

# Making the Case:

the blessing  
of  
same sex unions  
in  
the Anglican Church of Canada

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May, 2007

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## Preface

The recent literature on the subject of homosexuality and Christianity is breathtakingly massive. There are long treatises on the relevant passages of Scripture and how to read them; there are histories of the cruel oppression of gay people in the middle ages and since; there are accounts of the growth of the Christian anti-sex strain in the writings of the Church Fathers; there are theological treatises on the place of sexuality in the divine economy; there are accounts of the experiences of Christian communities that have been welcoming to gay people; there are many memoirs of gay people that tell the story of their relationship with the Christian Church, and much, much more. The very thought of engaging this massive literature in a full or comprehensive way would make even the stoutest heart draw back.

The present essay has a very limited aim. As Anglicans have been engaging this issue, both in Canada and elsewhere, it has sometimes been said that what we need is to have a document that works the question out in the terms of Scripture, Tradition and Reason — the time-honoured triad of sources for Anglican belief and practice. And indeed it may be true that such a document, a document with just that exact focus, does not exist. This essay is an attempt to fill that gap, to explain why the practice of blessing same sex unions is a practice that can sit comfortably on Hooker's three-legged stool of Scripture, Tradition and Reason.

This is, however, an essay, not a treatise. It is prepared with a view to the General Synod of the Canadian Church in 2007, and it is kept succinct because the delegates to that Synod are already overburdened with material to read. Deliberately lean in footnotes, it should be understood as a précis of a case that could obviously be made in a much fuller way, with much more historical illustration and much more discussion of the fine points of biblical exegesis. But there is in any case some virtue in brevity: it helps to keep the lines of the argument clear.

There is absolutely no claim to originality here, unless it is the originality of organization: organizing the argument into the lines of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. It will emerge that, if indeed we hold to these three sources of belief and practice, then blessing same sex unions is the Anglican thing to do. It is not just that we may do so — it is rather that we must do so: if we are to keep faith with our tradition we must do so.

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It may be helpful if, as author of this essay, I offer some account of myself. I am a professor of Philosophy at the University of Western Ontario; I am neither a priest nor a theologian, though I do have an interest in the philosophy of religion. I was educated at Trent University and at Oxford. I am not a cradle Anglican, but joined the Church by deliberate choice in my late teens, and have remained an enthusiastic member of it for four decades. My decidedly lay perspective on these issues may, of course, represent a deficiency; on the other hand, in a synodical Church that attaches importance to the views of the laity, a certain lay down-to-earth straightforwardness about the question may be of value.

## Introduction

There have always been groups within the Christian Church that have held to a vision of eternal and unchanging religious law, enshrined in the Bible and governing human life in every last one of its details. The Anglican Church, from its very beginnings, has refused this vision of the 'frozen church'. It has espoused instead a vision of the church as dynamic, as evolving in its self-understanding and in its understanding of what it is to live a life in fidelity to Christ.

One of our founding documents, a document that has been hugely formative of the Anglican tradition, is Richard Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. This book, written in the 1570s, was in essence an attempt to keep the Church of England from falling into the frozen mold of the Puritans in England, or of the Calvinists of Geneva. In this book Hooker argues that not all religious laws are unchanging; some are, but others must change to suit the changing *circumstances* of humanity and of the Church. Thus he was able to argue that many of the religious laws of the Old Testament — even though they were understood to be laws given by God — no longer have force for Christians. In general, for example, the laws known as the 'Holiness Code', laws that forbade such things as planting two crops in one field, or wearing cloth woven from silk and wool together, are not any longer regarded as binding.

This idea of an evolving Church is really implied by our central theological doctrine of the Trinity. The Father is the Creator; the Father's main work was done at the beginning of time. The Son is the Redeemer; the Redeemer's main work was done two millennia ago. When, then, is the work of the Holy Spirit done? The work of the Holy Spirit, the Counsellor, is that of guiding the ongoing evolution of the Church; the Father sent the Holy Spirit to be with us *forever*; and the reason for this is that the evolution of the Church is perpetual. In a frozen church the Holy Spirit would have nothing to do.

Of course, if religious laws and precepts are subject to change, then we need some understanding of how they can change, that is, under what general rules they can change. If the Church is an evolving church, what rules or principles govern its evolution? Hooker's famous answer was that the Church is bound by a three-stranded cord, Scripture, Reason and Tradition. He wrote:

What Scripture doth plainly deliver, to that first place both of credit and obedience is due; the next whereunto is whatsoever any man can necessarily conclude by force of reason; after these the voice of the Church succeedeth. That which the Church by her ecclesiastical authority shall probably think and define to be true or good, must in congruity of reason over-rule all other inferior judgments whatsoever.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Laws*, Book V, 8:2

This triad, Scripture, Reason and Tradition, has come to be known as the 'three-legged stool', and it has been broadly accepted as defining the Anglican way.<sup>2</sup> It allows us to understand how the teaching of the Church can change and evolve, without falling into the chaos of thinking that 'anything goes'.

Of course, to say 'Scripture, Reason and Tradition' is not to give a mathematical formula, an algorithm, for deciding what changes should be accepted and what changes should not. There is no crisp decision procedure for ecclesial development. As we participate in the life and evolution of the Church we are constantly asking whether this that or the other change is 'of the Spirit'. But Scripture, we shall see, gives us some very good clues as to how to answer that question, how to make that judgment.

The Anglican Church, then, as contrasted with some other traditions, has kept itself free from entrapment in the model of the 'frozen church'. The principles of Hooker — the three-legged stool — have guided this; but two other features of Anglicanism have also been important. First, Anglicans have always considered that religious precepts are arranged in a hierarchy of importance: the commandment to love is more important than the commandment to be sober and vigilant or than the commandment to be meek. Thus any change in interpreting a precept of lesser importance can be governed by one of greater importance. (Another way of saying this is that the letter of the law is to be revised in accordance with its spirit.)<sup>3</sup> Second, the Anglican Church has never been inclined to proclaim its own infallibility; the Roman Church is somewhat caught here: it can never rescind any doctrine promulgated by any Pope or Council; but the Anglican Church has always felt free to consider that a past pronouncement of a bishop or a synod or the Lambeth Conference was in error and should be revised, or at any rate forgotten.

As a worldwide Communion we are threatened at the moment because a change in discipline that is being introduced in some North American jurisdictions makes other parts of the church uneasy, gives rise to a fear that it represents a radical departure from the essential features of the faith and order of the Anglican Church. In this essay I am not going to consider all the complex questions about who consulted whom about this change, and how, and when — that debate is an administrative one, and probably ultimately not a fertile one. What I want to do, rather, is to show that the move in various North American dioceses to bless same sex unions<sup>4</sup> is a change that is well in keeping

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<sup>2</sup> In recent years the category of Reason has been subdivided, by some writers, into Reason on the one hand and Experience on the other, making, in effect, a four-legged stool. We shall keep the older way of speaking, subsuming Experience under Reason.

<sup>3</sup> In our Prayer Book liturgies we hear again and again of the two great commandments: 'on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.'

<sup>4</sup> In the Anglican Church of Canada the question of blessing same sex unions presents itself in rather a different way from that in which it arises in most other provinces of the Anglican Communion. The reason is that in Canada civil marriage is now available to gay couples throughout the land. Given this, it would be decidedly odd for the Church to decide that it will bless same sex unions that are not marriages, while not extending the same offer of blessing to heterosexual unions that are not marriages. Perhaps the Church should offer blessings of this sort — a kind of betrothal blessing — but that is not the present issue. It would seem logical that the Canadian Church consider blessing a restricted class of same sex unions, namely, those that are civil marriages.

with the three-legged stool of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. If at first it appears to be a radical break in the faith and order of the Church, it is in fact not so: it is a proper and appropriate way for the Church to give witness in its incarnation in a certain time and place — in its *circumstances*. It is the Anglican thing to do.

Hooker thought of the Church as facing different circumstances over *time*; his perspective was limited to the Church of England, in England; he had no inkling whatever of the Anglican Communion, the Church of England spread throughout the world. We now see that the Church may have quite different incarnations not just at different times, but also at different *places* at the same time. Cultures are different, and a local church — a parish, a diocese, or a province — always exists *in a culture*. And the culture in which a branch of the Church exists is the *circumstances* in whose light it must understand itself.

In essence, therefore, this essay considers the blessing of same sex unions, in the circumstances of North American culture, against the yardstick of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. This will, in each case, involve some initial clarification of what each of these terms means. How is Scripture to be read and understood? What are the repositories of the Tradition of the Church? And, given that Tradition cannot, in the Anglican Church, be understood as an immovable block to any evolution, what are the traditions governing change in the Church? And how does Reason play here? How does the Church encounter and accommodate the growth of secular science? How does it encounter and accommodate the life-experience of its members?

We will take up these categories in the order: Reason, Scripture, Tradition, since that order is, in this case, the most appropriate order for exposition.

