"De-centre-ing" sexual difference in public and ecclesial discourses on marriage

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Abstract

Public and ecclesial discourses influence opinions on the institution of heteronormative marriage. The term "discourse" indicates that private knowledge and experiences are made known in the public sphere. Against this background the article focuses on three postmodern approaches to a theology of marriage with regard to the significance or insignificance of the biological difference between femaleness and maleness. The first approach is that of marriage as a linguistic expression of intimacy in a relationship. According to this view, heterosexual marriage is not seen as the only possibility for expressing the intimate relationship between God and human beings. The second approach assumes that love and caring, supposedly inherent to heterosexual marriage, can also exist in other relationships. This implies that marriage as institution should also be available to people in relationships other than heterosexual. The third approach emphasizes marriage and sexuality as being embedded in community. Such a view makes sexual difference and procreation peripheral to sexual ethics. The aim of this article is to suggest a further option for consideration, namely the "de-centre-ing" of sexual difference in the theology of marriage. This postmodern option pleads for a respect for privacy with regard to sexual intimacy, also in ecclesial and public discourse.

1. BACKGROUND

Three perspectives on sexuality and marriage that emerged in ecclesial circles during the 11th to the 13th century CE, form the background of this article. In the canons of the church marriage was a sacrament instituted by God at creation. From this perspective, the heterosexual difference between maleness and femaleness and monogamous loyalty were of central importance. This creational-*theological* view on sexuality and marriage was

also embedded in another set of laws – that of *nature*. A third set of laws, namely that of the consential *contract* between two heterosexual human beings, was seen as the product of the first two: God's creation and the church's sacramental endorsement of this natural phenomenon.

The aim of the article is to argue against religious, naturalistic and heterosexual essentialism with its emphasis on the biological sexual difference between maleness and femaleness. This reifies human sexuality as *object* of religious scholasticism and thereby deprives human beings (the *subjects*) of the dignity of an authentic life before God. The article opts for a "de-centre-ing" of the sexual difference of maleness and femaleness, which will provide a different kind of language for articulating the relationship between people among themselves and between God and human beings. The article demonstrates how a *positivist* approach to the Bible can be utilised to legitimate socio-religious essentialism and it illustrates the process of sacramentalization and de-sacramentalization. Finally, the article presents an alternative namely *relational* "Bible-talk". It exposes the abuse inherent to ecclesial and public discourse on sexuality and marriage and concludes with a plea for privacy concerning human sexuality in order to honour the human subjectivity and preserve the human dignity of individuals.

2. INTENT

The public and ecclesial discourses on sexuality influence opinions regarding the institution of heteronormative marriage. The term "discourse" indicates that opinions and ideas cannot only be regarded as private knowledges and experiences, but are made known to others within the public sphere (Beukes 2002:285 n 8). In the context of modernity sexual intimacy has gained public commercial value. This constitutes a reification of private experiences, acts and opinions which can be clearly seen in industrial cultures. In these cultures human sexuality is used to advertise and sell a variety of products which, in themselves, have nothing to do with sexuality or sex. Mostly people's lives are not affected by this reified use of sex over a distance. When the communication over a distance stimulates people to perpetrate acts which harm others, it has an indirect effect. A more direct effect of the reification and objectification of human sexuality are experienced by real people whose personal lives and privacy are invaded and exposed by the media to ostensibly "serve the public interest". Public figures become the victims of persecution by the media under the pretext of serving the public, but what is nothing other than the exploitation of sensation for commercial purposes.

A similar dynamic can be seen where ecclesial disciplinary hearings take the form of persecution. People's private lives are exposed, often

resulting in the destruction of lives rather than in the healing of both the "guilty" parties and the "victims" as one would expect the Christian objective to be. The outcome exposes the intent. Had the intent been healing, the actions would have been "in the interest of people" (public or church). If the outcome is destruction the question is: whose interests were served and what were those interests? Were they *commercial*, as in the case of the media, or were they about *power* as is often the case in politics and in the church?

From a postmodern perspective, the hidden commercial or power interests and the ensuing destruction of people's lives, would be deemed more immoral that the immorality of the sexual acts that were exposed by the media or the church in the first place. Already in 1797 this insight was articulated by the Marquis De Sade (1714-1840)[1] in his work *Juliette* (see Bataille 1987:177-198; Beukes 2002:285 n 6). In his work, *Masochism*, Gilles Deleuze (1991:58) uses the expression *coldness and cruelty* in the subtitle to denote the immoral way in which a public discourse is made out of sexual intimacy (see Beukes 2002:285 n 7). Since the publication of Michel Foucault's (1978, 1985, 1986) three volumes on *The history of sexuality*, the so-called "postmodern Foucauldian revolution" was set in motion (see Beukes 2002:283-298). Foucault's plea is to liberate sexuality from exposure to the public eye and to provide a safe private space for sexual intimacy. This would include creating a safe space for sexual minorities by also removing discourse on their sexuality from both the public domain and faith communities. However, ecclesial authority claims to have the right to censure and deprivatize sexual matters on the basis of Biblical propositions regarding the "God-given creational sexual difference between maleness and femaleness".

