

FIRST THINGS

AGAINST HETEROSEXUALITY

by *Michael W. Hannon*

March 2014

Alasdair MacIntyre once quipped that “facts, like telescopes and wigs for gentlemen, were a seventeenth-century invention.” Something similar can be said about sexual orientation: Heterosexuals, like typewriters and urinals (also, obviously, for gentlemen), were an invention of the 1860s. Contrary to our cultural preconceptions and the lies of what has come to be called “orientation essentialism,” “straight” and “gay” are not ageless absolutes. Sexual orientation is a conceptual scheme with a history, and a dark one at that. It is a history that began far more recently than most people know, and it is one that will likely end much sooner than most people think.

Over the course of several centuries, the West had progressively abandoned Christianity’s marital architecture for human sexuality. Then, about one hundred and fifty years ago, it began to replace that longstanding teleological tradition with a brand new creation: the absolutist but absurd taxonomy of sexual orientations. Heterosexuality was made to serve as this fanciful framework’s regulating ideal, preserving the social prohibitions against sodomy and other sexual debaucheries without requiring recourse to the procreative nature of human sexuality.

On this novel account, same-sex sex acts were wrong not because they spurn the rational-animal purpose of sex—namely the family—but rather because the desire for these actions allegedly arises from a distasteful psychological disorder. As queer theorist Hanne Blank recounts, “This new concept [of heterosexuality], gussied up in a mangled mix of impressive-sounding dead languages, gave old orthodoxies a new and vibrant lease on life

by suggesting, in authoritative tones, that science had effectively pronounced them natural, inevitable, and innate.”

Sexual orientation has not provided the dependable underpinning for virtue that its inventors hoped it would, especially lately. Nevertheless, many conservative-minded Christians today feel that we should continue to enshrine the gay–straight divide and the heterosexual ideal in our popular catechesis, since that still seems to them the best way to make our moral maxims appear reasonable and attractive.

These Christian compatriots of mine are wrong to cling so tightly to sexual orientation, confusing our unprecedented and unsuccessful apologia for chastity with its eternal foundation. We do not need “heteronormativity” to defend against debauchery. On the contrary, it is just getting in our way.

Michel Foucault, an unexpected ally, details the pedigree of sexual orientation in his *History of Sexuality*. Whereas “sodomy” had long identified a class of actions, suddenly for the first time, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the term “homosexual” appeared alongside it. This European neologism was used in a way that would have struck previous generations as a plain category mistake, designating not actions, but people—and so also with its counterpart and foil “heterosexual.”

Psychiatrists and legislators of the mid- to late-1800s, Foucault recounts, rejected the classical convention in which the “perpetrator” of sodomitical acts was “nothing more than the juridical subject of them.” With secular society rendering classical religious beliefs publicly illegitimate, pseudoscience stepped in and replaced religion as the moral foundation for venereal norms. To achieve secular sexual social stability, the medical experts crafted what Foucault describes as “a natural order of disorder.”

“The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage,” “a type of life,” “a morphology,” Foucault writes. This perverted psychiatric identity, elevated to the status of a mutant “life form” in order to safeguard polite society against its disgusting depravities, swallowed up the entire character of the afflicted: “Nothing that went into [the homosexual’s] total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle.”

The imprudent aristocrats encouraging these medical innovations changed the measure of public morality, substituting religiously colored human nature with the secularly safer option of individual passion. In doing so, they were forced also to trade the robust natural law tradition for the recently constructed standard of “psychiatric normality,” with “heterosexuality” serving as the new normal for human sexuality. Such a vague standard of normality, unsurprisingly, offered far flimsier support for sexual ethics than did the classical natural law tradition.

But emphasizing this new standard did succeed in cementing these categories of hetero- and homosexuality in the popular imagination. “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality,” Foucault writes, “when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.” Sexual orientation, then, is nothing more than a fragile social construct, and one constructed terribly recently.

While our popular culture has not caught up—*yet*—the queer theorists increasingly calling the shots at the elite level already agree with Foucault on

this point. Such thinkers echo Gore Vidal’s LGBT-heretical line: “Actually, there is no such thing as a homosexual person, any more than there is such a thing as a heterosexual

person.” True, the firm natural division between the two identities has proven useful to the “gay rights” activists on the ground, and not least of all for the civil-rights-era ethos such power dynamics conjure up. But most queer theorists—and, for that matter, most academics throughout the humanities and the social/behavioral disciplines today—will readily concede that such distinctions are fledgling constructs and not much more. Many in this camp aim to expose the counterfeit credentials of sexual orientation and, taking a page from Nietzsche, to genealogically explain it away once and for all.

