

Ely Cathedral Autumn Lecture Series, November 24, 2009

‘Taming Desire: Freud *versus* the Church?’

Sarah Coakley, Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity, University of Cambridge

*

I am most grateful to Canon Hargrave for the invitation to give this lecture, and I am very glad and honoured to be with you.

Introduction: ‘Left Field’ Proposals for the Current Anglican Sex Crises: The Training of Desire – Gregory of Nyssa (c.330 - c. 395) as Exemplar

Let me say at the outset that I am taking a certain risk in this lecture, because I am inviting you to join me in thinking outside the usual boxes – ‘conservative’ *versus* ‘liberal’ – in the emotive and agonizing debates we have currently got ourselves into in the Anglican communion about so-called ‘sexuality’ (a modern word in itself, of course, alongside its variants ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘homosexuality’). For I shall be laying before you tonight a proposal for the replacement of our obsession with this ‘sexuality’ with the more ancient and more richly-theological concept of *desire*; and for these purposes I shall recover some intriguing material from the early church patristic era and bring it into critical conversation with the Freudian voices which constantly sound in our ears in contemporary secular culture. The aim of this exercise is to suggest that our ‘homosexuality’ crises in the Anglican communion may more truly be a crisis of *ascetical* thinking for all of us, whether or not we are sexually active, and whatever our so-called ‘orientation’ is. This shift of consciousness may then cause us to look at the homosexuality debates in a rather different light – or so I hope.

The second way in which I shall be thinking slightly outside the usual boxes is to suggest that it may be both chastening and revealing to look sideways at our Anglican disputes about sex through the lens of the rather different recent problems in the Roman Catholic church about celibacy and abuse. As I shall stress, these problems are not the *same* as ours; but they do throw up some really revealing, but heretofore somewhat submerged, issues which perhaps may help our theological thinking forward in our own communion.

I cannot – this will be obvious – solve tonight our current sad divisions in the Anglican church and Anglican communion about sexuality, which by now have backed into hardened posturing at both extreme ends of the spectrum, neither end of which – in my view – is really recognizable as Anglican in any historic sense. But if I can nudge our theological imaginations towards creative ways of dislodging this apparent impasse between ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’, I shall be well satisfied.

Now let me start by introducing a key notion in this lecture – the ‘training of desire’. I shall do so by reference to a patristic author who will play a central role in this lecture’s thesis.

In the late fourth century Gregory of Nyssa, the younger brother of Basil of Caesarea and one of the great Cappadocian Fathers who forged the ‘orthodox’ doctrine of the Trinity in response to late Arianism, wrote a remarkable treatise ‘On Virginité’ which has puzzled his readership ever since. The reason for this puzzlement – which has, if anything, intensified of late, leading to a string of competing interpretative articles about what Gregory could possibly have meant in this treatise – lies in the fact that Gregory was almost certainly married at the time of his writing of it. Is his high praise of

virginity, then – a life-style embraced by his admired elder brother, Basil – merely *rhetorical*, even ‘ironic’? Or does his insight about the particular values of married life, too, succumb to an inflated rhetoric: does marriage simply pale, finally, alongside what he perceives as the infinitely higher vocation of celibacy? Or is it neither of these messages, exactly, that he propounds, but something more subtle? I think so, as I shall argue later. But what Gregory presents to us, in this unique text, is a vision of desire – and its right ordering in relation to God – that (puzzlingly to the modern mind, as indeed for the most part to the ancient) does *not* require a disjunctive approach to marriage and celibacy. Rather, it entertains the thought that the godly ordering of desire is what *conjoins* the ascetic aims of marriage and celibacy, at their best, and equally what judges both of them, at their worst. Thus, at the height of his argument in the *de virginitate* Gregory can write that the choice for his reader is whether ultimately to be a ‘Pleasure-lover’ or a ‘God-lover’ – that is, it is a choice about what the *final* telos of one’s desire is; not that sexual pleasure holds any intrinsic fear for him, note (unlike for his near contemporary in the West, Augustine of Hippo, whose epic and tortured struggles for sexual continence we know about in detail from the *Confessions*), but rather – says Gregory – that it is all a matter of due balance or ‘proportion’ (‘On Virginity’, ch. VIII). The key issue, in fact, for Gregory, is a *training* of desire, a life-long commitment to what we might now call the ‘long haul’ of personal, erotic transformation, and thereby of reflection on the final significance of all one’s desires before God.