In the first of two articles on the "archeology" of marriage (see Dreyer 2008:499-527), I refer to the recent work of Christopher R Roberts (2007), entitled *Creation and covenant: The significance of sexual difference in the moral theology of marriage*. Roberts reaffirms the view that has prevailed since Augustine, namely that the biological sexual difference between man and woman forms the basis of a "moral theology of marriage" (see Dreyer 2008: 499-527) In the first article I pointed out that linking creation and

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[1] The Marquis de Sade, or Comte Donatien Alphonse Francois de Sade was born on 2 June 1740 in Paris, France and died on 2 December 1814. While jailed in the Bastille, he wrote and published *Philosophy in the bedroom*. Thinking that his work, *120 Days of Sodom,* had been lost (the carefully hidden 45 foot scroll had actually survived, but was not discovered until 1904 (it had been stuffed inside a tube of a bed frame) during the storming of the Bastille, he began working on a modified and more fully developed version of *Justine*, followed by *Juliette*. These two works appeared in a ten volume edition in 1797, published anonymously. The Marquis denied authorship (see Deese, P 1999-2004, The Marquis de Sade: Biography, bibliography, filmography & links. An independent reference resource. The Biography project. www.PopSubCulture.com).

covenant as Roberts does, corresponds with the basic premise of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*.[2] In this second article I will expand on Barth's dogmatic heritage. Both Roberts and Barth follow in the footsteps of Luther who radically reformed the theology of marriage by de-sacramentalizing the institution of marriage and denying that it is a soteriological necessity for an existence *coram Deo*.

In the first article I briefly mention that Roberts (2007:185-231) highlights three different postmodern approaches to the theological discussion on marriage in the last chapter of his book. For Roberts none of these approaches is convincing. In his view, the creation of man and woman forms part of the order of creation, which means that sexual *difference* is of the utmost importance for theologizing about marriage. The roots of this view lie in the first systematization of "a theology of marriage" by Augustine (see Roberts 2007:39-77) which to a large extent determined how marriage was seen within the European tradition up to the Reformation. During the Reformation Luther desacramentalized marriage, but retained Augustine's emphasis on *sexual difference* as part of the order of creation. This line of thought was perpetuated by Barth. Roberts, who builds on Barth, is a recent exponent. This progression is described in my first article.

In this second article I continue my discussion with the views of Roberts. I elaborate on the three postmodern approaches to the theology of marriage to which Roberts refers and then argue for a position beyond these three by suggesting yet another option for theologizing on sexuality and marriage. Points of departure in this article are: the de-sacramentalization of marriage as institution (concurring with Roberts, Barth and Luther), as well as the view that the sexual difference between female and male is of *no* soteriological consequence (contra Roberts).

Though human sexuality is a biological reality and marriage a social construct, neither of them should be considered from a *naturalistic* perspective alone. *Theology* does have a role to play. What exactly this role should be if theology wants to contribute to the discussion on the way forward (rather than tenaciously clinging to the past), should be considered. In his work, *Christian doctrine and modern culture (since 1700)*, Jaroslav Pelikan (1984:viii) points out that many Christian doctrines that had previously been taken for granted, were questioned in the modern era. The same can be said of Christian ideas on the significance of sexual difference. Though sexual difference may not be an "important Christian doctrine", Roberts (2007:185) nevertheless calls it "a

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[2] For my critque against Barth's view on gender and its application to marriage, see Dreyer (2007a:1493-1521; 2007b:1523-1547).

morally significant belief". He points out that Christian thought on sexual difference "was once assumed but … is now questioned".

Traditional theology generally assumed that sexual difference is part of God's creation, of how human beings relate to one another (two possibilities only: celibacy or marriage), and of how human beings live before God as men and women (see Roberts 2007:186). However, nowadays a case is made for the *insignificance* of sexual difference as to how human beings live their lives in relationship to one another and in the presence of God (see Ward 1998; Rogers 1999, McCarthy 1997, 2001, 2002). Both Christopher Roberts, and Karl Barth on whose work he builds, base their convictions on Biblical and Christian concerns when searching for a way forward. However, there are different "modes of Bible-talk" and different Christian concerns which lead to different convictions and theologies among Christians who take the Bible seriously.

Before considering a way forward for sexuality and marriage in a postmodern era, I first turn to the three postmodern approaches to which Christopher Roberts refers. Given his orthodox point of view, he did not find these three approaches useful. I would like to now revisit them from a postmodern perspective.

3. THE FIRST APPROACH: MARRIAGE AS A LINGUISTIC EXPRESSION OF INTIMACY

The first postmodern approach Roberts discusses, is that of Graham Ward (1998:62) for whom the biological reality of maleness and femaleness has little theological significance. The significance of sexual difference lies only in the *language* it provides for speaking theologically about intimacy and distance, relationship and separation, as well as about otherness (Ward 1998:52, 54, 55, 63). He puts it as follows: "In itself it [sex] remains human, far too human for the development of a *theology*" (Ward 1998:56). Sexual difference does provide useful language for the relationship between God and human beings in the sense that "God's desire for me" is reciprocated by "my desire for God" (Ward 1998:55). However, this kind of language, provided by the human reality of sexual difference, has its limitations. In the relationship between God and human beings the initiative is always taken by God. In this sense human relationships based on sexual difference cannot be seen as the analogy for the relationship between God and people. The latter goes far beyond anything human.

Both Barth and Ward see a connection between sexual difference and the image of God. Barth bases the connection on Genesis 1:27, whereas for Ward "separation and relation" is how the Trinity functions. He describes the

connection as follows: "In our attraction-in-difference is reflected the difference-in-relation in our Trinitarian God" (Ward 1998:55). According to Roberts (2007:189), Ward departs from Barth when his point of departure is not the creation story, but the more abstract concept of the Trinity. Ward (1998:59) criticizes Karl Barth for being naturalistic and basing too much on the bodily difference between men and women – a "biologically based metaphysics", he calls it. He explains his view as follows: "Trinitarian difference and sexual difference operate at odds with each other in Barth's thinking." According to Ward (1998:67), Barth describes "sexual difference from the male perspective. Though he voices a respect for the feminine, she is defined only in relation to what the male lacks – she is the help *meet* for him. His other is not really another at all. It is the other of the same. In Hegelian terms, the woman provides the consciousness with a reflection of itself that it might have a sense of its own identity." The hierarchy between the sexes which Barth accepts as a given, cannot possibly reflect the mutuality which is the cornerstone of the relationships within the Trinity. For Ward (1998:68) hierarchical difference also does not fit into the picture of marriage as a man and a woman being together-before-God.