Let me, however, be quite clear that I am not arguing here that every province in the Anglican Communion should immediately move to bless same sex unions. I argue only that in the circumstances in which the North American provinces (at least) find themselves — the cultural circumstances of social understanding and of science — it is right to allow the blessing of same sex unions. Indeed, not to do so would be to fail in fidelity to our Anglican way.

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A further, crucial, question that arises here is that of the meaning of 'blessing': what is it that we do when we bless an altar cloth, a pet dog, a couple? For an illuminating discussion of this question see Rae Fletcher, 'Blessing', available at: [www.anglican.ca/faith/ethics/hcc/fletcher.pdf](http://www.anglican.ca/faith/ethics/hcc/fletcher.pdf)

## Moral Evolution

In this section I will consider how popular moral values and imperatives have varied throughout Christian history, and how the Church's teaching has generally been part of that variance. Examples of these changing moral views are numerous, and some of them are very striking indeed. Taken together they suggest that the change in the secular moral assessment of homosexuality that has swept North America and much of Europe in recent decades is, if you take a long-term view, not all that surprising a phenomenon. What is surprising, rather, is that the official Church, in this educated age, is being so slow to catch up with it.

Morals change. The standards of what is acceptable behaviour — of what is reprobated and what is allowed or unnoticed — are in constant flux. What is an intolerable vice in one era may be a virtue in another; what is praised or taken to be neutral at one time may be regarded as criminal at another. The history of morality is an ever-shifting kaleidoscope.

In western countries, and notably in North America, until relatively recently, there has not generally been a sharp distinction between public morality and Christian morality. If society was threatened by some or other behaviour, the churches tended to add that item to the behaviour they condemned. A century and a half ago, in Canada, both gambling and drunkenness were serious social ills, and many churches, especially those in the Protestant tradition, brought gambling and drinking into the central focus of their moral condemnation — even though these forms of behaviour are not the subject of particularly strident condemnation in Scripture or in the traditional morality of the Church. The Church directed its preaching against agreed social ills. In the middle ages usury was commonly regarded as a most despicable vice, worse even than sodomy, and Christian moral theology came to reflect this; nowadays, of course, the opprobrium that used to attach to usury has vanished: we call usurers bankers, and they are often pillars of the Church. Usury has largely passed from our moral concern. Slavery, which was just a fact of life for nearly two Christian millennia, finally came to be condemned by secular society, and by the Church, in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the beating of wives, or of children, which used to be an accepted feature of life, pretty much morally neutral, is now despised, and in many jurisdictions is counted as criminal behaviour. These are familiar facts, but it is important to remind ourselves of them as we set about considering homosexuality in a Christian context. In the area of ethics the Church has never been a frozen Church. Morals change. They change radically, and sometimes they change very quickly.

We'll take a more careful sounding of two of these changes, so that we can see more clearly the way in which moral teachings, and moral preoccupations, have varied, and the way in which secular thinking and religious thinking have been related.

## i) Usury

Perhaps the best way to enter the story of the Christian understanding of usury is to set out five short extracts from Anglican pronouncements on the subject:

*John Jewell, Bishop of Salisbury, 1559-1571:*

If I lend one hundred pounds, and for it covenant to receive one hundred and five pounds, or any other sum greater than was the sum I did lend, this is that, that we call usury; such a kind of bargaining as no good man or godly man ever used: such a kind of bargaining as all men that ever feared God's judgment, have always abhorred and condemned. It is filthy gains, and a work of darkness, it is a monster in nature; the overthrow of mighty kingdoms; the destruction of flourishing states; the decay of great cities; the plagues of the world and the misery of the people. It is theft, it is the murdering of our brethren, it is the curse of God, and the curse of the people. This is usury, and by these signs and tokens ye shall know it.

*Edwin Sandys, Archbishop of York, 1576-1588*

By what means soever, thou receivest more than was lent thou are a usurer towards thy brother, and God will be a revenger against thee....All reason and the very law of nature are against it: all nations at all times have condemned it, as the very bane and pestilence of a commonwealth.

*William Sherlock, Dean of St Paul's, 1691-1707*

...makes it very plain, what is meant by Usury, when to take Usury is joyned with Violence and Oppression of the Poor....All other kinds of Usury are introduced by Trade and Commerce, and though it is against Charity to lend upon Usury to men, who borrow to supply their wants, yet if men borrow to increase their Trade and Fortunes, there is Justice and Equity in it, that the Lender shall make some Increase of his Money, as well as the Borrower. This is not properly Usury, but Traffick and Commerce, and I know no reason, why men may not Trade with Money, as well as with other Commodities.

*Richard Whateley, Archbishop of Dublin, 1831-1863*

The Israelites were forbidden in the law of Moses to lend to their brethren on usury, that is, interest. But they were allowed by God's law to receive interest on the loan of money lent to a stranger, and this shows that there can be nothing wrong in receiving interest.

*Anthony W. Thorold, Lord Bishop of Rochester, 1877-1891*

Money like every other talent is to be made the most of; and it is our duty to see that we do make the most of it....But making the most of it does not necessarily mean the highest possible return for it; simply the highest interest, compatible with good security.

This sequence of texts is a dramatic illustration of an absolute change in moral precept, from vituperative condemnation to robust approval, in the space of three centuries. What,

we may well ask, changed in the meanwhile? The short answer is that the *circumstances* of the Church changed, both the social circumstances, and what might be called the *theoretic circumstances*, that is, the broad economic and social theory with which people viewed the world. What changed was the data of secular Reason.<sup>5</sup>

Economic historians have written of the fear engendered by the obscure but certain knowledge that a whole new order was dawning: the 'age-long rural slumber'<sup>6</sup> was ending, towns were becoming boom-towns, centres of unimagined economic activity, an old model of settled life constrained by finite resources, was being supplanted by a vision of infinite possibilities; contentment with one's lot was giving way to dreams of limitless betterment. It was a change from an understanding of economic life as a zero-sum game, to understanding it as a creative endeavour, which could better the lives of everyone. To bring this version of economic life about, it was, of course, necessary to give up the idea that money was properly sterile, and so to permit the charging of interest. Those who feared this huge change in human self-understanding would of course condemn usury, but the change was inevitable, and so the Church was dragged, kicking and screaming on the one hand but scurrying to adjust its doctrines on the other, into a new vision of the world and of the possibilities for human well-being.

We have recounted this story only in outline and with only a few textual soundings, but however you tell it you cannot deny that it is a story of dramatic change in Church teaching — virtually a 180-degree shift over the course of a few centuries. And it also seems clear that this was a case in which the Church changed its laws, its moral principles, to reflect the changed *circumstances* in which it found itself. Moreover, it did so in contravention of Scriptural prohibitions. And those circumstances were, so to speak, theoretic ones, ones having to do with how humanity understood itself, how it understood the role of money, and how it understood the nature of economic life. In the face of these profoundly changed theoretic circumstances the old laws against usury were suspended; it seems a clear case of the sort of change in divine law that Hooker envisaged.

## ii) Slavery

The story of the English world's conversion in the matter of slavery has, of course, very often been told. In the first millennium and a half of Christianity there were few voices calling for the abolition of slavery *as an institution*, though many moralists called for kindness to slaves, and recommended the freeing of one's slaves as a signal act of charity. It was only towards the end of the seventeenth century, in the English-speaking world, that there began to be calls for the abolition of the system. Of course, by this time the nature of slavery had changed substantially; it was the extreme cruelty of the slave-trade, the wholesale abduction of men and women from west Africa to be transported overseas

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that the evolution of teaching in the Church of England between 1550 and 1875, illustrated by these quotations, recapitulates a development of doctrine in the pre-Reformation Catholic Church some four centuries earlier.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase is from Louis Baeck, 'The Mediterranean trajectory of Aristotle's economic canon', in Michalis Psalidopoulos, ed., *The Canon in the History of Economics: Critical Essays*, Routledge, London & New York, 2000

and sold to plantation owners in the southern British colonies in America, that began to stir moral consciences in Britain. This movement of conscience began among Quakers and other nonconformists, and so it initially went unheeded by the establishment. Eventually Methodists and Evangelicals joined the abolitionists, as also did freethinkers like Jeremy Bentham, and later John Stuart Mill. By the end of the eighteenth century the tide of popular thought was beginning to turn. With hindsight we see that these were moments in a fundamental social theoretic shift, a shift from conceiving of persons as the property of monarchs to conceiving them as autonomous bearers of rights: slavery appears simply as the most pressing case for the recognition of the freedom and dignity of individual persons.