Such a reference as this to an obscure, and puzzling, text of the patristic era might seem an odd place to start a lecture on the contemporary sex-crises of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, seen in some sort of relation. But there is a method in

my madness. For what I am going to do now, first, is to outline some of the problematic features of the journalistic – or ‘high popular’ - responses to the sex crises in both churches (Catholic and Anglican), in order to indicate their implicit appeal to a sort of ‘sub-Freudianism’, and to excavate some really curious ‘cultural contradictions’¹ about sexuality that emerge in their discussion. What will be really striking, however, is how strangely lacking in these analyses² is a distinctively *theological* account of desire such as Gregory of Nyssa’s work enshrines. I shall then move back to Freud himself, and seek to demonstrate some of the richness and complexity, as well as unfinished nature, of Freud’s own views about sex and ‘sublimation’, such that we are forced back to its ultimate sources in Plato and Plato’s Christian inheritors, and required to think afresh on matters that Freud himself never definitively parsed.

I The Sex Crises and ‘Cultural Contradictions’

Anyone who has attentively followed the press coverage of the recent sex scandals in the Roman Catholic church in Boston, on the one hand, and of the ecclesiastical divisions over homosexuality in the Anglican Communion, on the other, may have become aware of certain pressing contemporary ‘cultural contradictions’ on matters of sexuality and desire that these two crises enshrine, and to which I wish to draw explicit attention. It might be objected that even to name these two areas of ecclesial

¹ A phrase of Daniel Bell’s: see the handout at the end of this lecture.

² The recent, and well-publicised, volumes I list here on my handout are of varying quality and insight, ranging from Steinfeld’s highly-nuanced historical assessment of the Roman Church’s current crises, though Sipes’s largely psychological account of celibacy, via Greeley’s sociological riposte to Sipe’s pessimism on the priesthood, to the - to me - troublingly voyeuristic journalism of sexual abuse in France, and Berry and Renner. Stephen Bates’s book provides a journalistic introduction to the homosexuality debates in the Anglican communion.

public furore thus in one breath is already to have committed a dire, and offensive, fallacy of ‘castigation by lumping’³; for surely the abusive and illegal activities of paedophile Roman Catholic priests must *in no wise* be conflated with the honest and open vowed relationships of gay Episcopalians, including one of such who is now a bishop? To this we must reply immediately that *of course* the difference is ethically crucial – not only in the eyes of the law, but in terms of the unequal power relationships, and the protective shroud of ecclesiastical secrecy, that have marked the Roman Catholic scandal in contrast to the Anglican one. Yet at the same time one cannot help noticing, simply by reflecting on the odd temporal coincidence of these two, very different, ecclesiastical paroxysms over same-sex desire, that a latent ‘cultural contradiction’ of great significance is here made manifest. There is a deep and pervasive public pessimism, on the one hand, over the very *possibility* of faithful celibacy, and yet an equally deep insistence that *certain* forms of sexual desire must at all costs not be enacted. This first cultural contradiction was forcefully, if perhaps unconsciously, expressed by the ex-Jesuit writer Garry Wills in his famous article ‘The Scourge of Celibacy’, in *The Boston Globe Magazine* for March 24, 2002, thus: ‘The whole celibacy structure is a house of cards, and honesty about any one problem can make the structure of pretense come toppling down. ... Treating paedophilia as a separate problem is impossible, since it thrives by its place in a compromised network of evasion. ... [*The*] *real enemy* – Wills ends the article triumphantly - *is celibacy*’. Yet at the beginning of the same article Wills had inveighed against ‘the worst aspect’ of the crisis, ‘the victimization of the young’ and ‘the clerical epidemic of ... *crimes*’ (*Boston Globe Magazine* March 24, 2002, 22, 24, 10,

³ To use a phrase of Jeff Stout's in *Ethics After Babel*.

my emphases). In other words, celibacy is impossible, compromising, and delusive – the whole system smacks of unreality; yet those who do have unmanageable and illegal desires must be held to account and punished: they must and *should* be celibate. Herein, then, we detect our first – and profound – ‘cultural contradiction’: celibacy is impossible, but celibacy *must* be embraced by some with unacceptable and illegal desires.

Now of course once the familiar ‘liberal’/‘conservative’ divide is imposed on this first ‘cultural contradiction’, we get a certain diversion from it and an ostensibly much clearer disjunct, the ‘liberals’ happily condoning faithful vowed gay relationships but condemning illegal and abusive paedophile ones, and the ‘conservatives’ – whether Protestant or Catholic – disavowing and banning all of them by appeal to biblical injunction against sodomy, or reference to ‘natural’ law. *This* division however (between ‘pro-’ and ‘anti-’ gay, ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives’) then tends to get most of the public attention in ecclesiastical circles and in the press, thus diverting us from the underlying – and unsolved - cultural conundrum: how can sexual control be demanded of *anyone* if celibacy is intrinsically ‘impossible’? To this issue we shall shortly return.