Ward sees the significance of sexual difference for theological reflection not in *biological* difference. The difference is about the *otherness* of people who are attracted to each other and therefore drawn into a relationship (see Ward 1998:69) Sexual, biological difference is not a prerequisite for this. Ward (1998:71) concurs with feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray (1993:15) who puts it as follows: "Desire demands a sense of attraction: a change in the interval, the displacement of the subject or the object in their relations of nearness or distance."

Roberts (2007:194) describes the differences and similarities between Ward and Barth on sexual difference as follows: "Barth and Ward agree that human anatomy exists and takes its meaning from more ontologically fundamental theological prototypes, but Barth and Ward disagree about whether that anatomy retains its significance even as it is transfigured and enabled to signify something theological." In Ward's (1998:65) own words the significance of sexual difference which has a biological basis but is transformed in order to be of symbolic use in theological reflection, is the following: "Male and female are two differentiated positions within a divinely ordered sociality that signify partnership, covenant, fellowship and helpmates. They are symbolic positions within a divine narrative. Their life together constitutes the very fabric of Christian time. As such their performances are corporeal. Symbols *are* corporeal."

4   THE SECOND APPROACH: MARRIAGE AVAILABLE FOR NON-HETEROSEXUALS

The second "postmodern" approach to theologizing on marriage that Roberts refers to, is that of Eugene Rogers. Rogers (2004:29; cf 1999:159) does not locate the significance of sexual difference in the *imago Dei* as Barth did. Rogers rejects the idea that the sexes complement each other and together form the wholeness of humanity. According to him, Jesus who was not part of a "man-woman pair" is definitely not "a deficient case of the image, not its fullness … If Christ is the complete image, then the image need not be a dyad" (Rogers 2004:185, 225). Rogers does not see human beings in relationship to God in the first place as individuals or as couples who together reflect the image of God, but places the emphasis on *co-humanity*. He puts it as follows: "Christ promises to be with human beings *not* each individually that we might meet him as I and Thou, but when *two or three are already* gathered in his name" (Rogers 2004:184). Marriage does not occur in isolation. The married couple is always part of a larger community and faith community who witness to their union (Rogers 2004:195-196). Roberts (2007:200-201) criticizes Rogers's arguments against Barth's connection of sexual difference and the *imago Dei* when he points out that for Barth "marriage opens outward beyond the dyad. An encounter of dyadic sexual difference might be at the core, but it does not follow for Barth that this core is a closed circle."

The question would then be, however, what the consequences are of dyadic sexual difference functioning *at the core* of theological reflection on marriage. In arguing for Barth's "openness" and against Roger's criticism, Roberts (2007:201 – my emphasis) in effect says it: "… Barth commends marriage as *the central* form of sexually differentiated social life …" When *one* form, which may not be suitable to a whole variety of people is regarded as "the central form of social life", then all who cannot or will not conform to that "central form" are in effect marginalized. The consequence is exclusion from the centre of social life. Roberts (2007:202) defends Barth point of view by arguing that Barth "does not believe that celibates are somehow defective, or that they have withdrawn from the central task of the *imago Dei*. Barth's conception of celibacy is integrated with his concepts of sexual difference and marriage. Barth regards celibates as necessary testimony to the fact that marriage exists as a vocation, as a possibility and not an inevitability." In this way the fact that Jesus never married only means that marriage was not his vocation, but he was still fully human and, according to Barth's argument, sexual difference is still theologically significant. "Chastity" is "as much a response to sexual difference as marrying … By abstaining from temporary liaisons, the chaste and single reinforce the logic of marriage" (Roberts

2007:202). With marriage and sexual difference still firmly located in the central position – the only alternative being celibacy which reinforces the central position of marriage – there is no room whatsoever for sexual minorities and how they fit into the order of creation. The exclusive and dominant position of marriage and the homogeneous view of the difference between male and female is tantamount to hegemony.

In refuting Rogers's "attempt to displace Barth's *imago* with one that is sexually generic", in order to plead a case for same-sex marriage, Roberts (2007:203) emphasizes that, along with all the various ways in which people as the image of God are called to be "for others", the sexual way of being is always present. He concludes that "sexual difference is a sine qua non for the *imago* to exist and be known and manifest in our lives, for sexual difference is a *sine qua non* of the shape and form as God made us as creatures." The consequence of Roberts's argument which includes aspects such as "creation", "sexuality", "being-for-others", and "vocation", could be that people who have been created sexually different (to heterosexuals, in this case), also exist as the image of God and have the vocation, or do not have the vocation, to enter into a life partnership with another person to whom they are sexually attracted on account of difference of a different kind than the difference between maleness and femaleness.

5.   THE THIRD APPROACH: MARRIAGE EMBEDDED IN COMMUNITY

The third postmodern approach to theologizing on marriage that Roberts discusses is that of David Matzko McCarthy (2001, 2002) who focuses on the *context* in which marriage occurs. Marriage is not just about two people who enter into a union in the presence of God. It also has social significance and occurs within a social context. In practical reality marriage turns out not to be a blissful togetherness of two people in their own little world, but rather a variety of responsibilities which are rooted in their social context of family, their work environments, living in a specific neighbourhood with specific neighbours, and their in faith communities. McCarthy (2001:7) does not see the couple as the centre of marriage, but places the focus rather on "practical ends and intrinsic goods that transcend interpersonal abilities". The Christian faith community should assist people to change their focus from a romantic twosome to a more extensive social environment, to being part of a network where love means living together (McCarthy 2001:6, 217). Should a couple fit in well with their social environment and take their social responsibilities upon themselves diligently, sexual difference would be of no consequence. This means that, whether the couple consists of a male and a female person where

sexual difference can be distinguished, or are two people of the same sex, would not be important as long as they fulfill their social duties well (McCarthy 1997:384-385).

