



## CHURCH VIEWS ON SEXUALITY: RECOVERING THE MIDDLE GROUND

By Savitri Hensman

### Abstract:

It is clear that Christians hold a spectrum of views on sexuality and marriage. However, the popular idea that there are two warring blocks that may be labelled 'traditionalists' and 'revisionists' is simplistic and can be misleading as well as unhelpful. Current tensions could be reduced and reframed significantly if more church leaders acknowledged the extent of common ground in the middle of this continuum, allowed limited flexibility of practice, and enabled their communities to develop practices of discernment oriented towards the "grace and truth" (John 1.13-15) that lies at the heart of the Christian message. In this paper, Ekklesia associate Savitri Hensman identifies seven widely held positions on sexuality. She suggests that those with supposedly diametrically opposing views often have more in common than they may at first think. Equally, she argues, in Christian terms, that coexistence among those sharing a 'middle ground' is not about weak compromise, but instead reflects an approach *both* deeply rooted in Bible and tradition *and* open to change as a living community led by the Spirit.

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### (a) Identifying the spectrum of views among Christians

In many churches there have been heated debates over sexuality. Some people fear that divisions on this issue, in particular on how same-sex partnerships should be viewed, are too deep to overcome.

Yet there has been increasing convergence on a relatively narrow range within the broad spectrum of views held by Christians about sexuality. Those with supposedly opposing views often have more in common than they might at first think.

Practically, it should be possible for churches to accept that congregations and their members may, for the time being, occupy different spaces within this middle ground – not simply reducing conflict but also, through conversation and engagement, reframing and recasting it.

Moreover, the theological conviction of this paper is that, in time, if Christians continue to think, pray, talk and listen to one another, the Spirit can be trusted to lead us into what different church traditions call “the fullness of truth” on this matter.

The spectrum of widely held views set out below is broadly indicative rather than narrowly prescriptive. People may shift their position somewhat or it may be hard to categorise, rather as an object may appear green in one light and blue in another. Yet this may be a useful starting-point for identifying what areas of agreement and disagreement exist. A similar continuum can be drawn up on gender identity.

There is, not surprisingly, a similar range of views among people of other faiths and none. However, the reasons which Christians may have for accepting or rejecting particular positions are likely to be influenced by their faith.

***The seven main positions could broadly be described as:***

- 1. Me first, anything goes**
- 2. Treat others decently, whether relationships are sexual or not**
- 3. Support marriage between partners of the same or opposite sex**
- 4. Support marriage for opposite-sex couples and lifelong faithful partnership for same-sex couples**
- 5. Support marriage for opposite-sex couples based on equality, welcome lesbians and gays but abstinence is best for them**
- 6. Support marriage for opposite-sex couples based on male headship, encourage lesbians and gays to abstain or try to change**
- 7. The husband is boss, lesbians and gays are not acceptable**

It is worth noting in passing that, historically, there have also been varying views among Christians (ranging from Evangelicals and Pentecostals to Catholics and Orthodox) on whether marriage is (or can be) regarded as a sacrament – a ceremony regarded as imparting spiritual grace – and, if so, what this implies. This matter is not the focus of my attention here.

Instead, I will examine the positions (set out in outline above) in more depth, looking at which might be considered as ‘mainstream’ by churches today. I will then examine possible ways forward for Christians who disagree on sexual ethics but would like to remain in fellowship.

It should also be noted that, as in other areas of conduct, Christians may sometimes fall short of acting upon their ethical beliefs (or occasionally behave better than might be predicted). Also, there is a difference between an ethical and legal code, and between setting ideals for oneself and judging others.

## (b) Unacceptable extremes

Positions 1 and 7 on the spectrum set out above might seem to reflect opposite extremes of unrestrained individualism and rigid sexism, yet they share certain characteristics.

Position 1 says that it is acceptable to pursue any sexual relationship that brings one pleasure or profit, whatever the impact on others. The most extreme form would permit sexual violence, abuse of under-age children and bestiality, though not all would go so far. However deception and manipulation would not be ruled out.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people would be equal to heterosexual people in this set-up but other forms of inequality would be rife, as people used their power – based on status, wealth, beauty or other factors – to get what they wanted.

Individuals might appear to have complete freedom but, in practice, some would be less free than others, for instance those forced into the sex industry by extreme poverty, or the naive and emotionally needy who are seduced by those who claim to love them.

People who hold position 1 would not usually be particularly interested in the reasons why someone very poor, or whose upbringing was deeply damaging, ended up as a prostitute, provided she or he could offer them gratification. Likewise, if they broke up with a lover who had fallen in love with them but of whom they had tired, they would regard that as his or her tough luck.

Position 7 is that, in sexual partnerships, men's interests should come first and they should be in charge, while women should serve them. Same-sex relationships should be frowned upon and LGBT people may be treated with hostility or contempt. The most extreme form of this position would permit infidelity by husbands though not wives (the sexual double standard) or polygamy, and even violent coercion against women and gays, though not all would go so far.