William Wilberforce first presented a bill for the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire in 1789. It was defeated. In 1792 a new bill, calling for the 'gradual' abolition of the slave trade passed, but the devil was in the details, and especially in the meaning of 'gradual'. Nothing happened. Further abolitionist bills were presented in 1804 and 1806, but they both failed. It was not until 1807 that Wilberforce's Abolition Act finally passed into law. But of course this only abolished the slave *trade*. There were still many slaves in the British Colonies. And it was not until 1833 that the Emancipation Act was passed, formally freeing all slaves in British lands. And this same drift in popular sentiment occurred also in America, though emancipation was accomplished there only in 1865, and only after a bloody civil war had been fought on the issue.

From the first stirrings of moral disquiet until American emancipation in 1865, nearly two hundred years passed. During this period there was much debate, much speechifying, and a certain amount of sermonizing. Curiously, the 'official' Anglican Church — that is, the bishops and senior prelates of the Church of England — do not appear to have preached copiously on the subject.<sup>7</sup> The explicitly religious record stems mostly from America, and it is mostly in favour of slavery.

For, indeed, the scriptural texts nowhere suggest that there is anything amiss with slavery as a system; biblical writers seem all to presuppose it as a fact of life; the texts that mention it don't question it as an institution, they merely regulate it. Let us look at some examples.

The very first mention of slavery in the Bible is in Genesis 9, 25-27. The context is that Noah curses his son Ham for having seen him naked; but this curse is to fall on Ham's *son* Canaan, and his descendants:

Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers. He also said, 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem. May

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, since the Church of England is an established church, the English Parliament has jurisdiction over its doctrine and discipline: changes to the prayer book have to be passed by Parliament, and Parliament has passed laws even regarding liturgical practice. For this reason, a debate in the English Parliament about a moral matter like slavery is, in effect, a debate in the highest courts of the Church of England.

God extend the territory of Japheth; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem and may Canaan be his slave.'

Now it was standardly understood that Africans were the descendants of Ham. Thus this verse not only *permitted* the enslaving of Africans; it *mandated* it as fulfilling the will of God. The slave traders and plantation owners could rest easy in the knowledge that their practice of enslavement was a response to God's direct command.

One feature of, especially, the African slave trade, was the cruelty with which the slaves were often treated. But that, too, has a direct biblical justification, in Exodus 21, 20-21:

And if a man smite his servant, or his maid,<sup>8</sup> with a rod, and he die under his hand; he shall be surely punished. Notwithstanding, if he continue a day or two, he shall not be punished: for he is his money [property]. (KJV)

So the physical abuse of slaves — whipping, scourging, beating — and other tortures are permitted so long as the slave so treated remains alive for a day or two.

Moreover, female slaves could be used by their masters for sexual or reproductive purposes, as in Genesis 16, 1-2:

Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. (KJV)

The New Testament seems similarly to assume the institution of slavery; neither Jesus nor Paul condemns the practice — though there were junctures where they might naturally have done so had they been so minded. In Ephesians 6, 5-9, Paul instructs slaves to be obedient to their masters, and in 1 Timothy 6, 1-3 he tells slaves that they must honour their masters. And, of course, the whole of the letter to Philemon is about the return to him of his runaway slave Onesimus, whom Paul had encountered in prison.<sup>9</sup>

In short, the Scriptures nowhere condemn slavery; many texts bear on it, but their purpose is to regulate it, saying who may be enslaved and for how long, how slaves may be treated, how slaves must treat their masters, and so forth. The gist of Scripture was well summed up by Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America:

[Slavery] was established by decree of Almighty God...it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation...

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<sup>8</sup> The Hebrew words are better translated 'male or female slave', as is made clear by the end of the next verse

<sup>9</sup> It is a curious fact that, in urging Onesimus to return to his master Philemon, Paul is acting contrary to one of the Torah rules about runaway slaves.

Christians who opposed slavery, and there were many of them, thus had to do so not on the basis of the *letter* of the law, but on the basis of its *spirit*. The surface of the text gave them nothing to hang onto; they had to dig deep into its fundamental teaching of love among people — indeed they had to find a meaning, an implication, that was probably never in the minds of the authors of the sacred texts. They had to go behind the plain words of Scripture and in doing so they found a meaning that contradicted the plain words. Their deep Christianity contradicted the shallow religion of the biblical texts. They had the courage to displace the shallow reading by the deep one.

Had they not done so, Africa might still be the preserve of slave-traders, and Africans might still be their prey.

This has been a rapid look at two of the moral issues that have engaged the Christian Church over its history. The deep lesson from it is that with which we began: *morals change*. They change in response to changing *circumstances* of the Church, changing *theoretic* circumstances, changing understandings of the human condition. Moreover, they change in defiance of the surface meaning of Scripture.

## Reason

*whatsoever any man can necessarily conclude by force of reason*

### i) social history of homosexuality

North Americans who are in their sixth decade or higher have seen quite a lot of social change, but in some ways the most remarkable social change of all has been the change in attitude with regard to homosexuality. The reason it is so striking is that, a generation ago, the visceral loathing and disgust felt for homosexuals and homosexuality lay so deep in us all; it is simply amazing that those attitudes should have so largely evaporated. The matter of homosexuality was truly a *taboo* in our culture. And, for any culture, the lifting of a taboo is a huge moral shift.

Just how the lifting of this taboo came about is a complex story, and we will see some of it shortly. But however it came about, it brought in its wake a huge current of scholarship — the scholarship of social history — that has given us a much clearer understanding of the whole moral history of homosexuality, that is, the history of the moral understanding of homosexuality.

Of course the word 'homosexuality' is of fairly recent coinage, and is indeed only a little over a century old. Before that term came into use, and beginning in about the eleventh century, the operative term was 'sodomy', though in fact the terms do not have altogether the same meaning. Indeed this change in language is itself an important part of the moral history. And before the eleventh century the terminology is diverse; some writers deplore effeminacy,<sup>10</sup> others pederasty,<sup>11</sup> lusts which transgress the laws of nature,<sup>12</sup> deformation of men into women,<sup>13</sup> the union of men with men,<sup>14</sup> unseemliness with males,<sup>15</sup> the shameful acts against nature such as were committed in Sodom.<sup>16</sup> This very diversity of language, too, contains a lesson.

Let's turn now to look at the broad sweep of the history of the moral understanding of homosexuality, setting it out in nine stages. These stages are, of course, not perfectly distinct chronologically. And, in particular, what we describe as the state of mind at a given moment will not have been the state of mind of *everybody*, just as, now, the prevailing educated view in the west is not everybody's view. Here, however, is the history as we see it.

#### 1) *a vice*.

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<sup>10</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks* 2

<sup>11</sup> *Didachê* 2:2

<sup>12</sup> Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 4

<sup>13</sup> Novatian, *The Jewish Foods* 3

<sup>14</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Proof of the Gospel*, 4:10

<sup>15</sup> Basil, *Letters* 217: 62

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 3:8:15

The Church Fathers unanimously condemn homosexual behaviour, though there does not appear to be a settled understanding as to why it is to be condemned. In the texts we have just referred to, Justin Martyr seems to condemn mutilation for the purpose of sodomy, and he does so because it is a pagan practice; Clement of Alexandria seems to condemn it because it is what the pagan *gods* do; Novatian because it deforms men into women; Cyprian of Carthage because of the frenzied lust that he takes to be part of homosexual encounters; Chrysostom and Augustine because it is against nature.

Two things are to be noted here. First, we do not get much, in the writings of the Fathers, in the way of a psychological account of homosexual behaviour. The most we have, I think, is a suggestion, in the work of Basil the Great, that anyone — that is, any monk<sup>17</sup> — might find himself tempted by a beautiful young monk singing opposite him in choir. And so Basil advises that one should, at meals, sit far from other young men; when a young man converses with you, you should answer with eyes cast down. In lying down to sleep don't let the clothes of a young monk be near yours — have an old man between you. That is, Basil's view appears to be that anyone — that is, any monk — might be tempted to homosexual behaviour. 'Through [young men] the enemy has kindled the desires of many and then handed them over to eternal fire...' What this analysis implies, then, is that homosexual behaviour is a *vice*, a form of behaviour to which anyone might be tempted, and which could, if indulged, gradually come to commandeer the soul. It is the same sort of thing as avarice or mendacity or indolence or gluttony.

But if it is a vice, it appears in the works of the Fathers to be merely one vice among others. The *Didachê* mentions pederasty with murder, adultery, fornication, stealing, magic, witchcraft and abortion in a breathless list of what Christians should not do. Similarly St Basil's short treatment of homosexual behaviour is in the midst of a long list of reprehensible behaviours. It is one item among about forty.

At this period, then, in general, homosexual behaviour seems to be understood as a vice, but just one vice among others. Moreover the grounds for its disapproval seem to have been quite various.

