



ORTHODOX TRADITION AND HUMAN SEXUALITY

A Study Guide



THE ORTHODOX CHURCH & SAME-SEX LOVE

Resources for a Challenging Conversation

A study tool based on the Oslo Coalition's
New Directions in Orthodox Christian
Thought and Practice project "Gender and
Sexuality in Orthodox Christianity."

This is a study tool based on the Oslo Coalition's *New Directions in Orthodox Christian Thought and Practice* project "Gender and Sexuality in Orthodox Christianity." It comes with sincere gratitude to all those who participated in the *New Directions in Orthodox Christian Thought and Practice* project "Gender and Sexuality in Orthodox Christianity," either as presenters, conversation partners, or as authors of book chapters. All these contributions were invaluable to the project.

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CONTENTS

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION.....	5
INTRODUCTION	6
Asking the Wrong Questions?	8
WHAT IS TRADITIONAL?.....	9
SOURCES IN ORTHODOX TRADITION.....	11
The New Testament and the First Christians	11
Monastic Cohabitation and Friendships	13
The Marriage Rite.....	14
Brother-making.....	16
CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CHRISTIAN HISTORY.....	17
Morality and <i>oikonomia</i>	17
Homosexuality as a Particular Case.....	19
WHAT DOES SCIENCE SAY ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY?	21
THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS.....	23
PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES.....	26
Toward a Pastoral Response.....	27
MORE LITERATURE.....	30

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

The Oslo Coalition is an international network of experts and representatives from religious and other life-stance communities, academia, NGOs, international organizations and civil society, based at the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, University of Oslo. The mission of the Oslo Coalition is to promote freedom of religion or belief (FORB) as a common good for the benefit of everyone in every society. It does so by creating space for scholars, experts, and religious leaders to explore relevant issues, by publishing research and resources, and working with partners to teach and build competence about FORB.

Since 2012, the Oslo Coalition's umbrella project *New Directions in Orthodox Christian Thought and Practice* has organized several international workshops. In 2016, a three-year project about gender and sexuality was launched. The project brought together a diverse group of Orthodox scholars and church leaders to discuss these pressing issues. Participants came from every Orthodox majority country and from several countries where Orthodox Christians form a minority. Historians, theologians, social scientists, clinical and legal experts met with deacons, priests and presbyteras, bishops, and lay people. It was vital for us to include people who had some form of personal experience with sexual minorities, so that the conversations would not remain on a purely theoretical level. Three international workshops were held in Oslo.

This study guide is written by Eastern Orthodox scholars for Orthodox and non-Orthodox readers alike. It is intended for a non-academic audience, for parishes and church organizations, NGOs, and a broad public readership. It is intended to be neither a consensus statement that sums up Orthodox teaching nor an Orthodox gay and lesbian manifesto; rather, it is an exploration of various aspects of Orthodox thought and practice. It seeks to facilitate informed reflection over sexuality and sexual minorities within the Orthodox world, and it may serve as a companion to the scholarly volume *Orthodox Tradition and Human Sexuality* (eds. Thomas Arentzen, Ashley Purpura, and Aristotle Papanikolaou) published in the Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Thought series (Fordham University Press, 2022). Unless otherwise noted, quotes come from the pages of this book. For the full version of the key scholarly arguments developed by the expert participants, and the evidence and literature they cite, please consult the publication itself. Other important works are also listed in the study guide for further reading. These works represent a diversity of views, but they all aspire to engage in an Orthodox conversation about sexuality and sexual minorities.

INTRODUCTION

Sexuality has never been an uncomplicated issue. Every culture and every religion has to negotiate the role of intimate relationships within its tradition. Orthodox Christianity and the many cultures which it permeates are no exception. Throughout its history, the Orthodox Church has considered and reconsidered such phenomena as celibacy, nudity, castration, sexual intimacy, same-sex attraction, marriage and divorce, polygamy, and prostitution – to mention but a few aspects related to the embodied world of human sexuality.

The Orthodox Church blesses the union between a man and a woman in sacramental marriage, and early canons denounced those who reject sexual intercourse in marriage. Sexual flourishing is indeed a part of God's good creation, as for instance the Russian Orthodox Church emphasizes in the official statement *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* (2000), stressing that "the Church does not at all call [us] to abhor the body or sexual intimacy." Human sexuality is a good thing created by God. Most theologians today would agree that a husband and wife may rightfully enjoy a thriving sexual life within the confines of their marriage. Although such an intimate nuptial relationship may have its challenges, the couple can usually consult a married priest or priest-wife – or other parish members – for advice if they need.

In light of the broad agreement regarding sexuality in marriage, this study guide does

LET US LISTEN ...

"In the past, Orthodox have usually been reluctant to discuss such matters [as gender and sexual identity]; but the questions cannot now be avoided. Silence is not an answer. ... Let us listen to one another with creative courage, with mutual respect ... Let us acknowledge, moreover, the variety of paths that God calls us human beings to follow."

– Metropolitan Kallistos Ware

"I can understand people with that kind of sexual orientation, their countless administrative problems, challenges and pressures ..."

– Patriarch Porfirije of Belgrade

not primarily deal with the sexual challenges of husband and wife, but ventures into the unsettled waters beyond. Intimate relationships and amorous bonds outside married life do exist, but like most other Christians, the Orthodox have historically censured extramarital sexual expression. As recently as 2016, the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church at Crete avoided the difficult issue of sexual orientation, stating merely that "the Church does not allow for her members to contract same-sex unions or any other form of cohabitation apart from marriage." Nonetheless, some people find

themselves attracted to people of their own sex. We know that such attraction exists *regardless* of religious affiliation, conservative or liberal upbringing, and personal volition. In many Orthodox parishes, same-sex relationships are stigmatized and same-sex couples face sacramental exclusion.