Empathy with those who are attracted to, or fall in love with, members of the same sex, or indeed women who do not easily fit into subordinate roles, would not be encouraged. Macho behaviour and patriarchal patterns of family life would be regarded as natural.

This position would promote selfishness among the more powerful in marriages and wider society, while others would risk being exploited and oppressed.

Indeed some people may see-saw between these positions, for instance acting the patriarch at home while secretly having sex with those in vulnerable positions. Likewise during wars and gang or communal conflicts, rigid and unequal family patterns can sometimes coexist alongside no-holds-barred abuse of women and weaker men from other communities.

In addition, same-sex sexual activity takes place even in the most patriarchal societies, whether or not the feelings involved are publicly acknowledged. So position 7 tends to result in dysfunctional social patterns.

Hopefully the majority of churches would reject both these positions as harmful to humans made in God's image and not in keeping with the command to love one's neighbour as oneself. This does not mean that those who live by these codes should be rejected as people by the church, but certainly such patterns of behaviour would be hard to justify theologically, though some may try.

Christians as well as non-Christians may hold these positions for various reasons, for instance because of their upbringing or because these fit in with particular views of how society should be run. For example, people who have embraced consumerism may favour 1, while supporters of authoritarianism may be drawn to 7.

But they may nevertheless learn to behave differently through the influence of love, which the church can nurture and encourage by offering a community in which justice and compassion are not regarded as weak or 'letting the side down'.

### **(c) Positions sincerely endorsed by some Christians, but less than satisfactory**

Positions 2 and 6 are less extreme and theological arguments can be made for both of them, though I would suggest that they are outweighed by reasons against.

Position 2 is that there the same ethical code should be used for sexual and non-sexual relationships. Other people should be treated unselfishly and honestly, but exclusivity / faithfulness and permanence are not necessary between lovers unless this is explicitly promised or, perhaps, if a couple have children or other dependants who might be harmed if they split up or have other partners.

Equality and justice would be emphasised, whether people are LGBT or heterosexual. Indeed some might think such distinctions questionable. Likewise friendship would be highly valued and kindness and openness encouraged.

Position 6 believes that sex should only happen between married opposite-sex couples in faithful lifelong relationships, though people who fall short of the ideal may be treated compassionately. Both partners should put each other first and the husband should consult his wife but take responsibility for key decisions as head of the household. Those attracted to the same sex should be encouraged to abstain from sexual relationships unless they marry a member of the opposite sex.

Some who hold this position, while regarding marital breakdown with great regret, would accept the possibility of remarriage after annulment or divorce.

The case for position 2 could include the difficulty of identifying a consistent sexual ethic in the Bible (for instance there are varying attitudes to eunuchs and to polygamy), and the gap between the ancient world it was set in and today's world. Jesus' and Paul's rejection of legalism, emphasising instead love of God and neighbour and treating others as one would wish to be treated (Matthew 7.12, 22.36-40, Romans 13.8-10, Galatians 5.13-14), might seem a more reliable guide for all human relationships.

However position 2 fails to take enough account of the emotional vulnerability that many feel in sexual contexts and the potential for joy, spiritual growth and mutual support in doing good that many find in committed faithful partnerships. There may be different perspectives on the biblical concept of partners becoming 'one flesh' (Genesis 2.18-24, Matthew 19.4-6), but it does reflect a very common experience. Underestimating the power of sexuality can lead to hurt, even if unintentional, and a loss of opportunity.

Position 6 does acknowledge the potential for both good and ill in sexual relationships, in line with warnings in the New Testament epistles about sexual immorality. Potential benefits include conceiving children and bringing them up in a stable and caring setting. The concept of male headship can be argued from Ephesians 5.21-33 and is consistent with certain other passages in the epistles.

The emphasis on gender hierarchy is not however in keeping with the insight in Galatians 3.28 that "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." In the new creation, barriers are broken down and those on whom the Holy Spirit is poured are no longer trapped by the roles which society might allocate but rather freed to use their gifts, and part of a new body in which all members are equally honoured (Acts 2.1-21, 1 Corinthians 12.4-26).

It is insensitive to the damaging impact of sexism and prejudice on grounds of sexual orientation. In its treatment of women and gays, position 6 fails to do justice – a central theme in the Bible. And its promotion of hierarchical relationships among humans can displace the reverence due only to God.

Supporters of positions 2 or 6 are often sincere Christians, may have some useful insights and should be treated courteously, but are unlikely to convince the rest of us that theirs should be the church's stance.

#### **(d) The middle ground**

A comparatively narrow range of views makes up the middle ground towards which many churches have in practice been converging. A process of discernment is underway, though many church leaders do not explicitly recognise this and some members may be unaware that a sizeable proportion of their fellow-worshippers think differently from themselves.

In parts of the world, harsh state repression or prejudiced public attitudes to LGBT people may make it hard for Christians to find out about and seriously consider alternative perspectives. But where there have been opportunities for broad discussion which takes account of the Bible, tradition, reason and experience, many have settled on position 3, 4 or 5.

