

**Created in the Image and Likeness of God:
How we live out our creation as embodied, physical beings.**

Anglican History and Tradition.

Until the 20th century, Anglican history and tradition related to the teaching (or not!) of how we are to regard ourselves as physical beings was very much in line with that of the rest of the Christian Church. Our life together in the greater family of the church was an extension of our life together in the family of kinship and blood-ties.

Marriage was a life-long commitment and there were strict rules as to who one could or could not marry (see ‘Table of Kinship and Affinity’ BCP). A contract of intent to marry was as significant as the marriage ceremony itself, and Breach of Promise suits were not uncommon in the civil courts when an engagement was broken.

Until the mid-eighteenth century church weddings as we know them were contracted only between couples who were marrying for reasons of dynasty, property or advancement. The general population did not undergo a church ceremony but received a blessing on their union from the parish priest. Such a blessing was usually conferred in the church porch rather than in the church itself.

Sex before marriage was a sin, but until the nineteenth century it was not uncommon, particularly in rural communities, for betrothed couples to engage in sex without condemnation. A betrothal was as significant as a marriage, as has been stated previously. Chastity was a virtue, not only in the Anglican tradition but in most cultures, in all ages. It was, moreover, vitally important that the mother of future kings or aristocrats should be a virgin, to ensure that the bloodlines remained ‘pure’. It is interesting, however, to note that chastity was primarily regarded as a virtue among women. Men were granted more latitude! Chastity meant more than merely maintaining one’s virgin state; it meant full abstention from all sexual activity, including masturbation.

Contraception was neither expressly forbidden nor expressly approved. However, the general understanding was that one should do nothing to prevent the gift of children.

Abortion has not always been frowned upon by the church and church teachings on the subject have varied widely. Not even the Roman Catholic Church has always condemned abortion.

Birth was primarily a female concern. Until the late 18th century men were not involved in the birth process. Midwives, and the mothers and sisters of the new mother were in attendance and delivered and cared for the newborn. Men, as obstetricians, were not known until the nineteenth century. Birth took place in the home, not in a hospital, and the coming-into-the-world was perceived as matter-of-factly as death: it was part of a natural cycle.

Children were “to be seen and not heard”, and were treated as possessions of their parents, both by tradition and under law.

Same-sex relationships were abjured and generations of homosexuals spent their lives in the proverbial closet, suffering because of “the love that dared not speak its name”.

Divorce was anathema. Until the late 1960s the Anglican Church of Canada did not permit the re-marriage of divorced persons in the church. Even today, a couple seeking

marriage in the church must have the permission of the Diocesan Bishop and/or a Marriage Tribunal if one or both parties are divorced.

Extended family relationships were closer in bygone generations, since society was less mobile. Grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins were very much a part of one's life. Even as late as the 1950s it was not unusual for grandparents, parents, children and unmarried aunts and uncles to live in the same house. Nuclear families – that is, parents and children living apart from extended family – are primarily a post-World War II phenomenon.

Death, when it came, was perceived as a natural event. The end of one's physical life was not seen as or understood to be traumatic.

The Role of Culture in Religious Teaching.

The upheavals of the 20th century, with its scientific, technological, medical, psychological, and sociological changes, particularly with reference to the status of women and children, has thrown much of church teaching into question. Can we, as faithful people of God, reject these advances and cling to the past teachings of the church or do we need to review and re-think our interpretation of scripture in the light of social and cultural change? There are strands of the Christian church which negate science, technology, medical and psychological knowledge as being somehow apart from things of the spirit, but as Anglicans we have a tradition of viewing the world around us using scripture, reason and tradition to inform us and it is incumbent upon us to continue that process of seeking God in the world in which we live, and God's purpose for the world, for all creation and for ourselves as embodied, physical beings, created in the image and likeness of our God.

Other Cultures and Traditions

Much of the teaching of the church on sexuality have had more to do with social and cultural mores than with the teachings of Jesus or the working of the Holy Spirit. The writer of Timothy, for instance, was reiterating his society's view of women in I Timothy 2:8-15, a view of women which was shared by Greeks and Romans, as well as Jews and Christians of that day and age. In short, that passage is, in essence, a cultural rather than a spiritual teaching. Women were chattels, possessions, of their families – the families into which they were born and later the families into which they married. Indeed, under Jewish law, women were non-persons and could not bear witness in court cases. Children, too, were not perceived as persons in their own right.