## 2) *a particularly condemned, but secret, vice.*

Peter Damian, writing in about 1050, was the first to coin the term 'sodomy'. His *Book of Gomorrah* stands at the head of several new strands in the tradition. First, there is the singling out of sodomy as a vice for particular condemnation; the language of Peter's book is highly polemical and frequently obscene. Second, Peter is obsessed with the fact that sodomy can be a secret vice; he thus begins the long tradition of thinking that homosexuals have to be 'outed'. He sees sodomy as a vice that corrupts the monastery from within, a sort of hard-to-detect dry rot. Thirdly, though, sodomy is broadened into an array of sexual sins — four, to be precise: self-pollution, mutual rubbing of manly parts, pollution between the thighs, and fornication in the rear. But though the term 'sodomy' has this specific meaning in Peter Damian, its future career was one of uncertain, shifting and obscure meaning — a vague term for concealed vices. Fourthly,

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<sup>17</sup> When we read moralists in the first millennium of Christianity we should bear in mind that they are very often writing for monks

the hidden vice of sodomy is seen as one whose evil overcomes and annuls all other virtues in a man. Here is a striking story

There was a hermit...who was tricked by the devil into thinking that semen was no different from any other bodily superfluity. Just as he blew his nose when congested, so the monk masturbated whenever he felt the tickle of desire. On his death, the hermit was seized by demons in full view of his companion. The companion, knowing the man's practice of the virtues but not his sexual crime, despaired that anyone could attain salvation.<sup>18</sup>

This heightened importance of sodomy, this casting it as the sin of sins, is exhibited in a remarkable book a nearly two centuries later. In the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council, Paul of Hungary wrote a manual of instructions for the sacrament of confession, the *Summa of Penance*. In this book the sections on the sin against nature make up about 40 percent of the treatise on all the vices. To say this differently, Paul gives the sin against nature more attention than the capital sins of vainglory, anger, envy, sloth and gluttony combined. What ought to be no more than a subcategory of the capital sin of *luxuria* (lust) comes to dominate the whole taxonomy of vice and to rival in length the whole discussion of virtue.<sup>19</sup>

### 3) *an accumulation-point of vices.*

It is also in Peter Damian that we find the first occurrence of the idea that sodomy is an accumulation-point of vices. By this I mean the belief that sodomy often goes together with other vices, notably avarice in general, and simony in particular. In later writers sodomites are adversaries of God, and, since their crime brings about famines, plagues and earthquakes, they are murderers and destroyers of humankind. This seems a foreshadowing of the tendency, centuries later, to attach vices of unreliability, secretiveness, traitorousness, vanity, obsequiousness and general moral weakness to the homosexual character.

### 4) *hysteria and scapegoating.*

Of course, once the idea gets going that the sin against nature is the cause of natural disasters, it becomes easy to bring denunciation of sodomites to a hysterical fever pitch. Sodomites become like witches: secret sinners who must be discovered; and when they are discovered they must be destroyed, for their sin brings catastrophe on the community.<sup>20</sup> And so homosexual behaviour, which one would have thought was a relatively private and unimportant sin, is cast as the very worst of sins, undermining society itself. It seems to be a direct result of this that sodomy frequently came under the purview of secular law. And the secular laws forbidding homosexual behaviour remained in effect, and only began to be repealed in the second half of the twentieth century.

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<sup>18</sup> Recounted in Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 60

<sup>19</sup> Jordan, p. 94-95

<sup>20</sup> This idea was still alive in Canada in the 1950s. The country's federal police force had a device that they called a 'fruit machine'; it was supposed to be able to detect homosexuals, for the purpose of denying them security clearance for senior positions in the public service.

5) *construction of a personality.*

In the nineteenth century, there seem to have been two further developments. The language of hysterical denunciation of sodomites passes into something even more powerful — silence. Sodomy becomes the sin that dares not speak its name; the subject cannot even be mentioned except with the most elaborate indirection. This powerful silence reigned as late as the 1960s in Canada: I remember it from my own childhood. But also, in the nineteenth century — and growing naturally out of the earlier tendency to accumulate other vices around sodomy — there comes to be a construction of a homosexual personality. This is the development that the social historian Michel Foucault so famously captured in his remark that

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.<sup>21</sup>

And the literature of the end of the nineteenth century abounds in representatives of the species: Proust's Monsieur Charlus, Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, Huysmann's Des Esseintes: indolent, shifty, vain, selfish, unreliable, weak, effete, artistic, and, at the worst, inclined to treason.

6) *medicalization.*

But at the same time that this single homosexual personality is being hypothesized, it also becomes a subject of medical interest. The idea becomes current that homosexuality is not so much a vice as a medical condition; and, as a medical condition, it is open to cure. This is the context, indeed, in which the very word 'homosexual' — a typical medical neologism of the time — was coined. It is also the period of the birth of the medical specialty of psychiatry. And so was launched a century's worth of attempts to cure homosexuals, whether with electric shock treatments, with psychoanalysis, or with other devices. Very broadly, to be sure, it didn't work.

It was implied by the medical analysis, of course, that homosexuality could not be regarded as a vice, that is, a form of reprehensible behaviour that anyone might be tempted to — like gluttony or avarice. Whether the roots of homosexual desire lay in genetics or in very early development, it could not any longer be regarded as a voluntary and deliberate turn.<sup>22</sup> (It is strange, given this, that the popular language casting homosexuality as a 'lifestyle choice' should have endured as long as it has.)

7) *deconstruction of the personality.*

In about the 1960s the tide began to turn. An early element of the change was the realization that there were many men whose sexual desires were for other men, who did not fit the stereotype. They could be loyal soldiers, stupendous athletes, outgoing politicians, strong-minded statesmen, and so forth. At the same time, lesbians — who for

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<sup>21</sup> *The History of Sexuality*, Vol 1: An Introduction, tr. Robert Hurley, (New York) 1980, 43.

<sup>22</sup>

most of the two millennia of this discussion had been scarcely more than a footnote — became a homosexual identity of their own. And the notion that homosexuality attracted other vices — a notion that was preserved in the vagueness belonging to the term 'homosexuality', which didn't differentiate among effeminacy, pederasty, abusive sexual behaviours — fell into discredit. The stereotype was broken.<sup>23</sup>

8) *labelling theory; demedicalization.*

In the middle 1960s a movement in sociology called 'labelling theory' brought about the realization that much of the homosexual stereotype was an artificial structure, built by heterosexuals. The sickness of homosexuals was nothing more than the fact that the rest of society labelled them as sick and treated them as sick. (Much was made of the example of left-handedness, which had for centuries been regarded as a disorder, and for which cures had been attempted.) The shiftiness and secrecy of homosexuals was just a product of the fact that the rest of society would ostracize and punish them if their homosexuality was discovered. The traitorousness of homosexuals was just a product of the fact that social attitudes to homosexuality made them very subject to blackmail. Realizing that the 'sickness' here was not inherent in the persons but was a categorization imposed by society, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of psychological disorders in 1973. The normality of the statistically abnormal had been recognized. At the same time, research began to show how remarkably extensive homosexual behaviour is in the animal kingdom — a demonstrated fact that is still curiously denied by some people.

9) *acceptance as natural.*

The ultimate result of these accelerating developments of recent decades is being realized now, as homosexual men and women are able to be entirely open and frank about their sexuality; they are able to work in all the professions, including very public and responsible professions like politics. In Canada, now, homosexual couples have the full protection of the law, and they have access to civil marriage throughout the land. In retrospect, the way in which homosexuality was understood for centuries — as a reprehensible vice that attracts other vices and altogether nullifies what virtues a person might have, as an unmentionable and abhorrent sin, and even a crime — seems a cruel understanding, born of ignorance, and, no doubt, of fear. In these two millennia of misunderstanding there is much of which we must repent.

A question that naturally arises, as we consider this long history of oppression, is this: what is the *deep* reason for the loathing of homosexuals that our culture has known? It can't be Scripture passages — we don't *loathe* drunkards, although Scripture is regularly disapproving of them. It can't be the fact that homosexuality was a pagan thing, since our collective awareness of paganism as *the other* disappeared long ago. It can't be the

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<sup>23</sup> The term 'stereotype' has gained such currency that its strikingly informative etymology is generally lost to view. The word comes from the technical language of the 19<sup>th</sup> century printshop. It names a technique invented by the French printer Didot; you set your page of text in movable type; then you take a plaster cast of the page, and then you pour type metal into the plaster cast; the result is a single solid (Gk *stereos*) piece of type which does a whole page. In a stereotype, then, many otherwise separate units are, so to speak, stuck together in a large unit.

frenzied lust of gay sex, for straight lust is no less frenzied. No doubt these various items contributed to the case for condemnation and inflamed the loathing, but it seems hard to believe that any one of them was the root of it. What, then, was at the root?

We can't answer this question with absolute certainty, of course. But think of this. One striking feature of the long centuries of social and ecclesial condemnation of homosexuality is that it virtually always *has only men in view*: it thinks of the gay case, almost never the lesbian case. Why is that? Is it just because the society was patriarchal and always thought of everything in terms of men? Maybe; but maybe there is more to it than this.