A further, and second, ‘cultural contradiction’ seems to afflict the treatment of homosexual, versus heterosexual, desire in contemporary popular discussion of the church divisions. For it is a marked feature of both the Roman Catholic and Anglican sex-crises that almost all the press attention is focussed on same-sex relationships, whether paedophile, ‘ephebophile’, or (mature) homosexual. It is as if, by comparison, no crisis at all afflicts the *heterosexual* world *vis-à-vis* church life and what we might call the general ‘economy of desire’. But anyone surveying the cultural and political scene with a dispassionate eye would surely have to come to other conclusions: the general

erosion of the instance of life-long marriage in North America and Europe, the rise in divorce rates, and the concomitant upsurge in the number of single-parent families, are all well-known to us in secular discussions, but are by no means absent from church-attending, or indeed Protestant *clerical*, families. Only a short time ago, for instance, the clergy of the Diocese of Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts received a mailing calmly announcing that one of their suffragan bishops was undergoing a divorce. One could not but be struck by the air of enforced ‘normalcy’ and psychological adjudication that hung over this letter - no regrets, no confessions, no distress even, and certainly no reference to either bible or Christian tradition: just an insistence that the couple had been ‘faithful in caring for ... each other’ in the past, but were now ‘clear’ about the fact that their marriage was ‘ending’. Clergy were further informed by their suffragan bishop, in psychologized language, that ‘I want to assure you that I am taking *care of myself* in this *period of change*’. Apart from one reference to a ‘excellent Spiritual Director’ that the bishop had now decided to see, there was no theological reference in her letter at all. I wish to cast no specific judgments on this case since I have no independent information about it at all, and – even if I did – the matter would surely be morally complex, and demanding of due compassion. But in fact, the news of the ending of this marriage made me much sadder than the letter would seem to warrant. I cite the case only to note an instance of the current culturally-condoned acknowledgement of the impermanence of marriage, even in the ranks of bishops in the Episcopal Church.

Yet my more important, second point here is this: despite the extensive evidences of clerical divorce, and (quite differently) of clerical abuse or philandering – both Catholic and Protestant - in *heterosexual* encounters or relationships, the more emotive

issue of clerical *homoerotic* desire currently tends to continue to glean much greater public attention in the press and related publications than anything to do with heterosexual sex. It is as if, suddenly in the early 21st-century, homoeroticism has become sufficiently open to discussion to be publicly - and emotively - dissected in the press (and then either condoned or condemned); yet it is insufficiently integrated into a *general* discussion of 'desire' to make comparisons with heterosexual patterns of behaviour a worthy topic of sustained theological reflection. Yet one might well say, as did David Brooks in a *The New York Times* article of November 22, 2003 ('The Power of Marriage'), that our age is in a crisis - not so much of homosexuality - but more generally of erotic *faithfulness*. However, this is scarcely a chic reflection, granted the current prurient obsession with homosexuality, and the concomitant diversion from heterosexual failures in ascetic self-examination.

A third, and final, 'cultural contradiction' that I want to propose to you hovers over the common assumption that celibacy and marriage are somehow *opposites* - one ostensibly involving no 'sex' at all, and the other - again supposedly - involving as much sex as one or both partners might like at any one time. But this, on reflection, is also a perplexing cultural fantasy that does not bear close, analytic scrutiny. The 'ethnographic' evidence provided by Richard Sipe's book, *Celibacy in Crisis*, is revealing here. Not only does faithful (or what Sipe calls 'achieved') celibacy generally involve - perforce - a *greater* consciousness of sexual desire and its frustration than a life lived with regular sexual satisfaction (that attacks one side of the false presumption); but married sexuality, on the other hand, is rarely as care-free and mutually satisfied as this third 'cultural contradiction' might presume. Indeed a *realistic* reflection on long and faithful marriages

(now almost in the minority) will surely reveal periods of enforced ‘celibacy’ even *within* marriages during periods of delicate pregnancy, parturition, illness, physical separation, or impotence, which are simply the lot of the marital ‘long haul’, realistically considered. And if this is so, then the generally-assumed disjunction between ‘celibacy’ and ‘marriage’ will turn out not to be as profound as it seems. Rather, the reflective, faithful celibate and the reflective, faithful married person may have more in common – by way of prayerful surrendering of inevitably *thwarted* desire to God – than the unreflective or faithless celibate, or the carelessly happy, or indeed unhappily careless, married person.