Jonathan Ned Katz, a historian of sexuality on the radical left who has previously taught at both Yale and New York University, nicely captures the contemporary queer-theory consensus in *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, where he explains, “I speak of heterosexuality’s historical invention to contest head-on our usual assumption of an eternal heterosexuality, to suggest the unstable, relative, and historical status of an idea and a sexuality we usually assume were carved long ago in stone.” As he goes on to argue, “Contrary to today’s bio-belief, the heterosexual/homosexual binary is not in nature, but is socially constructed, therefore deconstructable.”

My own prediction is that we will see this binary thoroughly deconstructed within our lifetimes. But in my view, we proponents of Christian chastity should see the impending doom of the gay–straight divide not as a tragedy, but as an opportunity. More than that, I want to suggest that we should do our best to encourage the dissolution of orientation within our own subcultural spheres wherever possible.

Of course, given our immersion in a culture for which these categories seem as connatural as the English language, uprooting them from our vocabulary and worldview will not be anything like a simple task. So why bother? As long as we do not succumb to sinful acts, why does it matter if people—even we Christians—continue to identify as homosexuals or heterosexuals?

First of all, within orientation essentialism, the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality is a construct that is dishonest about its identity as a construct. These classifications masquerade as natural categories, applicable to all people in all times and places according to the typical objects of their sexual desires (albeit with perhaps a few more options on offer for the more politically correct categorizers). Claiming to be not simply an accidental nineteenth-century invention but a timeless truth about human sexual nature, this framework puts on airs, deceiving those who adopt its labels into believing that such distinctions are worth far more than they really are.

A second reason to doubt whether this schema is one that we Christians should readily use is that its introduction into our sexual discourse has not noticeably increased the virtues—intellectual or moral—of those who employ its concepts. On the contrary, it has bred both intellectual obscurity and moral disarray.

As to the former, orientation essentialism has made ethical philosophy in this realm all but impossible: It has displaced the old marital-procreative principles of chastity without offering any alternative that is not entirely arbitrary. The older teleological view measured morality against man's rational-animal nature; in the sexual realm, this meant evaluating sex acts by reference to the common good of marriage, which integrated spousal union and the bearing and rearing of children. The newer heteronormative system, on the other hand, cannot account for the wickedness of same-sex sodomy by reference to anything but a conditioned and unprincipled gag reflex, and one which, left unjustified, has weakened considerably over time.

As to the latter result, moral disarray, the orientation takeover has counterproductively shifted our everyday attention from objective purposes to subjective passions. Young people, for instance, now regularly find themselves agonizing over their sexual identity,

navel-gazing in an attempt to discern their place in this allegedly natural Venn diagram of orientations. Such obsessions generate far more heat than light, and focus already sexually excited adolescents on discerning extraneous dimensions of their own sexual makeup. This self-searching becomes even more needlessly distressing for those who discern in themselves a “homosexual orientation,” as they adopt an identity distinguished essentially by a set of sexual desires that cannot morally be fulfilled.

There is a third reason this categorization should be disposed of, this one theological: It is at odds with the freedom for which Christ set us free. My future prior in religious life, Fr. Hugh Barbour of the Norbertine Fathers, has expanded on this idea in an essay in *Chronicles Magazine*, entitled “Do Homosexuals Exist? Or, Where Do We Go from Here?” As Fr. Prior argues, “Traditional moral theology evaluated acts, and did not generalize so unsatisfyingly about the tendencies that lead to these acts. That was left to the casuistry of occasions of sin, and to spiritual direction. If the sin is theft, then is the standard of evaluation kleptomania? If drunkenness, alcoholism? If sloth, clinical depression?” Even orthodox Christians, he writes,

have given in to the custom of treating sexual inclinations as identities. Pastorally, we are meant to preach the freedom whereby Christ has made us free. In treating the sin of sodomy as a *prima facie* proof of an identity, are we not, in the guise of compassion and sensitivity, helping bind the sinner to his sinful inclination, and so laying on him a burden that is too great to bear without perhaps moving a finger to lift it?

Self-describing as a “homosexual” tends to multiply occasions of sin for those who adopt the label—provoking, in Prior’s words, an unnecessary “dramatization of the temptation.” Whereas the infusion of the theological virtues sets the Christian free, identifying as

homosexual only further enslaves the sinner. It intensifies lust, a sad distortion of love, by amplifying the apparent significance of concupiscent desires. It fosters a despairing self-pity, harming hope, which is meant to motivate moral virtues. And it encourages a strong sense of entitlement, which often undermines the obedience of faith by demanding the overthrow of doctrines that seem to repress “who I really am.”