In an open letter to the Holy and Great Council, the Orthodox Working Group of the European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups sought to remind the Church that “many LGBT Orthodox Christians have been thrown out of their parishes, barred from the Holy Communion, required to undergo conversion therapy with harmful effects on their personality, compelled to choose monastic life for which they had neither predisposition nor vocation, or forced to enter into heterosexual marriages and, through this, bring pain to more people (their spouses, children, and families).”¹

While same-sex relationships have always existed in some form, they have become highly contested in the current political climate. For certain groups, such relationships are the ultimate symbol of immorality, and consequently people who experience same-sex attraction are even targeted on an individual level. Instances of physical and mental violence are, unfortunately, numerous.

The constitutions of most countries provide freedom of religion, but sexual minorities still face discrimination in many places. Discrimination and degradation are often justified with reference to religious doctrines, including those of the Orthodox Church. Discrimi-

nation on the basis of sexual orientation is illegal in Georgia, for example, but there are frequently anti-Pride protests, which are openly supported by Orthodox clergy. In July 2021, a journalist covering the event was killed and many others were injured by the protesters. Consciously or unconsciously, churches contribute to a simplistic political rhetoric that constructs a polarized dichotomy between “traditional” religious values and “liberal” modernist values. Yet, such a clear dichotomy is founded on ignorance or political ideology. History itself was never that simple.

Along with various other Christian groups, some Orthodox have adopted the attitude that inclusion of gay and lesbian parishioners is the ultimate sign of “Western” decadence, and those willing to discuss the issues may be charged polemically with “heresy,” despite the fact that ethical positions are traditionally not labeled as heretical by the Church. Few topics are shrouded in so much mystifying secrecy and possess such potent symbolic power.

An open conversation about sexuality, sexual minorities, and the Church is overdue. The current study guide wishes to stimulate dialogue and conversation instead of stigmatization and exclusion. Rather than revolutionizing the Church, such a conversation would take seriously the problems faced by the Orthodox communion in our times.

On May 12, 2017, the Orthodox Bishops’ Conference in Germany issued a letter

¹ <https://www.lgbtchristians.eu/index.php/en/media-press/press-releases/223-open-letter-to-the-holy-and-great-council-of-the-orthodox-church> (the letter was penned by Misha Cherniak)

addressed “to young people concerning love – sexuality – marriage.” Like Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia, these bishops encourage openness and respect. While their letter does not endorse homosexuality as such, it points out that “homosexual men and women were ignored for centuries, and even oppressed and persecuted.” The hierarchs promote caution, since “what is certain is that we are largely in ignorance about how homosexuality arises.” They conclude: “All men [sic] are made in the image of God. Therefore all people are to be accorded that respect which is in keeping with the existence of this divine image in mankind. This applies also to our parishes, which are requested to show love and respect to *all* men and women.”

Orthodox Christians are called to love their neighbor without qualification – not only to love the neighbor whose sexual orientation they approve.

Although none of these bishops have explicitly endorsed same-sex relationships as such, they have acknowledged that an open conversation is called for, recognizing the pastoral need to include people of all orientations. Encouraged by such episcopal reasoning, the following pages seek to contribute toward a sincere and considerate conversation about this divisive issue, convinced that the goal is never “conservative” or “liberal,” but Christian and human.

Asking the Wrong Questions?

Some questions often recur regarding sexuality and the Church. These are not easily answered but may be helpful to keep in mind during the reading of this study guide:

- Most people have many close relationships. What makes a relationship sexual? Does sexuality merely denote genital intercourse?
- Why is sex so important to Christian thinking and morality? In the early Church, charging interest on a loan was regarded as a sin, but few voices today are raised to exclude bankers from parishes.
- Is gender complementarity a natural part of human existence? Or is there no longer male and female from the perspective of the Gospel, since all are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3.28)?
- Are all humans to some degree erotic beings, or are sexual acts simply something isolated that some people perform (and others do not)?
- Do we fall in love with other persons or with (people of) another gender?
- To what degree is opposition toward sexual diversity theological, and to what degree is it driven by political or cultural factors?
- What is a good pastoral way to minister to homosexual people (whether or not homosexuality is regarded as a sin)?

WHAT IS TRADITIONAL?

Tradition is vital for Orthodox theologizing. The theological trajectory of the Orthodox Church cannot rely on one voice or one epistle by St Paul but needs to engage the whole complex heritage of the Church. A living ecclesiastical Tradition embraces Scripture and important theological authors as well as liturgical practices, canon law, iconography, and hagiography. Expressed in such central sources, the Tradition is understood theologically as the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church – or rather, perhaps, the ears that the Church lends to the whispers of the Spirit.

“ Tradition is to be understood as a living force, as the conscience of a living organism which includes its prior life. Tradition is ... not only the past but also the present in which the future already abides. ... Therefore, true traditionalism in the Church does not preclude development. On the contrary, tradition lives and grows. Consequently, being faithful to tradition does not signify an obstinate fidelity to the Church’s past, even to the apostolic past.”

– Fr Georges Florovsky in
“The Body of the Living Christ”



According to the great twentieth-century theologian Vladimir Lossky, Tradition is “the faculty of hearing” granted by the Spirit. It has to do with spiritual discernment, interpreting the signs of the times (Matthew 16.3) in relation to the vast ecclesiastical legacy through which the Holy Spirit moves. Tradition cannot simply embrace the “stupid mistakes” of the past, as Lossky says, nor imagine that antiquity trumps novelty. Tradition leaves no easy solutions.² Tradition draws no simple maps for the future. Tradition comes with transformation. “The vivifying power of Tradition ... like all that comes from the Spirit, preserves by a ceaseless renewing,” according to Lossky.