There is very little overt moralizing about homosexuality among the pre-Christian Greek writers, but what there is seems heavily bound up with the idea that homosexual love feminizes a man, makes a man play the woman's role. This is fairly explicit in Aristotle,<sup>24</sup> for example; and the following is recorded of the philosopher Diogenes:

Seeing a young man behave effeminately, 'Are you not ashamed,' he said, 'that your own intention about yourself should be worse than nature's: for nature made you a man, but you are forcing yourself to play the woman.'<sup>25</sup>

This theme of the disgrace that a man brings upon himself by acting as a woman is very strong in Greek civilization; it seems likely that a similar thought may lie behind some of the Leviticus passages against homosexual relations. So it may be that the deep hatred of male homosexuals in the western tradition stems ultimately from the disprizing of women that was a common feature of the cultures of the Mediterranean basin. Homosexuals are shameful because they demean themselves by lowering themselves to the status of women. Loathing homosexuals is a natural extension of disdain for women. If this is right, then it is no accident that the century of women's liberation is also the century of gay liberation.

## **(ii) The question for the Church**

In Canada therefore, and in many western countries, the secular understanding of homosexuality has changed radically in recent decades. Secular society has come to see the old attitudes to homosexuality as profoundly mistaken, and extremely unfair and unjust. Homosexuality is statistically abnormal, but, like left-handedness, it is a normal abnormality. As a proclivity it is either inborn, or at any rate acquired so early in life that the agent has no say in its acquisition. And just as our western societies, in their pluralism, have had to learn to tolerate racial and religious minorities, so there seems no reason why they should not tolerate sexual minorities as well.

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<sup>24</sup> See the discussion in John Thorp, 'The Social Construction of Homosexuality', *Phoenix, the Journal of the Classical Association of Canada*, 46 (1992) 1, pp. 54-61

<sup>25</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, tr. R.D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1970, Volume II, Book VI, chapter 65

Moreover, the retreat from silence on the one hand, and from vague, obscure language on the other, has allowed us to pull apart the many different strands that used to be all confused together as 'sodomy' or as 'homosexuality'. There is pederasty, the sexual exploitation of children. There is promiscuity, the multiplication of sexual partners. There is sexual aggressiveness. There is exploitative pornography. All of these behaviours, which are socially negative, may occur as heterosexual or as homosexual phenomena. They, therefore, must be separated from homosexual behaviour itself. They are not packaged together. The old 'homosexual package' that we had constructed in our minds has come undone.

In the face of this dramatic conversion, this rather sudden realization of how wrong, how confused, and how unjust we have been for centuries, the western countries are putting their secular houses in order. Rights for homosexuals are being affirmed; prejudice and intolerance are being denounced; sensitivity training is being encouraged; homosexual partnerships are being honoured; homosexual marriages are being legally contracted.

One other point must be noted. In my experience, individuals who have undergone this conversion of understanding about homosexuality are not inclined then to be grudging in their acceptance; they are inclined rather to feel a huge sense of relief that scales have dropped from their eyes. Gay liberation does not just liberate gays; it liberates everyone from the culture's past pattern of ignorance, prejudice and fear.

The question for us, here, is what the Church should think and say about this? Is this a case in which the secular world, in what it takes to be a move toward justice that is inspired by understanding, is in fact going hopelessly wrong? Or is it a case like that of usury or that of slavery, in which the Church should simply shed a dying and pernicious worldview and bring its regulations into conformity with the one that is newly upon us? How can this question be decided?

Reason has shown that in our past centuries of scapegoating homosexuals, of excoriating condemning and loathing them, we were victims of error and misunderstanding, and we were perpetrators of deep injustice. What can Scripture and Tradition tell us here? Do Scripture and Tradition require us to reject the data of secular Reason? Do Scripture and Tradition require, that, in contradiction of the data of Reason, we Anglicans must continue to condemn gay and lesbian intimacies? Can Scripture and Tradition trump secular Reason and permit the Church to continue its infliction of harm and injustice? Or do they point in another direction altogether? Is the liberation of homosexuals from centuries of being abhorred the work of the Father of Lies? Or is it the work of the Holy Spirit? How can we decide?

## Scripture

### *What Scripture doth plainly deliver...*

In an essay of this scope we cannot, of course, engage the exegesis of particular Scriptural passages in depth. We shall rather stand back from the particular passages and raise a series of larger questions about Scriptural injunctions in general.

The questions, then, for a discussion of Scripture are:

- a) whether it really does convey a negative attitude to homosexual intimacies;
- b) if so, whether that attitude is prescriptive for us, or merely descriptive of a cultural attitude of ancient Jewish or late antique mediterranean culture, an attitude that itself forms no essential part of the Christian message;
- c) even if it is prescriptive, whether it is about our modern phenomenon of lifelong committed relationships, or about some other kind of intimacy;
- d) even if it is relevant to those committed relationships, whether the surface dicta of Scripture (of which there are, after all, only seven on this subject) should not rather be overcome by the deeper message of Scripture, as happened in the case of slavery.

On the whole it seems hard to deny that (a) the Scriptural writers take a negative view of homosexual intimacies, at least among males.<sup>26</sup> What is difficult, however is to know whether there are any limits to the range of such frowned-on intimacies: a gangbang of angels in the street seems a different category from respectful sexual intimacy with a slave. Are all equally condemned? Are some more condemned than others? Are some not condemned at all? What is the feature of such intimacies that, so to speak, sticks in God's craw: is it their association with pagan rituals, is it their nonprocreativeness, is it their implication of sexual infidelity in marriage (in a society in which, essentially, all males were married), is it the whiff of promiscuity that hangs about them, or is it just their simple same sex-ness? For reasons discussed below it is important to have some sense of an answer to this question. What is the motive for the Scriptural writers' negative view of homosexual relations?

It has been much debated whether (b) the negative attitude toward homosexuality in the Scriptural writers should be read by us as descriptive of the culture of another time and place or also as prescriptive for our own. We used to regard the approval of slavery and the condemnation of usury as prescriptive, and we have moved now to regarding them rather as merely descriptive of an older phase of human history. This issue has sometimes been pursued by raising the deeper question whether the Bible is of divine inspiration or merely the record of a people's reaction to its experience of the divine (as, for example, in the well-known debate between Bishop N.T. Wright and Marcus Borg). Fortunately there is no need to settle that huge and divisive question in order to find guidance as to whether these Bible passages are prescriptive for us or merely descriptive of ancient culture.

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<sup>26</sup> It has been persuasively argued that the passage from *Romans* 1 that is often taken to refer to lesbian relations in fact refers to heterosexual anal intercourse.

One of the gifts of the New Covenant is that we no longer understand moral precepts as simply God's caprices. Divine injunctions have an understandable motive: there are no arbitrarily forbidden apples in the New Creation. To persuade ourselves that some course of action is indeed illicit we must be able to *locate the harm* in it: we seek to know God's motives, if I may put it so, and in the light of that knowledge we interpret and adjust the surface injunctions. That, at least, has been the Anglican approach.

Consider the matter of divorce. There could scarcely be a clearer, more direct, less ambiguous injunction than Christ's prohibition of divorce. How is it that we Anglicans have become comfortable with softening it? Well, we have understood its motive, which is clear enough from the Prophets: in that society, where all property was owned by men, to divorce a woman is to cast her into inescapable poverty, to cast her to the margins. That is the evil of divorce. But in a society like ours in which that is not the inevitable consequence of divorce, in which there are provisions for division of goods when a marriage fails — in a society where the Divine motives are satisfied in other ways — it does not seem that the rule against divorce should be absolute. And so the judgment of the Church was that provision for remarriage after divorce was the better way to further the institution of Christian marriage. In a similar way, in many Anglican jurisdictions in Africa, there is a tolerance of polygamy in cases where men who have several wives convert to Christianity: to insist that all but one of the wives be set aside would be to condemn those women to poverty and marginalization. We adapt the injunctions of Scripture by seeking and satisfying their deeper motive, by *locating the harm* that they seek to forefend.

And, as we have already mentioned, our culture has come to see that all the harms that used to be alleged in homosexual love are nothing but delusions and chimeras. It seems, on the whole, then, that we should see the condemnation of homosexual relations *as such* as belonging to the descriptive rather than the prescriptive facet of the Biblical writings. To be sure, we continue to reprobate various forms of sexual misbehaviour that used to be lumped into the loose category 'homosexuality' — pederasty, promiscuity, abuse, etc. But we find no harm in the intimacies of committed adult same sex relationships.

And, in any case, (c), it seems extremely unlikely that any of the seven Biblical passages on the subject has lifelong, committed, nurturing relationships in view. The language is too harshly dismissive to allow us to think it is motivated by any knowledge of the phenomenon of successful lifelong homosexual partnerships that has become common for us. Some have argued that Paul, at least, knew the category of such partnerships, but if so he certainly never seems to have them in view as he writes.