Now we shall return fleetingly to these three ‘cultural contradictions’ I have outlined at the end of this lecture; for by then - I trust - we shall have gleaned some resources for addressing them. But we cannot go further, now, without attacking a different sort of cultural presumption head-on: that of the supposed psychological *dangers* of celibacy or of any so-called ‘repressed’ sexuality. But here we may be surprised to discover what Freud himself said on this matter, and to him we shall now turn. Could it be that he actually gives us, despite himself, certain back-handed resources for thinking afresh *theologically* about ‘desire’?

II: *The Re-channeling of Desire: Freud and His Precursors*

1. Freud on ‘Sublimation’: Desire Without God

The journalistic commentators on the Roman Catholic sex crises tend to take the view, as we have mentioned, that celibacy is ‘impossible’, or virtually so. Even Richard Sipe - who wishes, despite his sustained exposé of clerical failures in celibacy, to defend the estimated 2% of Roman Catholic priests who he thinks do (as he puts it) ‘achieve’

celibacy - avers that this 'achievement' is always at the cost of earlier 'experimentation' and fumbling, through which the priest must inevitably pass *en route* to something like mature sexual balance. Underlying these gloomy analyses (Sipe estimates that nearly half of so-called 'celibates' are actually not so at any one time) seems to lurk the psychological presumption – often attributed to Freud - that celibacy is unnatural and even harmful; or – if not *inherently* 'unnatural', then distinctly 'unusual' and 'utopian' (so Steinfeld, in the minority here, amongst our journalistic commentators, [p. 330]). It may come as some surprise then, to find that Freud's own views on 'sublimation' were not only malleable over time, remaining finally somewhat unclear and inconsistent, but that he moved distinctly away from his early, and purely biological, account of 'Eros' and its power for redirection. At no time, in fact (as far as I can see), does Freud's position provide a mandate for the view that 'sublimation' is *harmful* – or at any rate any more harmful than the psychological repressions we necessarily negotiate all the time, according to Freud. On the contrary, as we shall now sketch quickly, the later view of Freud is that we must all, perforce, be engaged in forms of 'sublimation', if civilization is to endure, and that celibacy has always been the choice of a 'minority' who interpret this pressure 'religiously'.

There are two points about Freud on sexual desire that seem particularly intriguing in our quest for a revitalized *theological* account of it. The first is that we can trace a distinct change in his views on 'Eros' from his early writings on the biological drive of sex (in *The Interpretation of Dreams* [1900] and the *Lectures on Psychoanalysis* [1916-17]), through a transitional period represented by *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920], to a mature sensibility about the possible re-channeling of 'erotic' power in a less

biological, and less repressive, sense, in *Civilization and Its Discontents* [1929-30] and *Why War?* [1933]. The shifts are highly illuminating and show how unafraid Freud was to change his mind, indeed how his mind – even when changed - remained somewhat unclear on the matter as late as the 1930s. The shifts particularly give the lie to the popular misconstrual that Freud sees sublimation/repression as inevitably *harmful*. In the early writings, Freud rarely uses the word ‘Eros’, although when he does it is as a synonym for the ‘Libido’, the physical, biological, sexual drive which at this stage he argues often comes into conflict with the ‘Ego’. Note that even at this early phase Freud is by no means of the opinion that it is harmful to *resist* physical sexual expression in many circumstances; he can stress, for instance, in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* [p. 413]) how harmful sexual activity itself can often be, precisely because its significance is social and not merely individual: ‘Sexuality’, he writes, ‘[has] advantages, but, in return for an unusually high degree of pleasure, brings dangers which threaten the individual’s life and often destroy it’. Eros at this stage, then, is conceived biologically and as always in a state of restless negotiation and tension: it must *necessarily* be repressed in part, and hence its difficulties.

By the time of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, however (1920), Freud can be seen significantly extending his concept of Libido and now more consistently labelling it ‘Eros’, whilst also drawing the Ego and the Libido closer together, rather than placing them in conflict; Eros/Libido have come now to include not just *biological* sex drive but all of the Ego’s instincts to self-preservation and the maintenance of life. At this point too Freud first introduces the notion of Thanatos (death) as a new binary opposite to Eros: whereas Eros is the drive that presses towards the future and new life, Thanatos