There are a handful of laudable counterexamples to this discouraging pattern, self-identified “gay Christians” who are both virtuous and faithful to the teachings of the Church. But given the inherent tension between the classical Christian narrative and the modern sexual-orientation account, it should come as no surprise that the praiseworthy outliers who try to combine these two inconsonant traditions are the exception rather than the rule.

Baptizing the homosexual identity is fraught with preventable perils. And yet, when it comes to the gravest evil effected by the sexual-orientation binary, homosexuality is not the culprit. Heterosexuality is—not, of course, as though we can have one without the other. The most pernicious aspect of the orientation-identity system is that it tends to exempt heterosexuals from moral evaluation. If homosexuality binds us to sin, heterosexuality blinds us to sin.

There is no question that some morally self-aware “heterosexuals” exist. Nevertheless, as a general rule, identifying as a heterosexual person today amounts to declaring oneself a member of the “normal group,” against which all deviant sexual desires and attractions and temptations are to be measured. Such hetero-identification thus ushers in a pathetically uncritical and—hopefully it goes without saying—unmerited self-assurance, not to mention an inaccurate measure for evaluating temptation.

Of course, we do have a model norm for the evaluation of sexual deviancy. But that model

is not heterosexuality. It is Christ Jesus himself, the God-man who both perfected human nature and perfectly exemplified its perfection, “one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” For the self-declared heterosexual to displace our Lord in this position is the height of folly.

It is true that homosexuality may be distinguished by an inappropriate despair, accepting sinful inclinations as identity-constituting and thereby implicitly rejecting the freedom bought for us by the blood of Christ. But heterosexuality, in its pretensions to act as the norm for assessing our sexual customs, is marked by something even worse: pride, which St. Thomas Aquinas classifies as the queen of all vices.

There are practical reasons to be wary of heterosexuality as well. Because our post-Freudian world associates all physical attraction and interpersonal affection with genital erotic desire, intimate same-sex friendship and a chaste appreciation for the beauty of one’s own sex have become all but impossible to achieve. (Freud, by the way, was one of the most influential architects of the vicious orientation-essentialist myth.)

For “heterosexuals” in particular, getting close to a friend of the same sex ends up seeming perverse, and being moved by his or her beauty feels queer. To avoid being mistaken for gay, these days many self-proclaimed straight people—men especially—settle for superficial associations with their comrades and reserve the sort of costly intimacy that once characterized such chaste same-sex relationships for their romantic partners alone.

Their ostensibly normal sexual orientation cheats them out of an essential aspect of human flourishing: deep friendship.

The earliest usages of the term “heterosexuality” give further reason to doubt whether we should celebrate the idea too enthusiastically. It is true that even in the late nineteenth

century, sometimes the label was employed merely to denote “normal-sex.” This is, of course, how we still tend to use “heterosexual” today, which I am arguing is tragically confused.

But another prominent meaning of the term around the time of its invention, including its first recorded usage in English in 1892, continues to inform our warped conception of human sexuality, even though this secondary definition has since fallen out of fashion. In its alternative definition, the word designated not “normal-sex,” but rather a different brand of deviant sex, like its homosexual counterpart in its disregard for procreation but made distinct by the typical object of its lustful inclinations.

The unfortunate history of “heterosexual” we have chosen to forget is that this word came into the English language as a label for a perverted sexual disorder that delighted in sterile sex acts. Usually such desires were for those of the opposite sex, but even that line was blurry, because as it turned out, once the generative purpose of sex had been severed, it often mattered very little who the heterosexual’s mutual masturbatory partner was.

Our Christian forebears would be shocked at our complacency with sexual orientation. The only reason that this whole program fails to alarm us as it would them is that we have been systematically indoctrinated into it from childhood, especially the young adults among us. But to take an analogue that we do not have such familiarity with, let’s consider how we would react if a different sort of category worked its way into our cultural vocabulary.

Slate recently ran an article entitled “Is Polyamory a Choice?” which argued that, in addition to inclinations toward men or women, there may also be innate and immutable fidelity- and infidelity-constituted sexual orientations. Dan Savage must be so proud.

