexuality

- Genesis 19:4ff
 - But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.'
 - Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, 'I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Behold, I have two daughters who have not known man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.'

- The meaning of the word 'know' is of particular debate
 - Interpreted *either* as the citizens wanting to sexually assault the strangers *or*, as the citizens wanting to interrogate the strangers
 - The original Hebrew word for 'know' appears approximately 950 times elsewhere in the scriptures, yet in only 10 of those times is it used to refer to sexual contact (Friends of Unity, 2006; Rogers, 2006)
 - One of those 10 times occurs in this passage, where Lot is talking about his daughters not having 'known' man
 - In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus refers to Sodom and Gomorrah when talking about the importance of hospitality

- Natural Law and scripture are used together by the Catholic Church to justify its position on homosexuality:
 - Basing itself on sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered. They are contrary to the Natural Law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.
(*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2357)

Group work

- Question A:
 - What forms of marriage and divorce occur in your community?
 - Who can marry? Who can divorce?
 - Is this controlled, e.g. by religion or by the State?
 - Are there differences between the rights or treatment of men and women?
- Question B:
 - Is homosexuality accepted within your community?
 - What does the State say? What do religions say—particularly Christianity?
 - Are there differences between the rights or treatment of homosexual people and heterosexual people? (20 mins)
- Feedback (20 mins)

The sacraments

- Sacraments represent God's blessing or grace upon the individual
 - The Church of England Book of Common Prayer (1549) calls them 'outward and visible signs of an inward and invisible Grace'
- Celebrated in ritual ceremonies such as Baptism, Holy Communion, marriage

... it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him (Genesis 2:18)

Sacraments & marriage

... a sacramental marriage lets the world see, in human terms, something of the faithful, creative, abundant, and self-emptying love of Christ. A true marriage in the Lord with his grace will bring the spouses to holiness.

Their love, manifested in fidelity, passion, fertility, generosity, sacrifice, forgiveness, and healing, makes known God's love in their family, communities, and society.

(US Catholic Bishops (2003) *Between Man and Woman*)

The fourth theme

- Contenance, celibacy & abstinence, chastity & virginity
- **Contenance** is restraint from sexual activity
- **Celibacy** is **abstinence** from sexual activity & from marriage
 - Celibacy versus marriage:
 - He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please God. But he that is with a wife, is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife: and he is divided
(St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians 7:33)
- **Chastity** is a state of purity; denoted by **virginity** until marriage and faithfulness after marriage

Session 2.

The key themes in action

Group work

- *Handout A: Christianity and HIV/AIDS*
 - Focus questions:
 - Some parts of the Catholic Church are opposed to education about, and promotion of, condoms for HIV prevention. How are the four main themes of a Christian approach to sexuality used to support this opposition?
 - Some parts of the Catholic Church (and other churches) disagree with the teaching that condoms cannot be used for prevention of HIV. What rationales do they use?
 - How do Christian churches that do not allow condom use for HIV prevention reconcile this with the associated risk of harm to church members?
 - How do (or might) churches opposed to condom promotion explain their position to those who have become infected with HIV?

- *Handout B: Christianity and reproductive health*
 - Focus questions:
 - Some churches are opposed to contraception and abortion. How are the four main themes of a Christian approach to sexuality used to support this opposition?
 - Some churches accept contraception or abortion. What rationales do they use?
 - How do Christian churches that do not allow access to non-natural contraception or abortion reconcile this with the associated risk of harm to church members?
 - What do these texts indicate in relation to relationships between Christian churches, the state and society on issues of sexuality and reproductive health?

Discussion

- Christianity and homosexuality
 - Individual reading of *Handout C* (15 mins)
 - Consider the focus questions:
 - Some Christians argue that homosexuality should not be accepted. What arguments do they offer? Do they use the four key themes?
 - Some Christians argue that homosexuality should be accepted. What arguments do they offer? Do they use the four key themes?
 - How are historical, cultural social norms used (or not used) by each side?
 - Based on these texts, what links exist between the Christian church, the State and broader social debate?
 - Discussion (40 mins)

Session 3.

Scope to engage?

No one Church position

- William Stacey Johnson (2007:40) defined seven positions on same sex unions at work in Christian churches in the U.S.:
 1. **Prohibition:** does not approve of, and would bar, same sex unions (because they are morally wrong)
 2. **Toleration:** does not approve of gays and lesbians amongst its own members, but would not encourage general social prosecution or rejection
 3. **Accommodation:** does not ordinarily approve, but would allow for exceptions on a 'lesser-of-the-evils' rationale

4. **Legitimation:** wants to include gays and lesbians in the community and wants to prevent them being singled out and condemned unfairly
5. **Celebration:** believes same-sex unions should no longer be scorned but affirmed as good
6. **Liberation:** perceives social attitudes concerning gays and lesbians as being caught up in wider injustices which need to be remedied
7. **Consecration:** argues for the full religious blessing of same-sex unions

- Engaging with proponents of
 - **Natural Law:** they must believe there is some 'good' *in addition* to procreation in sexual relationships before their conscience will allow latitude
 - **Scripture:** much will depend on the texts selected, and the leadership's degree of literalism in interpretation of them
 - **Sacrament:** the value attached in sacraments to fidelity, passion, fertility, generosity, sacrifice, forgiveness, and healing creates space for discussion
 - **Virginity/abstinence:** perhaps the least open to alternative views because of an implicit distrust of human sexuality

Hypothetical strategising

- Divide into small groups
- Everyone works for the same non-governmental organisation (NGO), in a developing country
 - The organisation provides:
 - STI diagnosis and treatment (for everyone, including men who have sex with men)
 - Family planning advice and contraception (including condoms and the morning after pill)
 - Voluntary, confidential counselling and testing (VCCT) for HIV
 - HIV-prevention education
 - Care and support for people living with HIV and people living with AIDS

- The local Christian Bishop is known to have objections to:
 - Men who have sex with men (MSM)
 - Sex before marriage
 - Contraception
 - Any approach to HIV prevention other than promotion of abstinence and faithfulness within marriage
- The number of people using your organisation's services has begun to decline
 - There is concern that this is as a result of the Bishop's objections

- Focus questions
 - How would you respond to this situation?
 - What would you need to consider in terms of enabling your organisation's work to continue effectively?
 - Is keeping service-user numbers high your organisation's only concern and responsibility here?
- Group members should draw on any relevant real-life experience they may have (30 mins)
- Feedback (20 mins)

Conclusion

- What will you take away from this module? (5 mins)
- In summary:
 - No one Christian view of sexuality
 - Four commonly recurring themes: Natural Law, Scriptures, sacrament, emphasis on continence, celibacy and abstinence, and chastity and virginity
 - Complex (and power-laden) interrelationships between Christianity and political, social and cultural responses to, and understandings of, sexuality
 - Some space for movement

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 - and*
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