Georges Florovsky, another leading theologian of the twentieth century, similarly emphasizes that Tradition is a living, dynamic faculty of the Church.

Since the Church must always think with the rich treasure of Orthodox Tradition, it never suffices merely to say “St Paul wrote this” or “St Maximus said that.” Their statements must be interpreted in relation to other parts of ecclesiastical Tradition, understood in relation to the signs of our times. Historical sources in Orthodox Tradition offer quite diverse visions of sexuality’s role in Christian life, partly because these sources do not necessarily discuss the topics that we struggle with today, and partly because Christ came to the world with the Gospel’s good news of salvation and not with a handbook in sexual morality. The sources must be used with discernment to understand their relevance for our contemporary questions. In the following, we shall consider a few of the (for the current topic) most important sources in the much broader historical Tradition of the Church.

FURTHER READING

Sergius Bulgakov, “The Church as Tradition,” in *The Orthodox Church* (SVS Press 1988), 9–36.

Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Collected Works, vol. II) (Nordland 1972), 73–92.

John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition: Orthodox Witness in the Contemporary World* (SVS Press 1978).

² Vladimir Lossky, “Tradition and Traditions,” in *The Image and Likeness of God* (SVS Press

SOURCES IN ORTHODOX TRADITION

The New Testament and the First Christians

It is sometimes assumed that the Orthodox Church has always unambiguously promoted the heterosexual nuclear family, but the early Church did not, in fact, preach monogamous marriage – at least not unanimously. This civil institution was far from a self-evident choice for the earliest Christians. Christ, who himself was born outside of marriage – and beyond human sexuality – blessed the wedding in Cana by his presence (John 2.1–11) and thus clearly sanctioned married life as legitimate. Yet he also embraced those whom he called “eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven,” encouraging other ways of life alongside marriage (Matt 19). Many early Christians, like Christ’s disciples, chose to abandon family life altogether, and this devotional strain would later evolve into the monastic movement.

St Paul seems to have had a negative view on same-sex acts. Modern discussions tend to revolve around Romans 1.24–27, 1 Corinthians 6.9, and 1 Timothy 1.10. Ekaterini Tsalampouni points out that “the biblical evidence usually quoted in current discussions against homosexuality is not as conclusive as it is usually claimed.” Scholars disagree on what exactly Paul meant. The oft-cited verses from his

epistles do not comprise considerations of sexuality as such; they list various ways sinful humankind turns away from God: “Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes (*malakoi*), sodomites (*arsenokoitai*), thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God,” says Paul to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 6.9–10). Greed and revilement are numbered among the unacceptable traits



along with being *arsenokoitēs*, so it is a list of quite diverse sinners. In fact, most people might find themselves mentioned somehow by Paul's list. Scholars do not agree about what *arsenokoitai* meant to Paul, but he seems to have invented the term. Does he intend older men's casual exploitation of younger boys? Did he condemn the kind of monogamous homosexual relationship that is common in many cultures in the 21st century, or rather heterosexual men or women who engaged in same-sex intercourses?

We may discern two strands in contemporary biblical scholarship: 1) those who think that there is a fundamental *continuity* between modern homosexuality and the acts which Paul condemns and 2) those who believe that there is *discontinuity*, such that Paul is really talking about something other than monogamous same-sex love. There is, in any case, little to indicate that Paul and his contempo-

rary culture was aware that there existed various sexual *orientations*. If he had been, he may have written to people of such orientation too when he addressed the unmarried in Corinth in the next chapter and said: "It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion." (1 Cor. 7.8–9). This text is, in fact, used during the Orthodox service for a second marriage, exemplifying the Orthodox custom of allowing what is not considered ideal, such as a second marriage. With pastoral *oikonomia*, the Church has wisely accepted that few humans are able to live a perfect Christian life, and thus has made arrangements to accommodate the imperfect. According to this line of reasoning, marriage (whether first or second) is not the sacred goal of Christian life, but rather a possible civil solution.

FURTHER READING:

Benjamin Dunning, *Specters of Paul: Sexual Difference in Early Christian Thought* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2011).

Benjamin Dunning (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality* (Oxford University Press 2019).

Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Westminster John Knox Press 2006).

Monastic Cohabitation and Friendships

Early Christianity offered a radical alternative to conjugal life. The ascetic world created same-sex communities. These were ideally not sexual, but we know of persons who were attracted to others of their own sex, in both early and Byzantine Christianity. According to St Athanasius of Alexandria, the great ascetic Antony was tempted by both women and boys in the desert, suggesting that same-sex attraction was a known possibility. Yet we also know of people who lived in committed same-sex relationships. The monastic realm became a venue for devoted and intimate long-term friendships between people of the same sex. This is not to say that homosexual acts were accepted by most Church Fathers, but it is fair to say that pre-modern people were able to live with a more complex set of (sometimes opposing) ideals than moderns tend to be. And while these

long-term relationships of brotherly or sisterly love and cohabitation may not have included sexual intercourse, we cannot exclude the possibility that people who shared a cell for decades also lived in a physically close relationship. Then again, perhaps it is really none of our business. “Their relationship may have involved sexual intimacy, or not. There is no means for us to know,” Susan Ashbrook Harvey has pointed out, yet Byzantine Christians clearly recognized “that close, committed, long-term relationships provided fruitful context for pursuing a life of holiness.” Such same-sex relationships were often filled with ardent love, as several saints’ lives attest. What physical acts they did or did not do is perhaps less important than the deep mutual desire and devotion between them, about which hagiographical sources witness.

FURTHER READING:

Derek Krueger, “Between Monks: Tales of Monastic Companionship in Early Byzantium,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20/1 (2011), 28–61.