McCarthy's emphasis on marriage as embedded in community has ethical consequences that should be explored. Community life presupposes social duties and roles. These duties and roles change over time as paradigms shift and cultural contexts vary. In order to reflect on changes in the sphere of sexuality, marriage and family, the covenantal ideology underlying the traditional theology of marriage and the role of procreation in traditional view on the morality of marriage should be perused with suspicion. According to Ulrich Körtner (2008:209-225), a socio-historical analysis is required, lest theological reflection should become either a purely abstract ethical discussion, or be suffocated by the restrictive tradition of Christian sexual morality and dogmas concerning marriage and family. If their history is not sufficiently taken into account, marriage and family could become sacrilized and will consequently no longer be open to analysis or criticism (see Körtner 2008:209-225).

In a previous article, entitled "Sexuality and shifting paradigms – setting the scene" (Dreyer 2005:729-751) I referred to the emphasis of Paul Tillich (1957:14-18) that cultural questions "determined the contents of theological answers." From this perspective I endorsed Adrian Thatcher's (1999:21) use of James Nelson's (1992:115-116) distinction between "sexual theology" and the "theology of sexuality". Thatcher (1999:20) explains the difference: "The latter concerns itself with the Bible and tradition as these deal with sexual questions. These findings are then applied to contemporary sexual dilemmas and problems. But sexual theology begins with our experience as embodied, sexual beings." According to Nelson (1992:21), the "movement must be in both directions, not only one." Thatcher (1999:30) speaks of a "loyalty to experience". It "requires giving priority to the testimony of contemporary men and women in the area of sexuality, and being willing to rethink the adequacy of premodern and modern institutions and assumptions which have regulated family and sexual life in the past." He also speaks of the "loyalty to the people of God", and this "requires the process of making available to them the resources of the Bible and tradition as they might be understood by an encounter with postmodern experience and culture." In order for this "encounter" to be meaningful, knowledge of the social environment of the Bible is necessary. An unhistorical theological perspective on social institutions as "God-given ordinances" – a view which will necessarily come to naturalistic conclusions, will therefore not be theologically useful.

With regard to the "creation ethic" as an interpretation of Genesis, Countryman (2007:245), for instance, criticizes such an attempt as follows: "Rather than advocate a thorough and consistent application of the initial created state to Christian ethics here and now, it offers a highly selective choice of inferences which just happen to be useful in ruling out same-gender sexual relationships. It ignores the rest. Moreover, it ascribes to one small text an extraordinary weight of importance and density of meaning." After having examined the evidence, Countryman (2007:248) comes to the conclusion that "[t]he claim that the Bible prescribes sexual ethic in the creation narrative remains flimsy at best." He deems "creation ethic" an "ideological criticism" which he defines as follows: "ideological criticism is any approach to the interpretation of the Bible that begins from a specific theory or perspective and proceeds to analyze and elucidate the text in ways that accord with that standpoint" (Countryman 2007:249). One of the sources on which creation ethics draws, is "the tradition of sexual mores forged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by Christian churches and long used to define and bolster middle-class respectability in the West. These sexual mores are assumed to be implicit in the scriptural 'system', and any divergence is therefore a violation of scripture" (Countryman 2007:250). The main criticism of creation ethic is not so much the fact that it does what it does, if it would only be open about its modus operandi. The problem is that it disguises itself as the "plain sense" of Scripture "as if it were derived from careful reading of the texts without external influence" (Countryman 2007:250).

This is also the view of Ulrich Körtner (2008:209-225) who emphasizes that the idea of eternal immutable social ordinances is not theologically viable. There is no way to discern which social ordinances would then have been divinely proclaimed and which ones are simply social constructs. Every human view of "nature" or what is "natural" is imbedded in culture anyway. The contrast between "natural ordinances" and "social constructs" is always relative. Since "natural ordinances" have been misused in the past for nationalistic, racist, sexist and political purposes the whole idea of "orders of creation" should be approached carefully and from an ideological-critical perspective. According to Körtner the entire human existence is tied up with sexuality. Through a sexual act a human being is born and from the very beginning is socially dependent on others in order to survive and grow. At the end of life human beings revert back to a state of dependence upon others. Although kinship remains till today a basic structure for human sociality, human sexuality is not just a matter of family and biology. It is to me most of all an individual characteristic of being human. It is an aspect of personal identity. Of course, sexuality also has a social aspect (see Körtner 2008:209-

225). It is formed within social interaction and becomes a medium of communication with others. Sexuality is thus a personal matter in its own right as well as a social matter because sexual behaviour has social implications and society's attitudes affect the person. A harmonious relationship between the personal and the social would be one of mutual respect and dignity, where one aspect does not dominate or hurt. Both an individual and a social ethic are relevant: respect for one's own dignity and the dignity of others should be possible.

Contemporary sexual ethics poses not only the question whether the church should acknowledge long-term relationships of unmarried people and, but also, under which circumstances (Ringeling 1993:298-316) this should be done. Moreover, would every person, be they heterosexually or homosexually inclined, necessarily want to be in a long-term relationship? If not, where could such persons find their niche in society (cf also Körtner 2008:209-225)? In the Christian tradition marriage is seen by some as an injunction. Jesus' words on divorce are interpreted as a command to marry. Körtner (2008: 209-225) questions this logic. If Jesus speaks against divorce, how does it follow logically that only one man and one woman should live together as a married couple?