Imagine if those people who anticipated being most romantically satisfied by committed sexual exclusivity began identifying as “faithfuls,” while those who were usually most excited by the prospect of unbounded sexual promiscuity started identifying as “unfaithfuls.” Would we not find that troubling, especially when Christian men and women began adopting the latter label for themselves, and even offering the fact that they are “unfaithfuls” as a reason not to marry, since they would not be sufficiently fulfilled by the sexual life to which they would be committing themselves via the marital vows?

“Unfaithfulness” is obviously playing the role of homosexuality in this analogy. But whether we are considering the number of one’s sexual partners or their gender, how can it not shock us when our Christian brethren adopt an identity for themselves that is essentially distinguished from its foil by nothing but a particular brand of temptation to sin? That is the opposite of Christian freedom. Of course, all of us are fallen and tempted and in need of divine assistance. But while we continue to struggle against these sinful temptations, what has been given to us in Christ Jesus is liberation from the shackles of sin that claims us as its own.

We do not belong to our transgressions any longer. So why create identities for ourselves using sin as the standard? I do not care how attractive promiscuity happens to be to you. You are emphatically *not* “an unfaithful.” Sure, we could socially construct categories that would make speaking that way appear obvious and connatural. But for the Christian to do so, or for him to participate willingly in such a framework once it has been constructed around him, would be severely mistaken.

I am not my sin. I am not my temptation to sin. By the blood of Jesus Christ, I have been liberated from this bondage. I will have all sorts of identities, to be sure, especially in our crazily over-psychoanalytic age. But at the very least, none of these identities should be essentially defined by my attraction to that which separates me from God

essentially defined by my attraction to that which separates me from God.

The other side of this *Slate*-inspired hypothetical brings to light the characteristic evils of heterosexuality. Our justified disapproval of Christians despairingly identifying as “unfaithful” notwithstanding, would there not be something even more absurd and vicious in their vaingloriously self-identifying as “faithful”? Put it this way: Does the fact that my erotic desires tend to take a single person for their object rather than a vast collective necessarily signify some inherent moral quality on my part? For that matter, does it even signal that my desires are virtuous, or—I think more probably—does it simply indicate that I happen not to be strongly tempted to one of many potential lustful abuses? Like so-called “faithful” folks, “heterosexual” individuals are not paragons of chastity just because they avoid the unchaste pitfall *du jour*.

However, despite the illogic of it all, “straight people” still tend to receive more societal advantages from their appellation, and thus the dismantling of the orientation schema threatens them far more than it does their “gay” and “lesbian” counterparts. As Jenell Williams Paris of Messiah College writes in her book *The End of Sexual Identity*, “Grounding sexual ethics in our humanity more than in contemporary sexual identity categories . . . comes at a cost to heterosexuals,” because “it puts them in the game as players instead of umpires.” For that very reason, though, it is self-proclaimed heterosexuals who may prove most effective in leading our chaste charge against sexual orientation, sacrificing their unchristian security blanket of “straightness” for the sake of *caritas in veritate*.

Yet whether we Christians choose to join the campaign or not, over time, sexual orientation will inevitably fall out of fashion—our choice is simply whether we want to fall out with it. One obvious reason for its unavoidable demise is that feeling is considerably more fickle than those early psychosexual movers and shakers believed. The

empirical evidence shows their hard-and-fast categories turn out to be radically insufficient.

A second factor in the inevitable downfall of sexual orientation is that these hetero/homo categories cannot logically ground the sexual norms they were made to support anyway. The original orientation essentialists could not even offer a principled reason to prefer heterosexuality over homosexuality, the linchpin of their position. Left with nothing but inherited sensibilities and arbitrary fiat, their heteronormative measure failed where its procreative predecessor had succeeded for centuries, in offering sound reasons for rules.

Philosophical failure has damned the orientation enterprise throughout its existence. Because the inadequate heteronormative standard left opposite-sex instances of lust entirely untouched, sins previously considered mortal—such as masturbation, pornography, fornication, contraception, and male-female sodomy—were progressively tolerated. Yet with all those injunctions lifted, understandably, it began seeming inconsistent and thus prejudiced to keep insisting on same-sex sodomitical proscriptions. The orientation-essentialist structure, which was meant to be a surefire defense against homosexual debauchery, thereby became the strongest weapon in its arsenal.

Which brings us to the final, perhaps most surprising, reason that sexual orientation will fall: It has nearly exhausted its political utility, which always had an expiration date. The nineteenth-century moral conservatives' plan for orientation backfired, of course, when what were supposed to be normatively unequal psychiatric conditions evolved into morally indistinguishable psychological identities.