The Marriage Rite

The Byzantine ecclesiastical marriage rite came into general usage first in the late ninth or early tenth century. Before that, no sacramental service to institute matrimony between a man and a woman existed in the Orthodox Church. This does not mean that Byzantine people before that were unmarried, nor that the Church disregarded marriage as such, but it was considered a civil pact accepted by the Church. It should be noted, however, that Byzantine slaves were prohibited from contracting such a civil marriage, which means that much of the population technically remained unmarried.

In the sacramental rite as it is practiced today, one may distinguish at least three themes: 1) The priest prays repeatedly for the couple's procreation, that God might "wed them into one flesh, granting them the fruit of the body." 2) The couple's bond is seen as a mystical union of flesh symbolizing the intimate union between Christ and the Church, as articulated in Ephesians 5.20–33 (the epistle lection of the service). Thus, the couple's love comes to mirror the Eucharistic mystery, the love between God and the congregation, expressed most fully in the liturgical instance when the Body of Christ is given to the Church. 3) The crowning of the couple connects them with the Christian martyrs, and marriage becomes an ascetic path toward spiritual growth and *theosis*. These, then, are three aspects of how Orthodox theology understands human sexuality: procreation, mystical union, and reciprocal sacrifice.

// Historically, the Church, for the most part, has viewed marriage as a social institution that might be tolerated so long as it did not interfere with the demands of discipleship. ... There is no compelling reason that the Church today should not bless marriages between people of the same sex who are committed to following Jesus Christ within the community of disciples."

– Marjorie Corbman, Steven Payne,
and Gregory Tucker in "Jesus Christ and
Same-Sex Marriage"

The first aspect requires a heterosexual union and has to do with creating families. It should be noted, however, that the Church does not deny marriage on the basis of infertility nor require unproductive couples to divorce, so children are not a definitive requirement for an acceptable union. It has been argued that both the subsequent aspects are just as relevant to same-sex unions as to heterosexual unions: it is not (or does not have to be) the gender of the couple that makes them capable of signifying the union between Christ and Church; indeed it is rather the couple's intimate and loving relationship in self-sacrifice that enables a Christian marriage to become an icon of the Church in relation to Christ. Furthermore, the vision of a stable, lifelong relationship as a path toward holiness, reminiscent of the martyrs' sacrifice, does not in any way rely on gender. In fact, this latter interpretation of marriage aligns it closely with the life of monastics,



who in same-sex communities strive for spiritual development and deification.

There is no Orthodox rite for same-sex marriage. There is, on the other hand, one for remarriage after divorce, even though the Church regards divorce as sinful. The two issues – same-sex marriage and remarriage – apparently have little to do with each other.

However, the possibility of remarriage after a first and second divorce demonstrates, as already mentioned, an ecclesiastical willingness to help people find healing paths in life, despite human inclinations which do not match the Church's own ideals. Should it be impossible, then, for the Church to consider a healing path for lesbian and gay couples in lifelong relationships?

FURTHER READING

Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition* (SVS Press 1985).

David & Mary Ford, & Alfred Kentigern Siewers (eds.) *Glory and Honor: Orthodox Christian Resources on Marriage* (SVS Press 2016).

John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* (SVS Press 1984).

Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., "Marriage as an Ascetic Practice," *Intams Review* 11 (2005), 28–36.

Brother-making

Brother-making, or *adelphopoiesis*, was a historical ritual in the Orthodox Church. It blessed and ritually established a close, lifelong relationship between two men who were not biological brothers. Attested in liturgical manuscripts from the beginning of the eighth century, the ritual is actually older than the ecclesiastical marriage service. Although it has now fallen into disuse, the historical rite of brother-making represented a liturgical tradition that sanctioned a kind

of same-sex union. In this way a familial relationship could be fashioned and recognized through prayer. The details of physical intimacy within such relationships remain unknown, and the similarities between brother-making and present day same-sex marriages may be limited. Nevertheless, the ritual evidences a historical tradition of recognizing and blessing relationships in greater diversity than just heterosexual marriage.

FURTHER READING

Claudia Rapp, *Brother-Making in Late Antiquity and Byzantium: Monks, Laymen, and Christian Ritual* (Oxford University Press 2016).

These sources and historical insights constitute parts of the Orthodox Tradition relevant to discussions about gender, sexuality, and relationships. There are more sources that should also be taken into consideration; unfortunately, this study guide cannot consider all of them. It is, however, within this

complexity, which we call Tradition, that further discussion must develop. A hermeneutical key for interpreting all these sources – scriptural, patristic, canonical, and liturgical texts – may ultimately be the Incarnation and God’s embrace of the human condition.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Morality and *oikonomia*

As the Greek theologian Christos Yannaras suggests, morality does not belong to a realm of absolutes. While the Church has pronounced various unchangeable teachings – that God is triune or that the Virgin may be called Theotokos (Mother of God) – moral statements and canons are always somehow liable to change, since they are responses to particular historical problems. And they have indeed changed throughout history. Their purpose is to guide the members of the Church toward the truth and a life in accordance with this truth. Let us assume, for instance, that Christians are called to be good stewards of creation. We would have to relate to the forest and tree felling in a different way if we lived in modern-day Ethiopia than if we were part of a small group of people inhabiting the medieval Russian taiga. Various cultural and historical circumstances come with different demands, and the Church has always known this.

The insight that leading the faithful toward salvation is more important than upholding principles explains the Orthodox practice of *oikonomia*, which has already been mentioned. This ecclesiastical “household management” implies a prudent stewardship, sometimes

“Increasingly, Christian life seems to be nothing more than a particular way of behaving, a code of good conduct. Christianity is increasingly alienated, becoming a social attribute adapted to meet the least worthy of human demands – conformity, sterile conservatism, pusillanimity and timidity; it is adapted to the trivial moralizing which seeks to adorn cowardice and individual security with the funerary decoration of social decorum.”

