

# Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2016

## Forgive Us Our Stubborn Conceptualizations

This is the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, a good time to reflect upon liberty. I did so by reading two articles, one from *Commonweal* and one from *Bondings 2.0*, a publication of *New Ways Ministry*, in service to the LGBT community.

The *Bondings* article raised the question whether there is an alternative to the "rigid orthodoxy" that continues to bedevil the Church's pronouncements on sex and gender. This article referred to the *Commonweal* article, by John Gehring, titled "False Choices & Religious Liberty", published June 21, 2016. Gehring makes the following point:

***"If conservatives need to do some soul searching about how they often set back the important cause of religious liberty, progressives also need a better approach that fosters dialogue and common ground instead of division."***

I found the points in both articles very well stated. Is there an alternative to "rigid orthodoxy"? Is there a "better approach that fosters dialogue and common ground instead of division"?

We need something better than a political argument about what is, for the Church, a stubborn conceptualization. In this Jubilee Year of Mercy, now would be an appropriate time for something better. I don't have an answer, but this is the subject of my musings for this article.

As Martin Luther King, Jr., said, the way to fight evil is not by direct confrontation but by doing good so as to crowd out evil. It is tempting to simply call out what is wrong. But a more disciplined strategy – to focus instead on doing good – reflects the ancient Greek wisdom of Orpheus, which can be paraphrased to speak the language of the Church's recent "Fortnight for Freedom" campaign: Orpheus demonstrated that the way to overcome the discriminations hiding behind the Siren Song of religious liberty is not to suppress the singing of the Sirens but to sing a more melodious song.

Freedom from discrimination would appear to be a more melodious song, but it apparently

doesn't ring clearly in the ears of many bishops and many Catholics. Why not? Perhaps a different approach is needed, and the *Bondings* article suggests a path. There is a "rigid orthodoxy" that needs the blessing of more adequate conceptualization of what our loving God is about.

It is usually more concrete and more comfortable to face discrimination on its own terms: fight back. It is immediate and satisfying. But a clearer melody may well be a conceptualization that places this very temporal struggle within historical context. We are part of a much longer and more enduring struggle for union with a loving God. This is a journey of repeated encounters with our "more primitive inclinations". It is also a journey of repeated examples of burying our God given talents of conscious awareness, and stubbornly sticking with what turn out to be "more primitive conceptualizations".

We have all experienced these "more primitive inclinations". Sexual desire is a potent part of our biological makeup, but that potency is embedded in God's creation. Investing that biological reality with love is the impetus behind marriage. It is a typically human idealization to reduce marriage to "one man and one woman", but that is not God's reality.

The reality is much richer. One out of every twenty thousand men are born a woman because that is the probability that the sex determining region (SDR) of the Y chromosome will be omitted during the complex biochemical processes through which the DNA of parents become a child. The SDR can also show up in a child whose 23rd chromosome pair is "XX", turning a genetic female into a biological male. The biological reality of gender evolved about one and a half billion years ago, and soon became dominant because this mechanism for transmitting life was more adaptive to changes in the environment, for both plants and animals.

Because of its evolutionary history, gender is more complex and ambiguous than the binary idealization. Gender correlated attributes

involve much more than the SDR. Even if 95% of us are reasonably well described by the binary idealization, it should come as no surprise that that other 5% (or whatever the figure is) is a vibrant LGBT community reflecting the diversity of God's creation.

In any event, sexual desire remains a potent part of our biological makeup. It is certainly true that this desire, robbed of the love that it can express, is among our "more primitive inclinations". Human language even has a name for this: concupiscence. Given the history, it is understandable that society would have developed simple rules for restraining sexual desire so that it does not become unhinged from love. Marriage between one man and one woman is a reasonable rule for 95% of us. But from what we now know about God's reality, a better ideal is simply to invest our relationships with love. That idealization works for all of us, not just the 95%.

So where does that leave the "rigid orthodoxy" – the idealization of a binary "one man and one woman"? It is, indeed, an orthodoxy. Human consciousness is quite a remarkable product of God's creation, and we are only gradually growing into a self-conscious appreciation of our capacity for conceptual creativity. The binary idealization that is causing society grief can be viewed in historical context, as part of cosmic unfolding since the Big Bang. It is simply a "more primitive conceptualization" and it is time to move on.

Moving on has become commonplace in physics and the sciences. We associate the controversy over Galileo with moving on from the conceptualization of cosmic reality as centered on the planet Earth. Isaac Newton systematized in mathematical form the motion of bodies in the heavens and on earth according to the same principles, relying on the assumption that space and time were absolute.

But observations of cosmic reality did not agree entirely with even the venerated Newton, and so at Einstein's behest we again moved on to a better conceptualization of physical reality, where space and time were neither absolute nor distinct. We now conceive of "space/time" where frame of reference determines how space

and time flow into one another. And Einstein's elegant conceptualization is based upon the simple assumption that the laws of physics are the same everywhere.

The historical development of more adequate conceptualizations in physics can serve as a model for a similarly historical view of religious conceptualizations. In religion as well as physics we really do need to move on. We are here because a loving God is sharing existence with beings who are able to love one another and – even more remarkably – come to comprehend God's creation itself. Development of this comprehension is not confined to physics. We are coming to see God's reality as one. If our ancestors were able to make sense of heaven and earth only by seeing them as separate worlds, that dualism can itself be explained in terms of a historical sequence from one "more primitive conceptualization" to the next.

There is something different about religious conceptualizations, though. They tend to be made sacred and untouchable, in a word, "sacralized". As St. Augustine's "Book of Nature" is now telling us, sacralizing the binary idealization of gender is simple idolatry. It places the simplifying constructions of human consciousness into the mind of a God whose reality is much richer.

Our better angels counsel a sense of the gradualness and graciousness of God's unfolding creation. What Einstein called "the Old One" is gently prodding us toward better conceptions of what is real. We need the humility to appreciate the irony of idolatry. Has our justifiable awe of God led us to sacralize conceptualizations which seemed to be God given, but -- in the most generous view of past mistakes -- no longer reflect the love with which they were conceived?

The common theme is love, love of God and neighbor. Jesus has been right all along. Our conceptualizations of God's reality have from time to time blinded us to the presence of the Risen Christ. As Francis might say, as a people "we are a sinner".

It's time for our institutional Church to move on, to a more real and less oppressive conceptualization of gender.