A more sophisticated approach to the biblical material is that the injunction is not direct, but presented indirectly as a possible human lifestyle which is acceptable to God, without recommending a specific cultural form of marriage for everyone (see also Van Eck 2007:481-513; cf Körtner 2008:209-225; Ringeling 1966:81-102). Essentialism and an appeal to a "natural order" based on the idea of procreation and substantiated by Biblical texts such as Genesis 2:24, represents outdated deterministic thinking about marriage and family. Theological ideas which elevate social constructs such as marriage and family to God-given obligations, are equally unconvincing. According to New Testament evidence, sexuality, marriage and family are part of this transient world and therefore have no sacramental significance.

If homosexual relationships are acknowledged by law and churches would follow suit, it would not affect the value or place of marriage in the least. Marriage is what it is and will remain what it is, even if other people and their long-term relationships are recognized and respected on the basis of the dignity of their humanity, irrespective of their sexual orientation, and even if sexual minorities are protected and respected by the sexual majority (Körtner 2008:209-225). Surely a respected institution in society and in the Christian faith community such as marriage should not regard its survival as dependent on having to be disrespectful and hurtful to others, excluding them form the privileges that it reserves for itself, and in general perpetrating the hegemony of heteronormativity. If marriage is in a crisis today it certainly is not the fault

of people who have, for the longest time, had nothing to do with this up till recently exclusively heterosexual institution. The crisis in which marriage finds itself, if it is in fact a crisis, was caused by social changes within the heterosexual world itself. It is in realm that solutions for the crisis should then be sought.

In order for human dignity to be preserved, this article pleads for a respect for privacy if and when public discourse on sexuality should venture onto the terrain of sexual intimacy. The distinctions between legal and moral as well as between private and public spheres are important in this regard. Christian ethics with regard to sexuality and marriage finds itself located where the individual, personal, social, moral and legal aspects converge. Such a convergence can cause confusion and conflict.

6.   THE ROAD AHEAD

6.1   Dangers and pitfals

The results of the biological, historical and social sciences have indicated that there are different ways of understanding sexuality and different ways of being sexual. An attempt to speak theologically about sexuality should therefore be approached carefully, also with regard to evidence from antiquity, including the Biblical texts (cf Osiek 2006:819-864). Stephen Barton (2001:71), in his book, *Life together: Family, sexuality and community in the New Testament and today*, points out how, in most cultures, the sexuality of women has been defined in terms of the sexuality of men (cf Balch 1988:25-50), and how the sexuality of sexual minorities has been defined in terms of heterosexuality (cf Garton 2004:38). Social control was needed in order to maintain some stability and to protect dominant male sexuality. According to Garton, in his book *Histories of sexuality: Antiquity to sexual revolution* (2004) "this necessitated a complex sexual and social regime to produce and perpetuate masculinity" (Garton 2004:39). The need for such measures indicates that maleness and femaleness were not fixed but had to be regulated and controlled in order to suit heteronormative ideology (cf Laqueur 1990:25-62).

Sexuality as complex human phenomenon, should therefore not be reduced to the sex act, focusing on "how-when-where-why-with-whom" as Western culture today tends to do (Barton 2001:72). For Roger Scruton[3] (1996:139) sexuality is part of the broadest possible view on a person as "the subject, and his relation to the world of space and time". If sexuality is narrowed down to participation in a genital sexual relationship, people who for

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[3] The essay "Sex" is a summary of Roger Struton's comprehensive 1986 work, *Sexual desire: A philosophical investigation*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson (see Barton 2001:73).

many reasons, do not have such relationships, will be excluded from being regarded as sexual beings (cf Barton 2001:72).

If the complexity of the human phenomenon of sexuality and the complexity of the historical context are not taken into account, Barton's (1996:41-13) critical question in an earlier work would be pertinent. He, doubts whether the "Bible is good news for human sexuality" at all. He emphasizes the importance of the context in a discussion on sexuality. Context includes the psychological, social and cultural dimensions of being human (cf Graham 1995:341-358). Barton (2001:73) points out how, rather than the medieval and humanist ideal of uniting heavenly love and earthy love, Modernity has split them: heavenly love being limited to "love thy neighbour" and earthly love reduced to an individualistic sexual love. The latter has become the model for human intimacy in the contemporary Western world and is used in advertising to sell all kinds of products (cf Adorno & Horkheimer 1984:141-143). Barton (2001:73) calls this "the language of unfulfilled desire, where sexuality is the master symbol and the products of consumer capitalism the means of fulfillment."

When religion and culture speak on sexuality, the attempt seems to be to confine and control something which is "both ambiguous, mysterious and fraught with risk" (Barton 2001:74). In his controversial speech "The body's grace", made in 1989 to the members of the Lesbian and Gay Association,[4] the Archbishop of Canterbury (then the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford University), Rowan Williams, puts it as follows:

> Most people know that sexual intimacy is in some ways frightening for them; most know that it is simply the place where they begin to be taught whatever maturity they have. Most of us know that the whole business is irredeemably comic, surrounded by so many odd chances and so many opportunities for making a fool of yourself; plenty know that it is the place where they are liable to be most profoundly damaged or helpless. Culture in general and religion in particular have devoted energy to the doomed task of getting it right.