– Christos Yannaras, *Freedom of Morality* (SVS Press 1984), 115.

more strict, sometimes less, but always aiming toward the ultimate goal of salvation. It may involve a pastoral lenience regarding rules in instances when this lenience helps people to heal and grow in their spiritual life. “When practiced out of love, sympathy and compassion ... [oikonomia] safeguards the Church and Christian faith from becoming an abstract dogma, or a fundamentalist principle, leading to the rejection of the world, turning the Church into an exclusivist cult, which de-churches itself by the lack of concern, love and compassion for the entirety of creation,” writes Davor Džalto. Thus, while the early



Byzantine church condemned divorce, the later Byzantine church tolerated remarriage, not only once, but twice. The Church has never blessed divorce as such; in principle, both divorce and remarriage are regarded as sinful. Nonetheless, the Church has made arrangements for the divorced to remarry, well aware that humans are weak. Sex and marriage were negotiated and renegotiated throughout Byzantine history. Incidentally, this same history even knew of legal cohabitation without marriage (concubinage). The historical lesson is that moral principles are not eternal truths; their role is to guide Christians in various circumstances toward a life in Christ.

Which moral codes dominate is partly a cultural question. While certain forms of male

homosexual acts were illegal according to Roman and Byzantine law, lesbian sex was not – presumably because it lacked a penetrating penis and thus could not really count as sex. Early Byzantines were less worried about nudity than later Byzantines, and the latter were in turn scandalized by the Russians' liberal attitude toward nudity. The early Christians had other culturally specific taboos and other gender related questions than we do. The almost ubiquitous presence of eunuchs – castrated beardless men who were seen as a sort of third gender – was a cultural issue to them. As we have seen, Matthew 19:12 declares that anyone who can, should accept the eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. The first canon of the Council of

Nicaea (AD 325), on the other hand, clearly discourages the practice of self-mutilation and prohibits access to the priesthood for men who have made themselves eunuchs. Even so, we know that male genital mutilation – although not necessarily voluntary – remained common in Byzantium, and several

patriarchs of Constantinople belonged to this “third gender.” In the twenty-first century, few people debate the role of eunuchs in the Church, simply because such male castration is not common anymore. Most contemporary Orthodox would probably disapprove of genital mutilation, but the Byzantines did not.

Homosexuality as a Particular Case

Today, homosexuality has become something of a “sin above all sins” for certain people, and parts of the Orthodox world have lately provided the most rigorist conservative voices in the Christian realm, turning same-sex love into the ultimate token of decadence.

Byzantine and medieval Russian penitential literature treated homosexual acts as immoral, yet such acts were not regarded as worse than any other extramarital or indecent act. Who the partner was, and the nature of the relationship only partly determined the morality of the acts. Intimacy with another man was, for instance, no more immoral for a Russian man than anal sex with his wife. The latter was worse for a man than to make love to another woman – as long as the latter lay below him, facing him, and did not sit on top of him. Premarital lesbian sex, on the other hand, seems to have been relatively common and almost accepted, granted that neither was sitting on top of the other. Gay and lesbian sex belonged to a relatively vast array of common extramarital intimacies, which included kissing. Ecclesiastical teaching did not accept them, but they were still not singled out or stigmatized as particularly wicked. For a man to shave off his beard,

however, was a graver offense in medieval Russia, since it meant turning himself symbolically into a woman. Few modern preachers will regard shaving a sin.

In our own time, the picture looks very different. According to the Pew Research Center’s 2017 report “Orthodox Christianity in the 21st Century,” so much as 86% of Orthodox Russians found homosexual behavior in particular to be morally wrong, while only 36% of the same population judged premarital sex unacceptable. To most twenty-first-century Orthodox Russians, then, the problem with same-sex relationships has less to do with the nature of the act, or that it represents sex outside marriage, and more to do with the gender of the partner. It has shifted from a concern about the purity or correctness of sexual acts to a stigma regarding homosexual acts specifically. We know that medieval Russian clergy had a more tolerant attitude toward homosexual acts than Latin clergy in the West, but they may even, in some sense, have had a more tolerant attitude than the modern Russian laity.

The attitude toward homosexuality in Orthodox countries is not necessarily congruent with the level of religious participation. In Russia,



87% of the Orthodox said that homosexuality should not be accepted by society. In Greece, as another example, only 45% share this opinion. According to the same report, however, more Greeks keep icons in their homes, and while only 15% of the Russian Orthodox say that religion is very important in their lives and only 26% say they certainly believe in God, the number for Greeks is 59% and 62% respectively. With these two examples, we may conclude that in 2017 Greek Orthodox people were *both* more religiously

devoted *and* more open to homosexual inclusion. Perhaps the so-called “traditional [anti-gay] values” of the post-Soviet realm rely more on the anti-gay sentiment of Soviet traditions than on Orthodox Christian tradition? Dmitry Uzlaner points out that the opposition to homosexuality in Russia is primarily political and lacks a theological foundation, and so “in order for the issues of sexual diversity to receive an adequate theological solution, they must first *become* theological ... Opposition to same-sex marriage is becoming in the Russian Orthodox context a kind of ‘shibboleth’ that allows ‘true’ believers to quickly differentiate who they are dealing with: is he one of ‘us,’ Christians, or is he one of ‘them’ – immoral liberal, pseudo-Christians?”

If we follow this line of reasoning, we may conclude that opposition to same-sex relationships is political more than religious. Orthodox people are not religiously opposed to same-sex relationships so much as they are unsure about its implications, and placing their bets on the opposing side is the safer move. Questions of identity lead believers – not only in Russia – to worry about their own exclusion.