Finally, (d), even if Paul means to condemn such relationships, there is an issue of whether we are to read the Bible for the woods or for the trees, to read it for the big picture and the deep message or to read it for the surface remarks, like a sort of recipe book. It would be a huge and doubtless hopeless enterprise to argue that the *right* way to read the Bible is for the big picture; all that needs to be shown is that that has usually been the *Anglican* style. To read the Bible in the Anglican way is to read it for its deep

message; it is because that is our way of reading that we permit remarriage after divorce, we ordain women, we condemn slavery, we rely on secular courts, we allow women to come bareheaded to church, we do not revile bankers: all of these practices, and many others, violate the surface text of Scripture.

A deep reading of the Scripture, then, urges us in the direction of love and acceptance of gay and lesbian people; and the force of that deep reading, combined with what Reason tells us about homosexuality, easily overcomes the surface prohibitions.

Another way of putting this is to say that we need to distinguish the *letter* from the *spirit* of the law. The Anglican way has been to prefer the spirit to the letter, as indeed Christ commanded.

So it is far from being the case that Scriptural prohibitions trump secular Reason on this subject; rather, Scripture — deep Scripture — urges abstinence from judgment, love, compassion, and acceptance.

## Tradition

*That which the Church by her ecclesiastical authority shall probably think, and define to be true or good....*

The honouring of homosexuals and of their relationships seems to many to be a most blatant flouting of two millennia of unbroken Christian tradition:

...such a break with catholic and universal tradition...is a mighty and awesome thing. To do anything so completely in discontinuity with what everyone has said everywhere and in every time is extraordinarily ambitious. It feels Promethean to me.<sup>27</sup>

These words seem to echo the so-called 'Vincentian Canon', a principle formulated by St Vincent of Lerins (d. c. 450) to help decide uncertainties about catholic teaching. His principle was: *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est* — what has been believed everywhere, at all times, by everyone — *that* is reliably catholic teaching.

It is in some ways a comforting idea amid the escalating noise and strife of theological dispute, that, if a view has hitherto found universal acceptance, we can be sure that it is right. But of course, as soon as one puts it that way, one sees that it won't do. It won't do as a principle of logic, and it won't do as a description of the Church's actual practice. It won't do as a principle of logic because it commits the fallacy of assuming that what is believed by everyone to be true must be true; this is a fallacy that Aristotle first registered, and that all through the Latin tradition of the Church was known as the fallacy *ad populum*. And history is full of examples of the great roar of the vast majority being proved wrong, and the small voice of the tiny minority being proved right. Some of the best stories in our culture are about just that. It is what prophecy is about.

We have already seen how the Church has changed its teaching in matters which, at the time they were being considered, would have been frozen by the Vincentian Canon. Until the early fourteenth century the Church had spoken with one clear voice about usury, and yet the teaching on usury was radically revised over the next few centuries. Until the middle of the eighteenth century the Church had had not a whisper of doubt about the well-foundedness of the institution of slavery, and yet the moral teaching about slavery was radically revised over the next few decades. Until the middle of the twentieth century the Church had maintained an absolute refusal to admit remarriage after divorce, and yet that discipline was radically revised at that time. Until the latter half of the twentieth century the Church had believed without question that priesthood was a male preserve, and yet the Church's practice here was radically revised. Though it might sometimes like

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<sup>27</sup> Paul M. Zahl, 'Last Signal to the *Carpathia*', *Anglican Theological Review*, 86 (2004) 649-650. Zahl is in fact speaking here of the Robinson consecration, but the sentiment is surely the same, in the minds of many people, when they consider the blessing of same sex unions.

to think otherwise, the Church has never in fact been an adherent of the Vincentian Canon.<sup>28</sup>

How, then, are we to reconcile Hooker's idea that Tradition is one of the legs of the three-legged stool, if the history of the Church in fact shows that traditional teachings have frequently been revised? There seems to be a contradiction here. Is this third leg made of rubber?

The word 'Tradition', in fact, is not Hooker's. His wording is that found at the head of this chapter: 'That which the Church by her ecclesiastical authority shall probably think, and define to be true or good...' We need to understand what this means.

At first hearing it is bizarre. It sounds as though it is saying that one of the bases of sound belief is 'what the Church will likely think' — and that really makes no sense. But this is to misunderstand the word 'probably'; Hooker is using the word here in a sense that has now become obsolete in English. What 'probably' means at this period and in this context is not 'likely', but rather 'in a way that approves itself to one's reason for acceptance or belief'.<sup>29</sup> That is to say that the third leg of the stool is what the Church, as a result of convincing reasoning, comes to believe. So the third leg of the stool is the Church's belief, *insofar as it is founded on convincing reasoning*.

And of course the Church's reasoning about its beliefs will rely on the data of Reason and of Scripture. In this way, Hooker's principle of Tradition avoids the gridlock of the Vincentian Canon: because Reason can discover new things, and because Scripture can be read in new ways in the light of evolving scholarship, the Church's beliefs may change. What has come to be called 'Tradition' is, in fact, in Hooker's understanding, simply the obligation of the Church to think 'probably' about Scripture and Reason.

Notice, moreover, something else. The Church is spoken of as having authority, as indeed one would expect in a catholic Church. But that authority is subject to the requirement of 'probable thinking'. This is to say that the Church is never at liberty just to issue thoughtless decrees, or just to rest on its laurels, intellectually speaking. Its authority rests on its 'probable thinking', on its convincing reasoning. If there are new data of Reason or new lights cast on Scripture, then the Church's obligation is to take account of them in its 'probable thinking'. And the Church's obligation to engage in such 'probable thinking' is never-ending.

Tradition, then, as the third leg of the Anglican stool, far from being a block to any evolution in the Church, is a requirement that we evolve our teachings thoughtfully and responsibly — *probably* — with due regard to Scripture and to Reason. 'We have always said it' is not an adequate reason for 'we shall continue to say it'.

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<sup>28</sup> For an entertaining account of how the Roman Catholic Church strives to maintain the illusion that doctrine never changes, despite the fact that it does change, see Maureen Fiedler and Linda Rabben, eds., *Rome has Spoken*, New York, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998.

<sup>29</sup> This is the definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Indeed, the tradition of the Anglican Church is precisely that its teachings *should* change in the light of evolving *circumstances*, including theoretic circumstances, circumstances of how we understand the world.

Far from holding us back from blessing same sex unions, Tradition — Anglican tradition — should move us to embrace them.

## Other Considerations

We have now seen that secular Reason has brought about a profound reassessment of homosexuality and homosexual activity. We have seen that the western Church, as it faces this changed circumstance of the place where it is incarnated, must ask itself about the well-foundedness of its traditional condemnation of homosexual activity *per se*. In particular, facing the question of whether it should bless same sex unions, it must ask itself whether the arguments from Scripture and Tradition that have shorn up its official refusal to do so, can in fact bear that weight. We have seen, in the last two chapters, that they cannot. No passage in Scripture seems to be about committed same sex unions. And the tradition of the Church has been to revise its moral strictures in the light of Reason and Scripture together, to adapt itself to the changing circumstances in which it is incarnated.

But there are other arguments, other considerations. Three of these have been prominent, and should be presented and investigated.

- i) The first is the argument that homosexual activity should not be approved because it is unnatural, against the natural order.
- ii) The second is that the purpose of sexual activity is procreation, and since procreation is excluded in the homosexual case, homosexual activity is not licit.
- iii) The third argument is really an objection to a case that is often made in favour of approving of gay and lesbian intimacies; it has to do with the idea of original sin.

### **i) the natural order**

It is probably true that, for most people, the deepest source of the traditional feeling that there is something untoward about homosexuality, and especially about homosexual activity, has been a sense that it is profoundly unnatural. By this is meant that it is contrary to the purposes of nature; it flies in the face of God's plan for the world; it is contrary to the way the world is 'meant' to work. This idea is very old, and is reflected, for example, in the ancient Greek term for homosexual love as love that is *para physin*, against nature.<sup>30</sup>

It is also reflected in many people's instinctive assumption that homosexual behaviour is not to be found in the animal world<sup>31</sup> — for all that happens in that world is natural, undeformed by human artifice.

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<sup>30</sup> The idea of the 'natural' is of course a complex idea. One of the meanings of 'natural' is 'in accordance with the plan and purposes of nature'; that is the meaning in play when people think that homosexuality is unnatural. But another meaning is 'inborn', 'innate', as opposed to 'acquired' or 'instilled by artifice'. I suppose it is by confusion of these two meanings that many people, believing that homosexuality is unnatural in the first sense, have taken it to be unnatural also in the second sense — a 'lifestyle choice'. But homosexuality is certainly not unnatural in the second sense, and we argue that to claim that it is unnatural in the first sense is to show unwarranted confidence that we know how nature is meant to work.