If religion has indeed been expending much energy on getting sexuality right and if this is indeed a doomed task, should religion venture "where angels fear to tread"? Barton (2001:74) warns against the danger of religion having either too much to say about sexuality, even thinking that it can provide all the answers, or of having nothing to say at all. However, it is necessary to examine the Christian contribution critically: in what ways has it been harmful

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[4] See www.Greens.org.uk.Rowan Williams in sex.

and in what ways has it been helpful to people? Barton (2001:75-76) sees "the Trinitarian sociality of God" as "the basis for true creaturely sociality". His theology of creation is that of "creation as God's play grounded on grace", by means of which he emphasizes the goodness of creation and the joy and delight that it brings to God and human beings. For him the connection with God and others is "covenantal", and the loss of such a connection leads to perversion (Barton 2001:77-80). However, for Adrian Thatcher (1999), in his book *Marriage after modernity: Christian marriage in postmodern times*, the covenant as *the* Biblical model for marriage is "dreadful for women", because it originated in contexts in which women were stereotyped as untrustworthy, sexual predators, unfaithful and a source of sin. "Even the depiction of a fresh start, the new covenant, will induce a state of disabling female guilt, the weight of which renders women dumb and makes mutual participation in the covenant impossible ...." (Thatcher 1999:73). Barton's view (like many others, e.g., Anderson 1993:138 and Hugenberger 1994:343) runs thus the risk of falling into a positivist trap. A covenantal model, even when considered carefully and suspiciously, bears witness to a positivist approach to the Bible. When "trinitarian" thought supports such an approach to Scripture, scholastic theism may just be knocking at the door. From a postmodern perspective, this would be cause for concern.

6.2   An alternative to essentialist Bible-talk

A positivist approach to the Bible would search for "historical facts" or God-given injunctions which would be seen as God's "revelation". If God revealed God-self in Scripture and all the "facts" are there, how could there then be any dispute? But Christians do have disputes. Frances Young (1990; cf Schneiders 1991:149-150; Barton 2001:60) in his work, *The art of performance*, proposes an alternative approach, that of "performance". According to Barton (2001:60) this model suggests that every "performance" (interpretation) will differ slightly depending on who is interpreting and the context in which it is interpreted. This mode of interpretation "brings the reading of the Bible back into the process of community formation, celebration and mission, and places the responsibility on the community to read the text in ways which are transforming and life-giving" (Barton 2001:60).

The Bible is often used to underscore pre-existing ideas which are sometimes in direct opposition. Ideas on human sexuality, gender and homosexuality are treated in this way (see Swartley 1983). Barton (2001:61-62) points out that such a *modus operandi* trivializes the Bible as well as the issue of human sexuality. Another problem is that the Bible is fragmented rather than speaking as "one book", though he is careful to emphasize that the

alternative is not to "'flatten out' the text of the Bible by process of harmonization so that it is always saying the same thing …" Barton (2001:63) warns against the two extremes of absolutizing the Bible as a book to be obeyed and rejecting the Bible as a book that cannot be trusted and sees the solution in "learning in community the kinds of skill and wisdom necessary to faithful interpretation and transforming enactment".

6.3   Relational Bible-talk

The evidence has shown that absolutizing the role of heterosexual marriage and overemphasising the religious meaning of sexual difference are manifestations of a positivist use of Biblical data as well as a naturalistic and essentialist understanding of and what it means to live an authentic life *coram Deo*. My contribution with this article (and the preceding one – Dreyer 2008) began with a critical discussion of Christopher Roberts' (2007) recent endorsement of the salvific meaning of sexual difference and its consequence of the heteronormative absolutizing of marriage. Giving soteriological power to something which belongs to the created order, amounts to a natural theology. The ethical implications are that sexual minorities are excluded from God's creational covenant, and therefore also from salvation. Sexual *difference* then becomes the core value when theologizing on marriage. Heteronormativity (which is a hegemony) and heterosexual marriage are then seen as prerequisites, also for people who have not been created heterosexual.

Roberts (2007:6-7) attempts to justify this point of view by distinguishing between sex and gender as feminist theory also does. He chooses to confine himself to sex (the biological reality of maleness and femaleness) and not touch on gender (the social construct of masculinity and femininity). Had he included gender, it may have been possible for him to also regard sexuality and marriage as social constructs. He shows little appreciation for postmodern approaches discussed above, which argue from a social constructionist perspective. The categories of sex and gender cannot be separated in such a simplistic fashion when a theology of marriage is explored.

It is a pity that Roberts does not consider a fourth option. Rather than either a dogmatic or ethical ontological approach to marriage (an *analogia entis* mode of thinking), the focus could have been on language as expression of relationship (*analogia relationis* mode of thinking). An *analogia relationis* (the consequences of which neither Barth nor Roberts succeed in fully working out) would open up a radically new perspective on sexuality, intimacy and marriage, where these three aspect are not connected directly to God's

act of creation. God could then be seen as being in a dynamic relationship with human beings, the nature of which (namely love) would be determinative of human interaction, including sexuality, intimacy and marriage. *All* (not only those based on sexual difference) intimate relationships between human beings could then refer back to God's relationship with human beings. At the beginning of his book Roberts states that he wants to argue on a *theological* basis rather than a "humanitarian" one. An *analogia relationis* point of departure and its consequences are not humanitarian, however. They are thoroughly theological.

Neither biblical categories, nor the views of theologians such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin and even Barth seem to be inordinately useful when it comes to constructing a contemporary ethics of marriage. The reason for this is the enduring androcentric and patriarchal contexts of both the Bible and these theologians. Their contexts should be critically examined before being mystified into theologies. For example, customs of arranged marriages in the Old Testament and the shift from endogamy to exogamy are not relevant to marriage ethics today. Terms for engagement in the New Testament (see Van Aarde 2007) such as *mnēsteuomai* and *harmozomai* (promise/submission) in 2 Corinthians 11:2, and for marriage, such as *hupandros* (under man) in Romans 7:2, *gunaikos haptesthai* (touching woman) in 1 Corinthians 7:1, *genetai andri* (becoming available to man) in Romans 7:3 are also not applicable today. The only gender neutral term[5] used in the context of marriage in the New Testament is *suzeunnumi* (joined) in Matthew 19:16. Biblical terms from a Pauline pneumatic perspective which do not refer to marriage, but to the relationship between God an people, may be more useful than those mentioned above, to provide terminology for marriage today. Examples are for instance *dikaiosunē* (right relationship), *koinōnia* (fellowship), *metechō* (togetherness) en *katallagē* (unconditional reconcilliation = German *Söhnung*). "Relational Bible-talk" with regard to sexuality and marriage searches for relational language to express the relationships between people which at the same time serve as *metaphors* for God's relationship with human beings. Language about how God relates to humankind in turn provides *analogies* for how human beings should interact with one another. This insight made it possible for Luther to see marriage not as an *analogia entis.* Human intimacy is not identical to the intimacy between God and people (as was the case in the mythological *hieros gamos*)*.* Old Testament scholar Judy Brown (2004:289) puts it as follows: "the fact that humanity bears the image of God cannot be turned into the notion that God