FURTHER READING:

Jane T. Costlow, Stephanie Sandler, & Judith Vowles (eds.) *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture* (Stanford University Press 1993).

Liz James (ed.) *Women, Men, and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium* (Routledge 1997).

Matthew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (University of Chicago Press 2001).

Pew Research Center’s report “Orthodox Christianity in the 21st Century” (2017) <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianity-in-the-21st-century/>

WHAT DOES SCIENCE SAY ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY?

Orthodox Christianity has traditionally valued science and successively integrated its discoveries into its worldview. A fundamentalist opposition to evolution or heliocentrism is rarely seen among Orthodox believers. Scientific perspectives are therefore pertinent to the conversation about on same-sex attraction.

One who has studied homosexuality critically from a psychological perspective is the Greek priest, theologian, and psychiatrist Vasileios Thermos. He points out that while ancients saw homosexual acts as isolated voluntary deeds, which anyone might or might not perform, modern psychology understands that homosexuality is better described as an orientation in some people's psychological construction. This discovery is indeed a Copernican revolution of sorts in the history of sexuality. Individuals do not choose their own eros; they do not voluntarily become gay or lesbian, and hence their homosexuality should not be interpreted as a freely chosen life of sin. This insight must inform the way we read older texts, including St Paul's letters and the writings of the Church Fathers.

// Through the contemporary development of science and technology, our life is changing radically. And what brings about a change in the life of man demands discernment ..."

– Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church

The so-called "conversion therapy," designed to convert homosexual people into becoming heterosexual, has proven to bear little fruit and has led to grave mental problems for many of the "patients." A thirsty person can try to forget her thirst for a while, or try food instead, but her yearning for water will not cease. As Thermos points out, "some parts of the Protestant world have placed their hopes broadly on conversion therapies ... After some decades, we know that their effectiveness is quite limited, not to say frequently psychologically damaging."³

More broadly, research shows that the suicide rate for religious LGBTQ+ people is higher than for religious people in general. While religious people are generally less liable to commit suicide than non-religious people, a similar tendency cannot be supported for

3 Vasileios Thermos, "The Orthodox Church, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Identity: From Embarrassment to Calling," *The Wheel* 13/14 2018, 86.

religious LGBTQ+ people in comparison with non-religious LGBTQ+ people. Most religious people probably hope and assume that their communities are safe places, but this is unfortunately not always the case.

How, then, do some people become sexually oriented toward their own sex? Sexual behavior is a complex phenomenon, and biological sciences do not claim to have simple explanations as to why humans behave the way they do. No science can easily explain the development of persons' sexual attitudes and the variations thereof. Sexual orientation is not determined solely by the absence or presence of a single gene, for instance. There is, however, scientific evidence to support some form of genetic predisposition, a connection between genetics and homosexuality. Same-sex attraction may, in other words, be explained by hereditary components – at least partly. Simultaneously, while upbringing and milieu alone fail to explain

certain people's orientation toward the same sex, environmental factors do seem to play a role. And so, as with many aspects of life, "nature and nurture" are intertwined and cooperate in forming human beings.

It is clear, moreover, that human sexuality is no strictly binary system, but occurs on a spectrum. Most people are not exclusively *either* homosexual *or* heterosexual. Both biologically and psychologically speaking, humans are complex creatures, and their sexuality remains multifaceted. Whereas theologians would not accept a reduction of humans to merely biological or merely psychological beings, theology will have to agree that humans are also biology and psychology. Conversely, the fact that homosexual orientation does exist in nature, may not automatically make it morally right. When we know that so many people have this orientation, however, we may perhaps be less inclined to judge it an individual sin.

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THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

Procreation may explain a historical need to control human sexuality in most cultures – children need a stable environment and to know who their parents are, and parents need heirs who can take care of them later in life. However, if we wish to regulate human pleasure and companionship in the many forms of intimacy that cannot lead to pregnancy, we need a different explanation. We need a theological explanation.

Contemporary Orthodox theologians often think with the category of personhood: the Christian God consists of three different *persons*, who should not be reduced to faces of a single oneness. Dwelling in relational unity, the three persons are most often described in relational terms (especially ‘Father’ and ‘Son’). This traditional trinitarian dogma lends weight to the idea of personhood as an ontological category.

In the human realm, to be a person means to be a social creature whose very being is constituted in relationships. We are neither merely separate entities (individuals) nor merely reproducible entities in a large collectivist mechanism. On the contrary, our lives come about in interpersonal communities, in relationship with others. And as unique persons, we all have something mysterious, *apophatic* to our beings, which is not exhausted in our individual characteristics or our gender. This we also share with

“ A basic principle of the Incarnation is that all materiality is sacramental, and this includes sexual desire ... Marriage is recognized as that ascetical structure that makes possible the performance of sexual desire in a way that facilitates growth in union with God – theosis ... If marriage is recognized as sacramental it is because the Church has, in part, recognized such a long-term committed relationship as an ascetical form that would shape sexual desire in a way that facilitates movement – eros – toward God.”

– Aristotle Papanikolaou

the sexless and mysterious God, as we are created in God’s image.

The thought world of the Greek Church Fathers does not render *eros* (erotic love/desire) a dirty word; it is the driving force that binds the world together, and it is the preeminent force of attraction between persons – including humans’ longing for God. Eros creates relationships. As Metropolitan John

“ The whole world, with all its various parts, God bound together by some unbreakable law of attraction into one fellowship and harmony”

– St Basil the Great, *Hexaemeron* II 2

Zizioulas puts it, "God ... as *eros* both moves outside himself and attracts to himself as *the ultimate destination* of their desire those whose desire he provokes."⁴ There is thus something fundamentally right in the love and attraction between humans, something entirely crucial to life, as long as it avoids eclipsing the erotic longing toward God. Since, however, any kind of erotic attraction may also lead to abuse or objectification, it is necessary to discuss the boundaries of *eros*.