<sup>31</sup> Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria holds this view. See his short article 'Why I object to homosexuality', reproduced at: [www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/archives/000985.html](http://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/archives/000985.html)

We can begin with the last point. We now know, contrary to the popular assumption, that homosexual behaviour is in fact widespread in the animal world: such behaviour has been abundantly documented; the most recent compendious treatment is a massive book (750 pages) by Bruce Bagemihl.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, it is not the case that homosexuality is limited to the higher primates, as some have supposed: it is found also among species quite low on the evolutionary tree, for example, birds, fish, reptiles and insects. The truth is that the animal world is permeated, from top to bottom, by the phenomenon of homosexuality. Moreover, it runs the full human gamut, from casual encounters to lifelong pairing and parenting. To give some sense of the degree to which homosexuality is present in the animal world, we give, in the Appendix, a (doubtless incomplete) list of the *mammals* in which homosexual behaviour, in some form or other, has been documented and studied. Note that this is only a list of mammals; it does not attempt to give the evidence from other zoological families.

This evidence is massive; it is overwhelming; it surprises and contradicts a widely shared assumption. And it is incontrovertible. Homosexuality is not some form of corrupt human artifice that perverts nature; it is a phenomenon that is percolated through the natural world from top to bottom. Homosexuality looks as though it is very much part of God's plan for the world.

That said, of course, homosexuality is not normal, in the sense of statistically predominant: in all these populations there is much less homosexual behaviour than heterosexual behaviour. But it does not follow from that that homosexuality is not natural, that is, that it is not a product of nature. The point is that there is the category of the normal abnormal, the category of natural variation. In the same way, among primates, left-handedness is not statistically normal, but it is nonetheless natural: it is the normal abnormal, the natural variation.

The question that arises is how we are to regard natural variation: are we to regard it as a deformity that is to be corrected if possible? Are we to regard it with tolerance? Are we to regard it with special admiration? The natural variation of left-handedness we used to regard as a deformity, and there were many efforts to correct it; now we accept it without demur and we make provision in our public facilities for left-handed people. Being born with a caul is a natural variation; it used to be regarded as a special sign of blessedness, though now we take no notice of it. The natural variation of a short fuse, a hot temper, is one that we think needs to be held in check and controlled. What about homosexuality? Is it, as some cultures have believed, a sign of special blessing?<sup>33</sup> Is it a tendency, as our western culture has traditionally thought, that is to be restrained and hidden? Or is it, in fact, morally neutral, inflicting neither special good nor special harm on the society in which it occurs?

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<sup>32</sup> Bruce Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance — Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1999

<sup>33</sup> I have in mind particularly the tradition of *berdaches* or 'two spirit people' in some aboriginal traditions in North America.

Given its near ubiquity, homosexuality may very well have a role to play in how the world is 'meant' to work — it may well be a product of evolutionary biology — even if that role is not apparent to a quick and cursory examination. To assume that we can easily decipher the mind of God is surely a form of arrogance that verges on blasphemy. Homosexuality, it seems, is part of the wonderful variety of God's world.

## ii) procreation.

The second further argument against approving of homosexual activity by blessing same sex unions is that the purpose of sex is procreation, and that, in the homosexual case, by definition, sex must fail of that purpose: gay sex is necessarily sterile.

To this there is a very swift and definitive reply. In the mind of the Canadian Church procreation is not an essential, but only an incidental, purpose of sex. This is shown clearly by the fact that in the form for the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage, in the Canadian *Book of Alternative Services*, the celebrant's exhortation includes the following:

The union of man and woman in heart, body, and mind is intended for their mutual comfort and help, that they may know each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love [and that they may be blessed in the procreation, care, and upbringing of children].<sup>34</sup>

Note that the brackets are part of this text; the celebrant may omit the bracketed remark. The clear implication here is that acts of love may or may not have procreation as their intended purpose. The sacrament of marriage blesses a couple's knowing each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love; it does not attach procreation as an essential intention of the couple in order to receive that blessing. In other words, the Canadian Church blesses non-procreative sex — not just non-procreative sexual acts, but non-procreative sexual relationships.<sup>35</sup>

Nor is the Canadian Church alone in assigning an inessential role to procreation in its understanding of sexual activity. Any church that is willing to marry persons who are beyond the age of fertility — that is, most churches — implicitly takes the same view.

That is the short riposte to the idea that the essential purpose of sex is procreation. As far as it goes, it is a negative reply. But consider also what, through their marriage rites, the churches are saying is the essential purpose of sex. 'Knowing each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love'; 'that with delight and tenderness they may know each other in love, and, through the joy of their bodily union, may strengthen the union of their hearts and lives'<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> BAS, p. 541

<sup>35</sup> In the *Book of Common Prayer* of 1662 the procreation of children is given as the first of the three purposes of marriage; in the Canadian *Book of Common Prayer* of 1959 it is the second of three; in the *BAS* of 1985 it is the second of two, and it is optional.

<sup>36</sup> *The Alternative Service Book 1980*, (Church of England) Oxford University Press, p. 288

What we believe is what we express in our liturgies — *lex orandi lex credendi*. The clear implication of these texts is that, in the mind of the modern Church, the essential purpose of sex is the strengthening of a union in tenderness. And, of course, given that that is the case, no one can deny that sex can fulfill this essential purpose just as well in the homosexual as in the heterosexual case. You cannot disapprove of gay sex because it does not fulfill a condition that is not required of straight sex.

### iii) original sin

A bad argument that one often hears in favour of liberalizing the Church's attitude to homosexuals and homosexuality is this: 'but I was born this way!' Well, it is not perhaps in itself a bad argument, but it is certainly an insufficient argument. It is insufficient because it leaves out of account the whole Christian theory of original sin.<sup>37</sup>

For the mere fact that a proclivity is inborn does not make it one that should be indulged. Some inborn inclinations are surely good things, for example an inclination to calmness is one that, at least up to a point, is an excellent thing. Some inclinations are entirely neutral, for example left-handedness. And other inborn inclinations are decidedly negative, as for example a short temper. A negative inclination needs to be held in check, denied, restrained. Our negative inclinations are original sin.

So it is certainly true that to argue that homosexuality is inborn and not a voluntary choice is not to argue enough: it supports only half the case. It certainly defeats the (crazy) idea that homosexuality is a 'lifestyle choice'; but it does not address the question whether it is a good or a bad or a neutral proclivity.

My argument in these pages has been that — contrary to so many centuries of Christian thought — it is *not* a bad proclivity. Once one understands that homosexuality itself must be separated from all sorts of other things with which it has traditionally been thought to be packaged — pederasty, pornography, sexual violence, promiscuity, etc. — one sees that in and of themselves gay and lesbian intimacies do no harm. Exactly like heterosexual intimacies they can be well or badly used; they may do harm or they may do good. Where they are exploitative or abusive they do harm; where they 'strengthen the union of hearts and lives' they do good. In and of themselves they are morally neutral.

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<sup>37</sup> This argument is eloquently criticized by Paul Zahl, 'Last Signal to *Carpathia*', *Anglican Journal of Theology*, 86 (2004) 647-652.

## Conclusion

This essay set out to make an Anglican case, in an Anglican way, for the blessing of same sex unions in the Canadian Church. It has undertaken to show that the introduction of such a practice, such a liturgy, would sit comfortably on the three-legged stool of Scripture, Tradition and Reason.

We began by seeing that change in moral teaching has been a frequent phenomenon in Anglican history, and that Anglican ecclesiology, classically formulated in the work of Richard Hooker, both foresees it and allows for it. Hooker understands that Church laws will change in reaction to *circumstances*, as these latter change through time. Our history shows, moreover, that some of the relevant circumstances are theoretic ones; for example, our economic theory, our economic self-understanding, has changed radically, and this has entailed a change in Church teaching on the subject of lending money at interest.

We then considered the astonishing secular phenomenon of 'gay liberation'. Social history tracks for us the development of moral attitudes to homosexuality and homosexuals, and it is an astonishing development. Homosexuality has moved from being simply a form of behaviour in classical times, to being a vice among others in patristic times, to being a secret and particularly deplorable vice in the early middle ages, to being the accumulation-point of other vices in the high middle ages, to being a profound psychological pathology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and, more recently, to being a 'lifestyle choice', to being a socially constructed category, to being the broadly accepted normal abnormal. In the arc of this history we see many points at which gay people have been treated with loathing and cruelty, much of it abetted and encouraged by the Church. We have learned, moreover, that 'homosexuality' has been understood as a package, a package in which antisocial forms of behaviour like pederasty, adultery, abuse, treachery, etc. have been artificially lumped together with same sex orientation. As we separate the ingredients of this loose package we see what injustice we have done by this gratuitous agglomeration of traits, this stereotyping. An understanding of all of this has made the scales fall from our eyes, and we can now see with great clarity how our culture imposed a label of opprobrium on gay people, a label that corresponds to nothing that is objectively there. This is liberation for homosexuals, but it is also liberation for the rest of society — liberation from an irrational and automatic categorizing that did much harm. We suddenly see the terrible injustice that has been inflicted on gay people for no good reason at all.