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[5] The Greek word *gameo* does not refer to marriage as an institution in antiquity but only to the act of sexual intercourse (see Van Tilborg, *HTS* 58, 802-810)

bears the image of humanity." She is of the opinion that it is "wrong to confuse God's nature with the nature of physical, created beings. And perhaps there is no characteristic more distinctly physical than sexuality." Such an *ontological* ("is identical to") relationship was the basis for the early church to declare marriage a sacrament. Relationships between human beings based on *analogia relationis* on the other hand emphasizes relatedness rather than sameness. Such *relational* thinking would therefore presuppose the "desacramentalizing" of marriage.

6.5   Desacramentalizing marriage as a "God-given institution"

During the late eleventh to the thirteenth centuries many revolutionary changes took place, culminating in what Berman (1993) calls "the first modern age of the West". Universities were established, city-states came into existence, trade flourished and advances were made in the natural sciences, literature, art and architecture. In this context the Roman Catholic Church developed its systematic theology and law of marriage (see Witte 1997:23). Witte (1997) discusses this systematisation which was done on two levels: on the church's *doctrine of marriage* (see texts such as Hugh of St Victor's *On the sacraments of the Christian faith* [c 1143]; Peter Lombard's *Book of sentences* [1150] and Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologica* [c 1265-1273] and the later commentaries on these texts) and on the *canon law of marriage* (first in Gratian's *Decretum* [c 1140]). The three perspectives of the church on marriage were that marriage could be seen as:

- a sacrament of faith, subject to the spiritual laws of the church;
- a created natural association, subject to the laws of nature;
- a consensual contract, subject to the general laws of contract.

According to Witte (1997:23), the three perspectives were regarded as complementary. They represented different aspects of marriage, namely its natural origin, its legal form and its spiritual meaning. The emphasis was, however, on the sacramental character of marriage, which was the aspect that brought all three perspectives together into a "systematic model of marriage".

The natural aspect of marriage focused on the natural inclination of humans as social beings to form associations, as well as the physical ability to produce children from an association between men and women. Furthermore, God commanded human beings to "be fruitful and multiply", to help one another and to teach their children to love God. This was the original intention of marriage. After the Fall, marriage was also seen to be a "remedy for the sick", namely as a "medicine" against sinful lust and passion. Marriage could

harness such destructive passions in order for them to rather become of service to the community (Witte 1997:24; see Lombard, *Sentences*, bk 4, dist. 26.2; Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* Pt. II-II, qq. 151-156; Pt. III, q. 41, art. 1; Hugh of St Victor, *Sacraments*, 325-329). Some Catholic authors viewed celibacy and a life spent in contemplation of faith as a higher command than propagation. It was only possible for those who were able to make the "higher" spiritual choice over the more mundane temporal choice of marriage (see Brooke 1991:61-92). According to Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theol* Pt III, q 41, art 2), "marriage is a very great obstacle" to the holy life, because it focuses one's attention on the physical world rather than on the spiritual (see Witte 1997).

The most important of the three perspectives on marriage was that of sacrament. The debate in the Roman Catholic Church revolved around whether the sacrament of marriage was instituted by Christ or whether its origin already lay in the creation of man and woman (see Pelikan 1984:51ff; Brundage 1987). The sacrament of marriage was seen as a visible sign of the union between Christ and the church and therefore the bond between husband and wife, just as the bond between Christ and the church, was eternally binding (Witte 1997:26). The two people entering into the sacrament of marriage were themselves seen as "ministers of the sacrament". They needed no consent, instruction or witnesses. William Hay (1967:31) puts it as follows: "[I]t is not of the essence of marriage to contract it in the presence of the church and according to the custom of the country, but a matter or propriety. The fitness of the parties [and the consent between them] is of the essence of marriage."

The sacrament of marriage was seen to have the power to sanctify those who partake in it and live according to God's law for marriage. They would receive God's grace. Marriage would also sanctify the faith community because it would contribute to the growth of the church and the education in faith of its children. Witte (1997:27) concludes: "The natural marital functions of propagation and education were thus given spiritual significance when performed by Christians within the extended Christian church." The sacrament of marriage was also seen to have had the power to transform the participants and their relationship. Through their spiritual transformation their sin of sexual intercourse is removed, they receive God's help to fulfil their tasks and they are received into the universal church (see Mackin 1982:20-22, 31-33, 332-333).

The second perspective was that of marriage as a natural institution, subject to natural law. This natural law, according to Medieval writers, was that a person would reach puberty, have children, and care for ageing family

members until they die. Marriage was seen as a heterosexual, lifelong union. All other forms of sexuality were regarded as "unnatural" (see Witte 1997:25). The lists of sexual sins found in Paul's and the Church Fathers' writings were reiterated in this period (see Weigand 1967).

The third perspective, namely marriage as a contractual arrangement, meant that marriage was also subject to the general rules of contract (see Berman 1993:187, 190-196). Mutual consent was necessary for it to be a binding contract. Peter Lombard (*Sentences,* bk 4, dist 28.4) did not regard living together or sexual union as the constituting factor of marriage, but "the *consent* to conjugal society" (my emphasis). Consensual contracts were regarded as legally binding. When applied to marriage contracts, both husband and wife could sue in court for the enforcement of the marital promise or their contractual rights (see Witte 1997:26).