Those who argue theologically against same-sex relationships, often point to the sexual differentiation in creation: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1.27). According to Christian anthropology, humans – being created in the image of a trinitarian God, a God of personal unity – are made to live as couples where otherness (male and female) meet; we are called not toward ourselves (or our sameness) but toward the other. The union between the sexes becomes a sign of divine communion. That this union of otherness is sanctioned by God, is revealed both in the Bible and by nature itself, which allows heterosexual couples to be fruitful, and multiply. To some, this implies that same-sex relationships should be rejected all together. Since humans are called to lay aside their sinful inclinations and their desires toward what is bad, those who have a sexual orientation toward their own sex should work on this, as other people have to struggle ascetically with their own vices and inclinations. A more moderate stance holds that Orthodox *mar-*

riage should be reserved for heterosexual couples, while homosexual couples might be tolerated by the Church, if not as part of the mystery of the marriage institution.

If one thinks in terms of personhood, however, the internal otherness of the trinitarian persons hardly relies on sex or gender (something which Orthodox Christianity does *not* ascribe to the divinity); it is instead an otherness associated with personal differentiation. To those who argue for same-sex relationships, therefore, the otherness in a human couple resides in personal otherness and not the otherness of sex.

Others will even point beyond the sexual differentiation and remind us that we are all created in God's image, regardless of gender. The idea of gender complementarity, which is so widespread in modernity, was not embraced by the Church Fathers. Central thinkers like St Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–94) and St Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580–662) do not seem to imagine sexual differentiation to subsist in the resurrection (cf. also Matthew 22.30, Mark 12.25). Indeed the Fathers did not generally think of marriage as a sanctified institution. As the original Adam was sexless before God turned the one into two, so the new Adam in Christ is sexless. If humans longing for each other is to reflect the longing for and orientation toward God, the gender orientation of their human longing seems less relevant. This eschatological attitude toward human life tends to downplay the importance of the sex act, problematizing its spiritual value or its symbolic centrality in Christian anthropology. In line

4 John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (T&T Clark, 2006), 50.

with such reasoning, some theologians argue for a “desacralization” of marriage; after all, marriage carried so little theological weight in the early Church and the Byzantine Church that a new communal lifeform was created in the monasteries. The conjugal union may be one place for spiritual growth, but it is not the gender of the couple nor the number of children that secures such growth.

Celibacy or virginity has been chosen by numerous ascetics throughout Christian history. But forced celibacy, which is what the Church currently prescribes for homosexuality, may potentially be psychologically damaging and spiritually dangerous. The Church has never in history agreed to prescribe forced celibacy for heterosexuals; it has only been advocated as a voluntary ascetical path.

A central theme in Orthodox theology is *theosis* or deification. Through the Incarnation, God has opened a path toward deification in this world. It is this path of healing that is the work of the Church broadly conceived. In everyday adult life, the process of *theosis* and the developing of virtues usually takes place within a marriage or a

“ The Divine is neither male nor female. How, after all, could any such thing be conceived in the case of Deity, when this condition is not permanent even for us human beings, but when we all become one in Christ, we put off the signs of this difference along with the whole of the old humanity?”

– St Gregory of Nyssa in *Homilies on the Song of Songs* 11

monastery, although it does not have to be restricted to any of these institutions. The mirror of love may transform humans in a lifelong relationship, and ideally marriage can be a school where the couple becomes skilled in humility and self-sacrifice. Marriage is also perceived by many as the place within which the sex act may be performed in a healthy and un-objectifying way, strengthening the unity and oneness of the two different persons, turning their intimacy into an exercise in learning how to love. If the task of the Church is to guide its members on the road to spiritual growth, liberation, and *theosis*, the Church must ask itself how this sort of healing can best be achieved among its lesbian and gay members.

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PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES

In some countries with locally established Orthodox Churches, same-sex couples now live in legally sanctioned monogamous relationships. These countries include Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Greece, and Montenegro. The same is true of many countries where Orthodox constitute minority groups. Orthodox churches face new historical circumstances, and priests around the world are unsure how to react. This situation poses new challenges to the ministry of the Church, as expressed in the quote by Fr Robert Arida

Many churches have responded by entrenching the exclusion of homosexual individuals – at least from the sacrament. Some parishes practice a reserved inclusion, allowing same-sex couple to go to communion while publicly maintaining the Church’s stance on the status of their relationship. A few parishes have unreservedly opened their doors and extended Eucharistic communion to lesbian and gay persons, a few even with the bishop’s blessing. One local church in Western Europe has allowed the performance of a doxology in its parishes to celebrate parishioners’ entry into civil same-sex marriage. While this topic area is highly controversial on an ideological level, many priests and parishes find that they are facing a more urgent reality than doctrinal

“ How to minister to those same-sex couples who, being legally married, come with their children and knock on the doors of our parishes seeking Christ? Do we ignore them? Do we, as a matter of course, turn them away? ... Or, do we offer them, as we offer anyone desiring Christ, pastoral care, love, and a spiritual home?”

– Fr Robert Arida in “Response to Myself: A Pastor’s Thought on Same-Sex Marriage

“ I think that we are called to accept one another as we are, regardless of the fact that all of us, in one way or another, do not perfectly live up to the scriptural ideals set out for us, particularly in the whole area of sex.”