looks backwards and is death-obsessed. In short, Freud has created a new binary – more publicly-oriented than the earlier individual psychic tension between Ego and Libido – and which provides a sort of Hegelian dialectic of *cultural* propulsion. No wonder, then, that his later theory of ‘sublimation’ – *Aufhebung*, note, in German – has a wider cultural remit than his earlier account of individual biological needs and their necessary repressions; this new theory – as expressed in *Civilization and its Discontents* and then, slightly differently, in *Why War?* – is now fascinatingly, and explicitly, linked to Plato’s theory of erotic ‘ascent’ to Beauty in *The Symposium* (e.g., *Why War?*, 90), and it is ‘what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life’ (*Civilizations*, 51). Whilst in *Civilizations* Freud is still of the opinion that such culturally-conceived *Aufhebung* comes with the danger, and the cost, of a necessary accompanying ‘renunciation’ or ‘repression’ (C, 52), it is not clear that he consistently keeps up this position later. As Marcuse argued in an important essay in his *Eros and Civilization* (‘The Transformation of Sexuality into Eros’), there seems to be in Freud yet another strand on ‘sublimation’ that does *not* involve repression, but rather a more straightforward transference of aggressive energy to a good, ‘erotic’ end. Thus, in a striking correspondence of 1933 initiated by Albert Einstein at Princeton (and later published as *Why War?*), Freud can express the astonishingly optimistic view, as war-clouds gathered in Europe, that ‘Erotism’ – the love instinct – could finally triumph over Hate and war and aggression (Thanatos), by a sort of *direct* transference of the energies of hate. As he now puts it to Einstein (ed. Rickman, 91, 93), love and hate must always go together, so that one – love - can modify or redirect the energies of the other - hate. Thus ‘[C]omplete suppression of man’s aggressive

tendencies’, he concludes, ‘is not in issue; what we try is to *divert it into a channel* other than that of warfare’ (93, my emphasis). Note, then, that a discussion of ‘sublimation’ that started in Freud’s early works as a matter related to mere biological drive, has now become a theory of a *positive*, and seemingly non-repressive, ‘rechanneling’ of psychic energy. Let us keep this theme of positive ‘rechanneling’ in mind as we go back to Christian authors later: we may find more continuity with Freud – via the shared resource of Plato – than we might expect.

The second point about Freud on ‘sublimation’ I want to stress here, however, is the issue on which he is at most odds with Christianity, and indeed with Plato likewise. And this too is – at least backhandedly - instructive for our theological purposes, and again, not what one might think to hear from him. For when Freud speaks specifically about *Christian* celibacy in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (56ff.), it is not to inveigh against it as such, nor to deride it as psychically dangerous or impossible (though he does say that it is only a ‘small minority’ who are ‘enabled by their constitution to find happiness, in spite of everything’ according to this path). Rather it is to say – *a la* Plato’s first stages of erotic ascent in the *Symposium* – that celibates have managed to direct their love to ‘all men alike’ rather than simply to *one*, chosen sexual ‘love-object’. It is precisely ‘religion’ that helps them to do this, he admits; and – as we might expect from Freud – this causes him to inject a sneer: it is not that he thinks celibacy is intrinsically damaging, but rather that he has *moral* objections to the ‘religious’ idea that one should love everyone equally: ‘A love [first] that does not discriminate seems to me to forfeit a part of its own value ...; and secondly [he goes on], not all men are *worthy* of love’ (C, 57, my emphasis). What this rhetoric hides, it seems to me, is a deep

remaining *aporia* in Freud's new, but partial, accommodation of Plato: since there is no final theory of 'forms' for Freud, still less a Christian God, then the new embrace of the Platonic ladder of ascent has, perforce, nowhere finally to go: Eros lacks eschatological, or *divine* direction. Thus, while celibacy remains both possible, and even undamaging, for the later Freud, he cannot accept its *moral* goals, and nor can he give it final *theological* meaning. Therein lies the true rub.

2. Nygren as Distractor: *Eros* and *Agape* disjoined

If we have now successfully shown, then, that Freud himself - as opposed to the contemporary popular American misunderstanding of him - sees 'sublimation' as personally and culturally *necessary*, and even priestly celibacy as *possible*, wherein lies the continuing felt resistance to a contemporary *theology* of desire? We have seen how Freud - of sheer atheistical conviction - himself blocks the upward ascent of 'Eros' towards any heavenly goal; but it may be that it is Anders Nygren's famous study of 1953, *Agape and Eros*, rather than the secular Freud, that has actually played a wider cultural role here than is normally recognized in undermining the efforts at a modern Christian theology of 'desire'. Now a classic of the 20th-century, the book's rigidly Lutheran (and oft-criticized) thesis is so well-known as to scarcely need another rehearsal: *agape* is the Christian love of Jesus and the New Testament, says Nygren - graced, God-given, sacrificial, downward-moving, unselfish; whereas nasty Platonic *eros* - 'desire' - is, in contrast, acquisitive, man-centred, upward-moving, egocentric, and needy. To pick up our metaphor of 'channeling' again, we may note how frightened Nygren is about the possibility of *any* safe channeling of the alarming erotic urge: 'The idea of Agape', he writes (pp. 49-50), 'can be compared to a *small stream* which, even in