The question that then arises is how an Anglican is to respond to this astonishing datum of secular Reason, this profound revolution in our way of seeing things? Are we to resist it? Are we to cling to the Church's old anathemas? If so, it could only be on the grounds of Scripture and Tradition that we could do so — for to do so would be to fly in the face of Reason.

We then examined — admittedly rather summarily — the question whether the Scriptural condemnation of same sex intimacies could bear this weight, and we saw that they could

not. Too many questions and uncertainties surround them, especially the question whether they are to be understood as prescriptive passages or as passages that are merely descriptive of social norms at the time of the Biblical writers, and the question whether this is a case of a tussle between deep Scripture and surface Scripture, between the spirit and the letter. And we saw that the Anglican way, at least, has generally been to seek the deep lessons of Scripture rather than its surface rules; that, at least, is what we have done in other contentious cases. Viewed in this way, Scripture would rather support the blessing of same sex unions than impede it.

We turned next to consider the third leg of Hooker's stool, Tradition. We saw that, in Hooker's understanding, Tradition had nothing about it of the so-called 'Vincentian canon' according to which nothing that has been universally accepted in the Church should ever change. Quite the contrary: what 'Tradition' means in Hooker is that the Church must think 'probably' about contentious issues, drawing Reason and Scripture into the mix. Seen this way, what Tradition tells us is not that we should stick automatically to old shibboleths, but rather that we should constantly re-examine and reassess them. Tradition, in other words, tells us to think again, to think hard, to think 'probably' about the matter.

Finally, as a sort of addendum, we considered some of the other sources, the nonscriptural sources, for a negative view of gay intimacies: ideas about the natural, ideas about procreation, and the notion of original sin. In each case we found that it will not bear the weight that it has been asked to bear. The natural world — the animal world — is replete with instances of homosexuality. Anglicans show in their liturgies that they no longer believe that the primary purpose of sexual relations is procreation. And we have come to see that, although homosexuality is present from the earliest moments of a person's life, it is not an inherently negative proclivity: although it is original, it is not sin.

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As we stand back from the clamour of this fray, we may want to put the question another way. We acknowledge that there has been a huge change, in Canadian society, in the way in which gay people are viewed; for those of us who were growing up in Canada of the 1950s this change is nothing short of revolutionary. It is a change that is so deep that no one of that era would ever have thought it possible. We have gone from thinking that homosexuality was so dreadful a thing that we could barely even mention it, to finding it quite ordinary and innocuous. The religious question is: granted that this deep change has happened, is it Spirit-led? Is it the work of the Wicked One, or is it the work of the Holy Ghost? In the former case the Church should resist it; in the latter it should welcome it and adjust its liturgies to recognize it.

The *St Michael Report* raises this question. The Canadian House of Bishops has also raised this question, and intimated that it wants another three years to answer it. I respectfully submit that we don't need another three years to answer it. How do we discern whether a sea change of this sort is of God or not? Well, which is the better world: one in which a category of people whose tastes, though harmless, are not

statistically normal, are loathed, shunned, treated as second-rate, or even just condemned to loneliness? Or one in which such people are fully accepted, allowed to flourish, and given the blessing of the Church?

Or, let us put it another way. We know the Spirit by its fruits. And what are the fruits of the Spirit? They are love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.<sup>38</sup> And surely it is clear that the liberation and acceptance of gay people is much likelier to nourish these fruits in them, than is their marginalization and exclusion. Gay liberation is *clearly* the work of the Spirit. How can it reasonably be judged otherwise?

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<sup>38</sup> *Galatians 5, 22-23*

**Appendix:**  
**Bagemihl's list of mammals exhibiting homosexual behaviour**  
 (see note 32)

**Primates:**

Pygmy Chimpanzee (*Pan paniscus*)  
 Common Chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*)  
 Gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla*)  
 Orang-utan (*Pongo pygmaeus*)  
 White-handed Gibbon (*Hylobates lar*)  
 Siamang (*Hylobates syndactylus*)  
 Hanuman Langur (*Presbytis entellus*)  
 Nilgiri Langur (*Presbytis johnii*)  
 Proboscis Monkey (*Nasalis larvatus*)  
 Golden Monkey (*Pygathrix roxellana*)  
 Japanese Macaque (*Macaca fuscata*)  
 Rhesus Macaque (*Macaca mulatta*)  
 Stumptail Macaque (*Macaca arctoides*)  
 Bonnet Macaque (*Macaca radiata*)  
 Crab-eating Macaque (*Macaca fascicularis*)  
 Pig-tailed Macaque (*Macaca nemestrina*)  
 Crested Black Macaque (*Macaca nigra*)  
 Savanna Baboon (*Papio cynocephalus*)  
 Hamadryas Baboon (*Papio hamadryas*)  
 Gelada Baboon (*Theropithecus gelada*)  
 Squirrel Monkey (*Saimiri sciureus*)  
 Rufous-naped Tamarin (*Saguinus geoffroyi*)  
 Verreaux's Sifaka (*Propithecus verreauxi*)  
 Lesser Bushbaby (*Galago moholi*)

**Marine Mammals:**

Amazon River Dolphin (*Inia geoffrensis*)  
 Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)  
 Spinner Dolphin (*Stenella longirostris*)  
 Orca or Killer Whale (*Orcinus orca*)  
 Gray Whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*)  
 Bowhead Whale (*Balaena mysticetus*)  
 Right Whale (*Balaena glacialis*)  
 Gray Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*)

Northern Elephant Seal (*Minounga angustirostris*)  
 Harbour Seal (*Phoca vitulina*)  
 Australian Sea Lion (*Neophoca cinerea*)  
 New Zealand Sea Lion (*Phocarctos hookeri*)  
 Northern Fur Seal (*Callorhinus ursinus*)  
 Walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*)  
 West Indian Manatee (*Trichechus manatus*)

**Hoofed Mammals:**

White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)  
 Black-tailed deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*)  
 Red deer (*Cervus elaphus*)  
 Swamp deer (*Cervus duvauceli*)  
 Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*)  
 Moose (*Alces alces*)  
 Giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis*)  
 Pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*)  
 Kob Antelope (*Kobus kob*)  
 Waterbuck Antelope (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus*)  
 Lechwe Antelope (*Kobus leche*)  
 Puku Antelope (*Kobus vardonii*)  
 Blackbuck Gazelle (*Antelope cervicapra*)  
 Thomson's Gazelle (*Gazella thomsoni*)  
 Grant's Gazelle (*Gazella granti*)  
 Bighorn Sheep (*Ovis canadensis*)  
 Dall's Sheep (*Ovis dalli*)  
 Asiatic Mouflon (*Ovis orientalis*)  
 Musk-ox (*Ovibos moschatus*)  
 Mountain Goat (*Oreamnos americanus*)  
 American Bison (*Bison bison*)  
 European Bison (*Bison bonasus*)  
 African Buffalo (*Synceros caffer*)  
 Mountain Zebra (*Equus zebra*)  
 Plains Zebra (*Equus quagga*)  
 Takhi (*Equus przewalskii*)  
 Warthog (*Phacocoerus aethiopicus*)

Collared Peccary (*Tayassu tajacu*)  
 Vicuña (*Vicugna vicugna*)  
 African Elephant (*Loxodonta africana*)  
 Asiatic Elephant (*Elephas maximus*)

**Other Mammals:**

Lion (*Panthera leo*)  
 Cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*)  
 Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)  
 Gray Wolf (*Canis lupus*)  
 Bush Dog (*Speothos venaticus*)  
 Grizzly Bear (*Ursus arctos*)  
 Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*)  
 Spotted Hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*)  
 Eastern Gray Kangaroo (*Macropus giganteus*)  
 Red-necked Wallaby (*Macropus rufogriseus*)  
 Whiptail Wallaby (*Macropus parryi*)  
 Rat Kangaroo (*Aepyprymnus rufescens*)  
 Doria's Tree Kangaroo (*Dendrolagus dorianus*)

Matchie's Tree Kangaroo (*Dendrolagus matshiei*)  
 Koala (*Phascolartos cinereus*)  
 Fat-tailed Dunnart (*Sminthopsis crassicaudata*)  
 Northern Quoll (*Dasyurus hallucatus*)  
 Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*)  
 Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)  
 Least Chipmunk (*Tamias minimus*)  
 Olympic Marmot (*Marmota olympus*)  
 Hoary Marmot (*Marmota caligata*)  
 Dwarf Cavy (*Microcavia australis*)  
 Yellow-toothed Cavy (*Galea musteloides*)  
 Wild Cavy (*Cavia aperea*)  
 Long-eared Hedgehog (*Hemiechinus auritus*)  
 Gray-headed Flying Fox (*Pteropus poliocephalus*)  
 Livingstone's Fruit Bat (*Pteropus livingstonii*)  
 Vampire Bat (*Desmodus rotundus*)