– Sr Vassa Larin

debate in the Church, namely how to minister to brothers and sisters in Christ who live in or long for a same-sex relationship here and now. Parish members suddenly realize that this is not a theoretical issue, but one about their own daughter or son.



Toward a Pastoral Response

If we, for a moment, bracket the question about which sexual acts are sinful, we may be able to make some preliminary conclusions:

- To feel attraction toward a person of one's own gender is itself not sinful, and usually not the result of a personal choice. Sexual orientation typically occurs in a human person from an early age.

“ Same-sex love, when properly experienced and purely expressed, is always God's sacred gift. Such love is a necessary, normal, and natural part of God's essential goodwill for humanity ... According to Orthodox Christianity, having loving desires for people of one's own sex is not at all sinful; it is perfectly natural, normal, and necessary.”

– Fr Thomas Hopko in *Christian Faith and Same-Sex Attraction*

" As a pastor, I must be able to say to anyone, for example, struggling with issues of sexuality, family, child-bearing: come and join our community for a while, live among us, experience what love and kindness look like, see what sacrifice and patience look like, experience joy, enter into fraternity and friendship."

—Fr Alexis Vinogradov in "No One Is Good: The Liturgical Root of Christian Anthropology"

- The theological grounds for rejecting same-sex sexual relationships remain unclear. What is indisputable is that there is no traditional rationale for treating homosexuality as the sin above all other sins.

With these general conclusions in mind, some more concrete inferences may also be drawn:

- Church Tradition does not legitimize or support discrimination. Indeed, Christ welcomed a "sinful woman" (usually taken to mean a prostitute) and allowed her to anoint him before his crucifixion. This event is commemorated annually during Holy Week in every parish.
- Any moral reasoning regarding same-sex love must be tolerated and discussed, yet moral principles do not equal the right to deny other people human dignity. Ethical conversations about the issue work best
- if the sexual minorities themselves are included, and if everyone expresses her- or himself respectfully.
- The children of same-sex couples may be baptized; their children are no more or less sinful than any other babies.
- Without performing the marriage rite for same-sex couples, churches might permit the celebration of a thanksgiving service ("doxology") those who have entered a civil partnership.
- Like anyone else, sexual minorities should be socially included in parishes and churches. These minorities already constitute a vulnerable group.

To minister means to serve, and it is the calling of every Christian to serve the least of Christ's brothers and sisters. How an inclusive community may be built depends on the local context, but based on gay and lesbian persons' own stories of exclusion, one might consider the following:

- Remember that according to Christian teaching, we are all sinful, whatever our orientations are. It is not up to parish members to judge each other's sins. (Personal questions about sin are normally discussed with the priest in confession.)
- Get to know the lesbian and gay parishioners in your local community, and remember that they (as anyone else) are more than their sexuality. Avoid scrutinizing their sex-life.



- Try, on the other hand, not to ignore gay and lesbian people's specific experiences and their relationships.
- Allow gay and lesbian members to serve on the parish council or other leading positions; these positions are not reserved for those who are without sin.
- Create openness about sexually related questions by organizing study and dialogue groups where open conversations about same-sex orientation could be conducted in a secure environment.

“When we ...reduce our fellow human being to his or her sexual orientation, we not only deny the image of God, but also the indwelling of Christ in us.”

– Michael Hjälml, Dean of St Ignatius Orthodox Theological Academy

- It is vitally important to listen to others' experiences and learn more about sexual minorities and not take them to represent a political movement. As one Orthodox gay man once sighed: “There is no such thing as a unified ‘gay agenda.’ Likewise,

there is no 'gender ideology' seeking to undermine two essential principles of masculine and feminine. We do not share a common 'lifestyle.' And whatever our sins may be, referring to us as 'sodomites' is a cheap rhetorical move. ... We are othered and demonized. Our experiences are erased. Most importantly, we are no longer seen as siblings in Christ, but instead as outsiders against whom Orthodoxy must be protected."

Let us return, finally, to the Bishops' Conference in Germany and their apt reminder that we are *all* created in the image of God, and that "all people are to be accorded that respect which is in keeping with the existence

of this divine image in mankind. This applies also to our parishes, which are requested to show love and respect to *all* men and women." As long as love and respect prevail, discrimination may be eradicated and healing may begin. In the foreword to *Orthodox Tradition and Human Sexuality*, Metropolitan Ambrosius of Helsinki suggests that "in a loving relationship – whether gay or straight – the presence of God may reside ... as long as it opens up to the saving work of *theosis*." Openness to the saving presence of God is ultimately the most important issue for any creature and community. Although these conversations regarding sexual orientation may be challenging, with God nothing shall be impossible.

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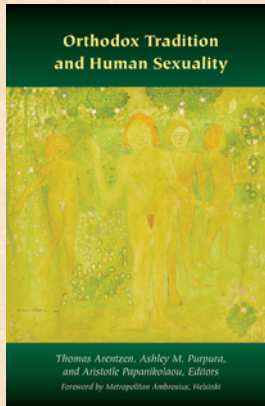
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The mission of the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief is to promote the freedom of religion or belief (FORB) as a common good for everyone in every society. It does so by:

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In 2016, a three-year project about gender and sexuality was launched in the New Directions in Orthodox Christian Thought and Practice series. It resulted in the volume *Orthodox Tradition and Human Sexuality* (eds. Thomas Arentzen, Ashley Purpura, and Aristotle Papanikolaou) published by Fordham University Press (2022).

The present study guide serves as a companion to that book, but may also be read independently. It is intended for a nonacademic audience. It is neither a consensus statement that sums up Orthodox teaching nor an Orthodox gay and lesbian manifesto. The aim is to bring out various perspectives from both sides of the discussion. It seeks to facilitate informed reflection over sexuality and sexual minorities within the Orthodox world.



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