the history of Christianity, flows along an extremely narrow channel and sometimes seems to lose itself entirely in its surrounding; but Eros is a *broad river that overflows its banks*, carrying everything away with it, so that it is not easy even in thought to dam it up and make it flow in an orderly course' (my emphasis). I mention Nygren's thesis here only briefly as a bridge back to our discussion of Gregory of Nyssa and other pre-modern Christian theorists of 'desire', because anyone who wishes, as I now do, to re-engage a significant dimension of Christian tradition that consciously married the New Testament with Platonic and neo-Platonic ideas of *eros*, inevitably has to run Nygren's gauntlet. It is worth pointing out, then, with Fr. Martin D'Arcy and other earlier critics of Nygren, that while his account of New Testament views of *agape* is relatively accurate, his reading of Platonic *eros* is by contrast highly selective, negative and contentious. It shows little cognizance even of the subtlety of Diotima's speech on the nature of love in Plato's *Symposium*, in which the ladder of erotic purification is mounted in order finally to 'have disclosed' to her 'suddenly' – and as a sort of gift or revelation – a *participation* in the form of Beauty. This is no mere selfish 'grasping'. Not only then is Nygren's reading of Plato marred by an imposition of Christian – and specifically Lutheran - fears of 'works righteousness' and Pelagianism, it also has the effect of placing sexual attraction and '*Christian* love' in radically different boxes with no obvious means of mutual influence – a Protestant trait which has lethal consequences for any theological theorizing of sexuality and its relation to God's love. To move then now towards our own constructive proposal based on Gregory of Nyssa's seminal insights, we shall have to simply bypass Nygren's road-block and declare it a mistaken and false construction. Nygren is in fact quite unable – on account of his rigid binary - to give any positive

account of the fruitful alliance of Christian *agape* and Platonic *eros* which began in the third century with Hippolytus and Origen, and their commentaries on *The Song of Songs*, and passed directly from there to Nyssen; and yet this was the marriage that was to spawn innumerable classics of ‘mystical theology’ thereafter. For Origen, *agape* simply *is eros*, by any other name; whereas for his rather different successor in the *Song*-commentary tradition, Gregory of Nyssa, *eros* is *agape* (as he puts it) ‘stretched out in longing’ towards the divine goal. Let us then turn back, now, in a final section of this lecture, to see further how Nyssen’s views on celibacy curiously *cohere* with his views on marriage, and how his insights – after our examination of Freud – might steer us beyond the false ‘cultural contradictions’ with which we started this lecture.

3. Platonic ‘eros’ and Christian appropriation: Gregory of Nyssa as example

We have been charting, in the case of both Freud and Nygren, how the image of ‘channeling’ is used in relation to erotic desire in interestingly contrastive ways. For Freud it provides a means of positive transference of energies, whereas for Nygren the dangerous ‘eros’ is forever destructively bursting its banks. Precisely this same image of channeling, interestingly, is at the heart of Gregory of Nyssa’s theorizing of marriage and celibacy in his *de virginitate*. As Valerie Karras perceptively shows in her excellent article on this treatise, Gregory is being ‘ironic’, neither in his adulation of celibacy nor of marriage, puzzling as it may seem that they should be put thus together. The really interesting and unique heart of the argument, then, lies in the metaphor of the ‘stream’ of desire, and of its right direction, use, and even *intensification* in relation to God; and in this task celibates and married people are – as far as Gregory is concerned - equally involved as a life-long ascetical exercise. Thus, as Gregory puts it in ch. VII of the