Yet neither does liberalism have much left to glean from it, since, between *Romer* and *Lawrence* and *Windsor* and ENDA, very few “gay rights” issues remain to be settled. Orientation might have a few years' worth of political capital still, but many progressives

already boast that they could discard the absurd natural-categories myth and be just fine, having now initiated an irresistible liberalizing trend that will continue apace with or without it. Sooner or later, the queer theorists' ivory-tower pronouncements will become cultural orthodoxy as well.

Although I expect many conservative Christian thinkers will find Foucault a strange bedfellow, I want to suggest that our endorsement of the radical left on this subject should be an enthusiastic one, although it must also be carefully circumscribed. In essence, we should happily join our voices to those of the poststructuralist queer theorists in their vigorous critiques of the naive orientation essentialists, who mistakenly think "straight" and "gay" are natural, neutral, and timeless classifications.

Their disillusioned historicism makes these sexual genealogists uniquely positioned to see through the deceptions of sexual orientation, and while we Christians do not need them in some essential sense, nevertheless, in an accidental way, they may prove a great asset to us at present. Ironically, these radical leftists may be the only ones who can heal the blindness we have foolishly inflicted upon ourselves of late by uncritically adopting the language of hetero- and homosexuality.

However, while we can and should recommend the queer theorists' diagnosis of the absurdity plaguing our popular sexual categories today, nevertheless we cannot sign on to their plan of treatment. Jonathan Ned Katz, Hanne Blank, and contemporary queer theorists generally, aim to genealogically explain away the rigid orientation schema precisely because they believe this will give them the freedom and the power to make, unmake, and remake their sexuality as they see fit.

They want to tear down these failed social constructs not so that something better can be

constructed in their place—or, perhaps, rediscovered amid the rubble—but because they hope to achieve an even greater degree of sexual libertinism than we have today, even if it comes at the cost of endorsing a wretched sort of sexual nihilism. To riff on Dostoevsky, these radicals would like to believe that if orientation does not exist, then all things are permissible.

The Christian cannot follow them down this miserific road, of course. But neither, I believe, can the Christian remain content in today's deceptive, doomed orientation taxonomy. Mark my words: The queer theorists will have their way in dismantling the thing before long. Even our popular culture is beginning to show signs of stress here. The ever-increasing laundry list of orientations demonstrates the insufficiency of those neat and discrete categories. And the now familiar concept of the “hasbian” suggests that these identities are far less static than we were initially led to believe. (Think, for example, of our new ex-homosexual first lady of New York City.)

The question is, once this sexual-orientation structure collapses, what will come to replace it: the queer theorists' nihilistic anything-goes ethic, or the classical Christian view from which all of this is a departure, the view that takes the marital-procreative as its end and organizing principle, evaluating passions against nature rather than vice versa?

The role of the champion of Christian chastity today, I argue, is to dissociate the Church from the false absolutism of identity based upon erotic tendency, and to rediscover our own anthropological foundation for traditional moral maxims. If we do not wish to be swept away with modernity's orientation essentialists, then we need to remind the world that our sexual ethics was never really at home in the modern framework anyway, and thus that our forsaking the framework need not lead to postmodern nihilistic libertinism. There is firmer ground to stand on in the classical Christian tradition. Indeed, it seems to me the only place left to stand.

The Bible never called homosexuality an abomination. Nor could it have, for as we have seen, Leviticus predates any conception of sexual orientation by a couple of millennia at least. What the Scriptures condemn is sodomy, regardless of who commits it or why. And yet, as I have argued throughout, in our own day homosexuality deserves the abominable label, and heterosexuality does too.

As regards sexual morality, we have reached a point at which it is no longer sufficient for us to criticize modernity's poor answers. Like our Lord in the gospel narratives, we must also correct its terribly impoverished questions. Rather than struggling to articulate how to live as a "homosexual Christian"—or, for that matter, the even more problematic question of how to live as a "heterosexual Christian"—we should be teaching our Christian brethren, especially those in their most formative adolescent years, that these categories are not worth employing.

They are recent inventions that are utterly foreign to our faith, inadequate for justifying sexual norms, and antithetical to true philosophical anthropology. The time has come for us to eradicate sexual orientation from our worldview as systemically as we can manage—with all due prudence as to complicated particular cases, of course.

If Pope Francis is right that contextualizing our moral discourse is a necessary prerequisite to being found convincing—or even intelligible—by our interlocutors, then abandoning heteronormativity and resurrecting our own tradition of familial-teleological chastity is the only way to adequately explain Christian sexual ethics.

Michael W. Hannon is preparing to enter religious life with the Norbertines of St. Michael's Abbey in Orange County, California.