

Ethical Issues in the Science and Sexuality Debate

Faith, Science and Sexuality day conference, Ozanne Foundation, St John's Waterloo, London, 8 December 2018

Thanks to Jayne

So what can we learn from today?

- learned a lot about the science
- learned about people's individual experience
 - that's good: I want to put the two together
- but one could say: so what? what does all this mean for ethics, for theology, for the church?
 - how does all this relate to the Bible and to the Christian tradition?
 - can science tell us what we should do next as a church?
 - can science teach us about our individual discipleship and following of Christ?

I want to say straight up: science cannot dictate our theology or our ethics

- science can tell us how prevalent different kinds of sexual attraction are
 - and what the causes of intersex are
 - and whether there are brain differences between trans-males and cis-males
- it can tell us whether there are evolutionary explanations for homosexual attraction
 - and whether environmental influences on trans identity are more likely to be from the maternal environment or the social environment
 - and how different cultures respond to intersexed bodies
- but science can't tell us whether we should have reasonable adjustment policies on bathrooms
 - it can't tell us whether a surgical response to intersex is ever right
 - it can't tell us whether the church should conduct blessings for same-sex couples or ordain those in sexually active same-sex relationships
- for Christians all of these are matters for ethics and theology and Scriptural interpretation
 - to be sure, all Christian thinking should be done in the light of the best scientific understandings we have
 - but no straight line from science to ethics

So what are we doing here then, apart from having an interesting day learning about the science?

I want to answer this by thinking what we mean by talking about what is 'natural'

- in relation to sexuality and gender a mainstream, traditional answer is:
 - what is natural is (i) the sexual binary of male and female
 - (ii) heterosexual sex and heterosexual marriagetherefore what is unnatural is anything which crosses the boundaries of these:
 - those who don't fit into the sexual binary, either in terms of gender identity or in terms of non-standard genitalia

- those whose sexual desire and behaviour doesn't fit into heterosexual sex/marriage
- for someone or something to be unnatural or non-normal is for them to have crossed a boundary, in three ways:
 - (i) usually: it is/they are untypical for a population, a group: a statistical outlier, a rarity, relatively speaking
 - (ii) it is/they are regarded as immoral, ethically unacceptable or is in some other way subject to social disapproval
 - (iii) underlying this, in the case of sexuality/gender, they break with the ordering of nature, male made for female, female for male, with its orientation to reproduction (the teleological ordering of nature)

Before I come back to the science, think in terms of their experience what happens to those who are regarded as unnatural:

- the social processes of exclusion of those who don't fit in with the dominant social norms lead to profound social and psychological effects:
 - on the social side it may be overt in terms of ostracism, rejection, shunning
 - internalised on the psychological side as shame, feelings of not belonging, being different
 - and of course, because one can understand the social rules of the game without anyone having announced them explicitly, people can feel different without even really realizing why
 - and this toxic brew of internalised shame can be bolstered by just the occasional odd comment, even if the vast majority of the time people are perfectly nice
- these are standard processes by which all cultures reinforce their norms:
 - as true of modern liberal societies as of non-modern shame cultures
 - as true in practice of the church as of wider society
 - those minorities who breach social boundaries are marked as dangerous, polluted, unnatural
- in Biblical terms we find this in terms of the OT purity laws
 - thus in Leviticus we find no mixing of kinds – no mixing of crops in a field, of fibres in clothing
 - again an emphasis on completeness – the leper is unclean because of the piebald appearance of the skin
 - priests have to be proper examples of men: can't have a physical impairment, have to have the right number of testicles
 - all of devoted to showing the holiness of God in the holiness of the people
 - the one God who is not to be confused or mixed with anything, unlike the pagan gods who were earth gods, idols
 - the one God who is complete and lacking in nothing
 - the whole of the purity code is one long training in the nature of God
 - but of course it produced a whole lot of people or things which did not fit and were therefore unclean – unnatural (though they tend not to use the term)
 - **example, example, example**
 - and it is exactly this which Jesus comes to turn over
 - things that were called unclean Jesus declares clean