treatise (p. 352): ‘Imagine a stream flowing from a spring and dividing itself off into a number of accidental channels. As long as it proceeds so, it will be useless for any purpose of agriculture, the dissipation of its waters making each particular current small and feeble, and therefore slow. But if one were to mass these wandering and widely dispersed rivulets again into one single channel, he would have a full and collected stream for the supplies which life demands. Just so the human mind ..., as long as its current spreads itself in all directions over the pleasures of the senses, has no power that is worth the naming of making its way towards the Real Good; but once call it back and collect it upon itself ... it will find no obstacle in mounting to higher things, in grasping realities.’ (Note how interestingly this compares with Nygren’s imaging of *dangerous* and excessive ‘erotic’ channels.) It might be thought that Gregory intends this intensification of desire towards God as mutually exclusive with a sexually-active life in marriage; but interestingly he repeats the same metaphor of the stream in the following chapter (VIII) precisely to explain how sex in marriage can be a ‘good irrigation’ provided it, too, is ordered in relation to God and so made ‘moderate’ in comparison with the intensified and unified stream that desire for God demands. It is not then to *suppress* ‘passion’ that the treatise is written; but actually (as stated by Gregory at the very outset) precisely to ‘*create passion*’ for ‘the life according to excellence’. Married sexual expression, and its erotic metaphors, thus holds no worries for Gregory, unlike for Augustine, who was to find even lawful married intercourse a matter for concern on account of its capacity for male loss of ‘control’ (*City of God*, book XIV), and who notably never expanded any theology of the *Song of Songs* as did Gregory later. Here, in the earlier *de virginitate*, however, Gregory lauds ‘virginity’ *not* on account of its

sexlessness, but because of its withdrawal from *worldly* interests – the building up of families, status and honour – and hence its emulation of the changeless life of the Trinity. It is not sex that is the problem but worldly values. And he sees good, spiritually-productive, marriage as almost on a par with celibacy given its equal potential capacity, when desire is rightly ‘aimed’, to bear the fruits of *leitourgia*, ‘service’ to others, especially to the poor. Consequently, by the end of the treatise, as Valerie Karras rightly shows, we have an instructive set of hierarchically-ordered possibilities for ‘erotic’ states of affairs: bad marriage, in which the external rules of fidelity may be kept but no spiritual unification of desire towards God is occurring – no right ‘channeling’ of *eros*; bad celibacy, in which likewise the external rules may, or may not, be obeyed, but physical virginity is not leading to any transformation of the soul; and then spiritually fruitful marriage and spiritually fruitful celibacy, in contrast, which turn out to have more in common with one another than do the other states. Hence, as Karras puts it (p. 121) the married person who can ‘channel the water’ erotically towards God is significantly above the mere *physically* celibate virgin who is still subject to false attachments or the ‘spiritual’ vices of envy, malice and slander. But the special power of the virgin who has also rightly channeled the erotic stream lies for Gregory in his significance for others: Gregory ends, much in the spirit of an Alasdair MacIntyre today, with an insistence on ascetical *practices* as means of transformation, and of the indispensable spiritual power of one from whom one may *mimetically* ‘catch the halo’, as he puts it, of rightly-ordered desire. In other words – and this is surely a point of great spiritual significance for today – rightly-channeled *eros*, whether married or celibate, is impossible without deep prayer and ascetic perseverance; but it is even more impossible, interestingly, without shining

examples to emulate. Such, for Gregory himself, was the inspiration of his celibate brother Basil: celibacy was ultimately to be ‘caught’, not ‘taught’.

Conclusions and Forecast: Beyond Repression and Libertartinism

Let me now gather the strands of this lecture in closing, and see what lessons it may hold for Anglicanism today. As we have seen in the course of this exposition, Nyssen’s tract ‘On Viriginity’ is unique, and puzzling, in the tradition precisely because it is written by a married person and cuts across the usual dividing categories of lay and ordained, married and celibate. As such, I suggest it not only provides a potential hermeneutical key for reading other forms of ascetic literature thus, against the grain, and across traditional disjunctions (so that literature for monastics can be given lay application), but surely also gives the lie to Peter Steinfels’ insistence that a commitment to celibacy could only now be re-invigorated within contemporary Roman Catholicism *at the cost of* a high theology of lay and married service. (As he puts it in *A People Adrift*, ‘If the church wants to restore celibacy to [its] former status, there is really only one practical way to do it: demote marriage to the second-class standing it once had’ [p. 330].) It has been the burden of this lecture to suggest otherwise, in the spirit of Gregory; and not only to insist that marriage and celibacy should thus be re-thought alongside one another, but also implicitly – and doubtless more contentiously - that heterosexual and homosexual desire should also, and analogously, be reflected on in concert by the same exacting standards of progressive non-attachment and ascetical transformation. Then, I submit, homoerotic desire could potentially be released from its cultural – and biblical – associations with libertinism, promiscuity and disorder.