Celibacy was viewed by Jews as unnatural. A man or woman who chose not to marry was guilty of selfishness! Marriage and the procreation of children was expected in Jewish society leading up to and during Jesus' time. Imagine the reaction St. Paul got in his own time and place, then, when he wrote "that it is better to marry than to burn" with its implication that living a life of celibacy was infinitely superior than subjecting oneself to the physical intimacy of marriage.

As Christians we have been directly influenced by scripture, of course, and even today there are strands of the Christian church which do not allow women and children a full role in the life of faith based on scriptural directives (qv I Timothy 2:8-15). In the more

conservative parts of the church universal there dress codes, prescribed roles for men, women, youth and children, and rules about food and behaviour, all based on scripture.

As Canadians we share a country populated for the most part by immigrants (people of aboriginal descent, including Métis, account for 2% of the population), regardless of when that immigration occurred. Moving from one country to another does not mean that we leave behind all cultural influences. In recent years, immigration from Asia and Africa has greatly surpassed that of immigration from Europe and in heavily-populated areas like southern Ontario and the lower mainland in British Columbia the cultural influences of immigration are more obvious than in, say, rural Manitoba or Newfoundland and Labrador.

Traditional Aboriginal Views of Sexuality

Prior to contact with Europeans, the aboriginal inhabitants of Canada lived as members of some fifty different nations (with up to 150 more nations south of what is now the Canada-US border), each with its own language, traditions, religion and culture. While there may have been similarities in all these areas, they were distinct from one another. However, some attitudes with regard to sexuality prevailed across these diverse cultures. Homosexuality was not condemned in any of the aboriginal cultures; indeed, homosexual people were generally accorded the same status as shamans. Sexual relations were perceived as natural and were not carried on out of sight of the children. There were no separate bedrooms in lodges, tipis or hogans! The body was not considered something shameful and something necessarily to be covered up. The original inhabitants of North America wore clothing only as protection against the elements or as a symbol of status.

Aboriginal cultures, not having written languages, passed on traditions, religious and medical lore, and social mores by example and in many of the aboriginal nations it was the grandparents who taught the children the culture of their society. One of the most harmful and lasting effects of the Residential Schools is the loss of the traditional role of the grandparent as teacher of the young.

In his book, ‘American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World’, David Stannard documents the negative effect that the European subjugation of North American native peoples has had on their societies and makes no bones about laying much of the decline of aboriginal culture on the doorstep of the Church!

Other cultural voices

Since the 1960s Canada’s population has grown by about one-third and much of that growth is due to an influx of immigrants from Asia and Africa. Consequently, Hindu temples and Islamic mosques are becoming as much a part of the Canadian city landscape as churches and cathedrals. One can meet Buddhist monks on the streets of Toronto and the subject of whether or not Muslim girls should be able to wear hijabs to soccer practice and young Sikh men should wear the kirpan to school have been subjects of hot debate across the country. Who can forget the whoop-de-doo that accompanied the Royal Canadian Legion’s attempt to ban turbans from their club rooms on the west coast? Or

the shockwaves that rippled through the Anglican Communion following the Archbishop of Canterbury's recent comments about Sharia Law?

Each of these groups bring to the Canadian patchwork centuries of tradition and culture. In traditional Hinduism young men and women do not marry as they choose, but marry partners chosen for them by their parents. In some Moslem traditions, women do not leave their homes unless they are covered from head to foot in a burqa. In some African cultures, as well as in Islam, polygamy is permitted and is not perceived as unnatural in any way.

Increasingly, too, our Canadian society is becoming more secular. Growing numbers of Canadians are becoming lapsed Christians (or Moslems or Hindus, etc) and seeking to enlarge their spiritual dimension outside the confines of organized religion.

Some questions for consideration

How do we as Anglicans in this multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-faith landscape establish for ourselves holistic and realistic understandings of human sexuality, using our three-legged stool of scripture as seen through the lens of reason and tradition? Perhaps we can begin by considering these questions:

- Who is responsible for teaching an understanding of sexuality to our children? Is it a family matter? Should the church be doing a better job? Is it the role of the schools?
- Why, for the most part, are we hesitant to acknowledge our own sexuality?
- When and why did sex become a secret, behind-closed-doors activity?
- Do I understand the difference between Anglican doctrine and religious tradition when it comes to the roles of men, women and children in our society?
- Who determines moral codes? Is it an individual responsibility, a matter of law or church teaching?
- Should we as 21st century Canadians uphold 1st century teachings about human sexuality, given the development of psychological, medical and sociological change?

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