7.   A PROPOSAL

7.1   "De-centre-ing" sexual difference"
Whereas Luther provided the basis for the distinction between *analogia entis* and *analogia relationis,* it was more fully worked out by Karl Barth (Buitendag 2007:445-461). This distinction is of a significance that goes beyond the work of either Luther or Barth. *Analogia entis* thinking leads to marriage being seen as an order of creation, an ontological reality, given and created by God. In the sphere of *analogia relationis* marriage would rather be seen as a metaphor for relationship. According to Scripture, marriage does not have salvific power, neither as *ex opera operata* nor as *signum* of salvation. Therefore marriage is not a sacrament like baptism or the eucharist.

The question is what the *bonum* (value) of marriage would then be. Clearly the value of marriage cannot be located in *proles* (procreation) any longer. Such as value would be highly questionable in an over-populated world where resources are dwindling to the extent that the existing population cannot be adequately supported. The value of marriage could be located in *fides* (fidelity or commitment), analogous to how faithful and committed God is to creation and how people respond in faith. Marriage can no longer be seen as *sacramentum* or as *medicinum* againgst lust, but rather as indication of the permanence and mutual fidelity of people who live in relationship with one another in the presence of God (*coram Deo*).

Naturally speaking, morality is based on human people's knowledge and will. Theologically speaking, it is based in God. Calvin grounds his ethics in a God who is sad *and* glad about human beings. People partake in God's joy where compassion and generosity are shown to those in need and partake

in God's sorrow for those in pain. All of God's creation is welcome in God's presence. The human relationships of those who live in the presence of God should be based on compassion because God is a God of compassion. Marriage is but one relationship among others, not *the* relationship. The family of God is the primary relationship and the one which provides the example for all other relationships.

6.2   An appeal for privacy

In Roman times sexuality was dealt with in theaters as *ars erotica*, whereas Eurocentric modernity dealt with sexuality publically as *scientia sexualis*. Since Sigmund Freud (1856-1839) sexuality, whether located in the depths of the human psyche or manifesting on the surface as attitudes and acts, has been scientifically analyzed and so brought into the public discourse. Between ancient times and modernity sexuality went underground. The topic was taboo in public discourse. In late Medieval times it was deemed mysterious, to be discussed only in confession. The church made a distinction between sacramental morality (when procreation was the intent of sexual activity – *proles*) and immorality (sex for enjoyment – *conupiscientis*). People were often guilty of this kind of "immorality" to which they had to confess – their private sexuality was made public, even if only to a priest in the confession booth.

In the subsequent centuries (reaching its peak in the Victorian era) sexuality was a taboo subject in the public arena. According to Foucault such a "depression" of sexuality indicates an unhealthy state of affairs on which the Roman Catholic practice of confession cashed in. He regards the practice of confession as the beginning of the modern commercialization of sexuality where it is made public for the sake of money (or power). In this regard Foucault (1988:110-111) poses the question: "How is it that in a society like ours, sexuality is not simply a means of reproducing the species, the family, and the individual? Not simply a means to obtain pleasure and enjoyment? How has sexuality come to be considered the privileged place where our deepest truth is read and expressed?" (see Beukes 2002:282).

Another way in which sex was made into a public affair, is by categorizing people in terms of their sexuality – something which did not happen in the Greco-Roman era of the *ars erotica* but was part and parcel of Israelite holiness codes. Foucault (1978:191) points out that "modern discourse" has led to the classification of types, such as crazy people, criminals, women, married women, unmarried women, divorced women, homosexuals, adolescents and many more. He shows how the analytical description of these "types" on the grounds of their past, history, youth,

personality, lifestyle and bodiliness can always be traced back to their sexuality in one way or another (see Beukes 2002:289-292).

Postmodern discourse requires that people are disengaged from these groups or "types" for the sake of their human dignity. Their communal existence in groups, on the other hand, should be redefined as whole and healthy rather than deviating from the norm, as the typification suggests. Priority should be given to the *particular one* rather than the *institutional many* and to the *person* rather than the *institution.* Also in the church the interests of the institution should take a second place to people.

The consequences of such a view would be to acknowledge and respect the private space of people, also as far as their sexuality is concerned. According to Johann Beukes (2002:293-294), the church should speak about sexuality *only* when there is no other option, as in cases of criminal behaviour such as rape or sexual molestation. Another instance would be where health education is concerned, for instance regarding matters such as HIV/AIDS, venereal disease and the risk of unplanned pregnancy. Beukes (2002:294) "cannot think of any other instances where interference of the church in the private spaces of individuals is justified: The church can become the first public forum where the private spaces of individuals is respected." According to Beukes (2002:297; my translation) patriarchal dominance in the public discourse on sexuality should be "disempowered":

> The decentering of the phallus not only creates new spaces, but even an entirely new identity: *androgenous sexuality*, from which polimorphic sexual identities emanate. Not much in Western society can be deemed purely male or purely female. Rather a highly androgenous quality has come to the fore. However, the sexuality of androgenous subjects and poligenious subjects such as queers, crossdressers and transvestites is much publicized as vanilla sexuality. Their private spaces too have already been infringed. An open circle of radical discretion would provide and guarantee them a private space without exception, without discrimination, without value-judgements, specifically because every sexual condition is kept silent and non-public.

This insight can contribute greatly to pastoral engagement with gay people. From such a perspective all people who find themselves between maleness and femaleness will be respected in terms of the particular person him- or herself, whether gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual. Such a pastoral engagement requires of the pastor to reflect on existing paradigms, theories, models and methods in Practical Theology. In following articles a theoretical pastoral theological reflection will be carried out in order to enable the pastor

to engage with sexual minorities in terms of an inclusive practical-theological model.

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