Gregory's vision of desire as thwarted, chastened, transformed, renewed and finally *intensified* in God, bringing forth spiritual fruits of *agape* and *leitourgia* in a number of different contexts, represents a way beyond and through the false modern alternatives of 'repression' and 'libertinism', or of *agape* and *eros*, and one – that as I have argued within this lecture – has curiously more points of contact with the real Freud than the imaginary Freud of American popular consciousness. Whether Gregory's stern intimations of the final locus of desire can also be the means of an overcoming of all three of the cultural contradictions I outlined at the start of this lecture I leave here to some extent an open question; but such has been my implicit argument. Certainly the re-thinking of celibacy *and* faithful vowed relations (whether heterosexual or homosexual) in an age of instantly commodified desire and massive infidelity is a task of daunting proportions, of which no-one can be very confident of wide-spread success. But as Gregory himself warns, we cannot believe it unless we see it lived: 'Any theory divorced from living examples ... is like [an] unbreathing statue' (ch. XXIII). Therein then, perhaps, lies the true challenge for us today: the counter-cultural production – not of film-stars, sports heroes or faithless royal families – but of erotic *saints* to inspire us.

The conclusion, therefore, to which I have brought us, finally, is that we cannot solve our own Anglican crises about 'homosexuality' unless we first, all of us, re-imagine theologically the whole project of our human sorting, taming and purifying of desires within the crucible of divine desire. Such is the ascetical long haul set before us, in which faithfulness plays the indispensable role endemic to the demands of the primary love for God. To re-think the 'homosexuality' crises in *this* light, I have suggested,

would be to re-invest the debate with a theological and spiritual wisdom too long forgotten.

*

Ely Cathedral Autumn Lecture Series, November 24, 2009

‘Taming Desire: Freud *versus* the Church?’

Sarah Coakley, University of Cambridge

*

Introduction: ‘Left Field’ Proposals for the Current Anglican Sex Crises: The Training of Desire – Gregory of Nyssa (c.330 - c. 395) as Exemplar

I: *The Sex Crises and ‘Cultural Contradictions’ – Exposing Some Questionable Presumptions Arising from the Response to the Roman Catholic Sex Scandals in Boston:*

1. Celibacy is ‘impossible’, but *demanded* of some constituencies; 2. Homoeroticism is problematic, but heterosexual areas of difficulty (divorce, abuse, etc.) are not; 3. Celibacy and marriage are ‘opposites’.

II: *The Re-channeling of Desire: Freud and His Precursors:*

1. Freud on ‘sublimation’ – desire without God; 2. Nygren as distractor: *eros* and *agape* disjoined; 3. Platonic ‘eros’ and Christian appropriation: Return to Gregory of Nyssa.

III: *Conclusions and Forecast: The Training of Desire - Beyond Repression and Libertinism. Implications for the Anglican Debates on Homosexuality*

*

Select bibliography

Gregory of Nyssa, ‘On Virginitly’, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, eds. P. Schaff and H.Wace (Peabody MA, Hendrikson Publishers, 1995), 343-71

Mark D. Hart, ‘Reconciliation of Body and Soul: Gregory of Nyssa’s Deeper Theology of Marriage’, *Theological Studies* 51(1990), 450-78

_____, ‘Gregory of Nyssa’s Ironic Praise of the Celibate Life’, *Heythrop Journal* 33 (1992), 1-19

Valerie A. Karras, ‘A Re-evaluation of Marriage, Celibacy, and Irony in Gregory of Nyssa’s *On Virginitly*’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13 (2005), 111-21

Augustine, *Confessions* (London: Penguin, 1961)

Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003)

A. W. Richard Sipe, *Celibacy in Crisis: A Secret World Revisited* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003)

Andrew M. Greeley, *Priests: A Calling in Crisis* (Chicago: U. Chicago P., 2004)

David France, *Our Fathers: The Secret Life of the Catholic Church in an Age of Scandal* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004)

- Jason Berry and Gerald Renner, *Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II* (New York: Free Press, 2004)
- Stephen Bates, *A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality* (London: Tauris, 2004)
- Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1996²)
- Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998)
- Garry Wills, 'The Case Against Celibacy', *The Boston Globe Magazine*, March 24, 2002
- David Brooks, 'The Power of Marriage', *New York Times*, November 22, 2003
- Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1999)
- _____, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1985)
- _____, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: Norton, 1975)
- _____, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1989)
- John Rickman (ed.), *Sigmund Freud: Civilization, War and Death* (London: Hogarth, 1953)
- Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon, 1974)
- Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (London: S.P.C.K., 1953)
- M. C. D'Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love* (London: Faber, 1954)
- Augustine, *City of God*, tr. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1984)
- Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981)
- Sarah Coakley, 'Pleasure Principles: Toward a Theology of Desire', *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* Autumn 2005, 20-33
- _____, (ed.), *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2003)
- _____, 'Beyond Libertarianism and Repression: the Quest for an Anglican Theological Ascetics', in ed. Terry Brown, *Other Voices, Other Worlds* (London, D.L.T., 2006), 331-38
- _____, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge, C.U.P., forthcoming)