- it is not what goes into your mouth but what comes out of your mouth that makes you unclean
- Jesus associates with the outcast: prostitutes, women caught in adultery, tax collectors, sinners
- not just Jesus' teaching, but the whole thrust of the New Testament
 - those who were unclean and excluded are now counted as clean
 - most importantly, the Gentiles are included in the covenant
 - this is a radical overturning of the whole categorisation that led to the kinds of exclusion associated with purity
 - the last shall be first, the least shall be greatest
 - the shepherd leaves the 99 righteous in the sheep pen to go and search for the one who is lost
 - I remember one evangelical leader who was arguing that the numbers of gay men/lesbians may not be 3-5% but 1% (perhaps it wouldn't matter so much if there were fewer of them)
 - but it is precisely the 1% that the Good Shepherd goes to search for
- in Christ the whole purity system with its exclusions of those who don't fit the categories has been overturned: the impure/the unnatural are no longer impure, the excluded are no longer excluded
 - but what does the church say to someone who asks, am I included?
 - *'only if you don't sin'*
 - so what you are saying is that only the pure are allowed in?
 - only once the Church has been able to say 'yes, you are included' that we can begin to talk about ethics
 - for those who are feel excluded by the church's purity norms the first thing to be said is: 'yes, Christ loves you, you are included'
 - ontologically, we are loved, however dirty or different or excluded we may feel
 - that doesn't address the ethical question, but it does address the prior question of inclusion

What has all this got to do with science and sexuality?

- the reason is that in practice the church does operate with purity norms, which those who are excluded by them because they are gay/lesbian/bi/trans/intersex/any other sexual minorities, feel only too intensely
 - these are enforced not only by the more overt moral norms which it is the job of theology and ethics to investigate
 - but also by a whole range of more subtle and sometimes subterranean attitudes that buttress those moral norms
 - it is these attitudes which science can help us address

So what subterranean thoughts do we have that implicitly normalise a certain view of sexuality and gender and marginalise others? (Mainly here going to talk about sexuality)

- one is that people choose their sexuality
 - at some level we may think that it's wrong therefore they must have chosen it
 - now, to be clear, how people decide to *act* is within their power, but this does not mean that *one's sexual orientation* is within one's power
 - but in general it is no more the case that LGB people choose their sexual orientation than that heterosexual people do
- another is that people can change their sexuality if only they try hard enough (pray hard enough, seek healing)
 - conservative views often carry this thought around somewhere even if it's not always made explicit
 - certainly if it were the case that sexual orientation could be changed this would change the nature of the debate
 - but (as we have seen) the evidence for the effectiveness of change therapy is extremely limited
- another connected to this is that if people can change their sexuality it is because it is caused by social environment, not by genetics/maternal womb environment
 - if it's caused by one's upbringing then it can be changed
 - 'it's all in the head'
 - but there is evidence that there is at least for some people a genetic component in their sexual orientation
 - besides which there are plenty of things caused by the social environment which are notoriously difficult to shift
 - the effects of being abused in childhood an obvious example
- all of these (and others) are examples of attitudes which can be very upfront and explicit, but are often tacit and held only half-consciously if that
 - they have the effect of exclusion
 - but if we are honest enough to address them directly they would significantly affect our attitudes

Science can contribute to our theological and moral understanding in this kind of way, and in lots of parallel questions.

Unfortunately in my view what it can't do is directly answer the question about whether same-sex sexual activity breaks the order of nature, the teleological ordering of male to female and female to male

- that is ultimately a theological and ethical question, not a scientific one
- I'm not going to say very much about this
 - lots of possible responses
 - my own view is that one needs to address the question head on
 - the only thing that makes sense of that teleological ordering of male to female is that it is oriented to procreation
 - the only reason we have gender at all is because that is how we reproduce
 - but what happens to procreation in Christ?
 - the answer is that having children is no longer an essential part of Christian identity
 - unlike for Jews of the OT, for whom sharing in the blood of Abraham was essential to their identity
 - for Christians sharing in the blood of Christ is the crucial identity marker
 - we reproduce by baptism not by having children

- if that is the case, might that not mean that marriage is fundamentally reconfigured in Christ?
 - that having children is no longer intrinsic to marriage?
 - but if so, then why does marriage need to be heterosexual?
 - indeed might it not be that gender is irrelevant to marriage, so that one's identity as LGBTI doesn't matter, only the commitment to faithfulness, permanence and fruitfulness?

All of that takes us well beyond questions of sexuality and science

- but it is one way of showing how theology might fill out our understanding of nature in a way that science can not