These share the perspective that love of God and neighbour are inextricably linked. Treating others justly and compassionately and, through closeness to others,

becoming more loving is important, for *'everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love'* (1 John 4.7-8).

While love, in Christian terms, may involve showing mercy and generosity to all (Matthew 5.42-48) and loyalty and care towards others of one's faith (John 13.34-35), emotionally close relationships also matter.

In the Hebrew Bible, the soul of Jonathan is bound to the soul of David, whom he loves as his own soul, and they make a covenant (1 Samuel 18.1-4), a bond of love which endures despite the most difficult circumstances (1 Samuel 20, 23.15-18, 2 Samuel 1.26). This exemplifies the trustworthiness of the divine covenant of love with God's people. In John's Gospel, Jesus loves all his followers while relating in a special way to "the disciple Jesus loved" (John 13.21-26, 19.25-27, 21.20-23). Church tradition draws on this gospel in developing a doctrine of the Holy Trinity, joined in intimate love (e.g. John 3.34-35, 14.8-17), which outflows to humankind.

Sexual relationships should not be entered into lightly or exploitatively. Faithful, self-giving, lifelong faithful marriage founded on equality can offer unmatched opportunities for emotional and spiritual growth, as well as nurture of children (if any). LGBT people should be welcomed and respected, and committed same-sex as well as opposite-sex partnerships can be deeply loving.

The emphasis on constancy and justice in these positions would make them all counter-cultural in many settings. Yet there are also important differences.

In position 3, churches should support and celebrate the marriage of both opposite-sex and same-sex couples, and all forms of ministry should be open to LGBT as well as heterosexual people. While lifelong celibacy is to be respected as a vocation, relatively few people are called to it. Being married offers a constructive channel for the yearning for intimacy and enables partners to understand more deeply, and reflect more fully, the trustworthy and generous love of God. Fruitfulness matters but this is not always about having biological children: there are various ways in which couples' love could benefit others.

Position 4 would celebrate committed loving same-sex partnerships involving emotional and physical intimacy but regard them as different from marriage, reserving this term for opposite-sex couples. Those who hold this view might or might not agree that the civil authorities and people of other beliefs should be free to regard same-sex relationships as marriages.

While some advocates of this stance regard same-sex relationships as not being as good or at least not as central to humankind as heterosexual marriage, others might think of these as equally valid but different in character and even, in some cases, better because they do not carry the legacy of patriarchy attached to the notion of being married.

Supporters of position 5 would, while recognising that sexually intimate lesbian and gay partnerships can be exemplary in many ways, regard lifelong celibacy as more in keeping with biblical teaching and church tradition. While opposing human rights abuses, some (though not all) of those who hold this view would be reluctant to

appoint ministers who were non-celibate and partnered with someone of the same sex.

In recent years, many theologians have argued the case for each of these three positions. At a leadership and grassroots level in various churches, many members have wrestled with the issue of sexuality and likewise come to hold one of these positions, sometimes shifting their stance. Some are still trying to decide which position seems best.

The debate can become unhelpful and even destructive if positions 1-3 or 5-7 are treated as identical (sometimes lumping position 4 in with one set or the other). This also makes it harder to raise awareness of the damaging consequences of positions 1 and 7.

Indeed fellow-Christians who disagree on sexuality may be treated as if they have abandoned all respect for Scripture and tradition, or any attention to reason and experience. Yet there may be sincere disagreement on how these are interpreted by those who seek to follow Christ today in their own settings, while being part of a universal fellowship that crosses time and space.

In seeking to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God (Micah 6.7-9), avoid false witness (Exodus 20.16), love one another with mutual affection and outdo one another in showing honour (Romans 12.10), clarity matters.

This does not mean glossing over the tensions that can exist near the middle of the spectrum.

For instance, supporters of position 3 (myself included) might point to the unnecessary loneliness faced by many LGBT people who are persuaded to steer clear of committed partnerships by advocates of position 5, the loss of faith some experience and the damage to the church's mission when it is perceived as narrow-minded and unjust.

Likewise supporters of position 5 might regard those who favour position 3 as encouraging a way of life that is ultimately unhelpful to the practice of Christian discipleship. It can be hard work to be part of a faith community where sizeable numbers of people disagree on such matters.

Yet churches hold together despite disagreement on a range of important issues, doctrinal and ethical. As in the days of the early church, unity need not be based on uniformity of opinion on all matters.

### **(e) Moving forward amid uncertainty**

There are various approaches to dealing with disagreement in faith communities. Suppression of dissent can lead either to unthinking conformity and/or splits, while refusal ever to challenge erroneous views can erode credibility and convey the impression of indifference to truth, justice and faithfulness to God's will.

Ultimately, the Spirit of truth can be trusted to lead seekers into all truth (John 16.13), Christians believe. But in the interim they may get things wrong. The New Testament offers examples of different ways of dealing with difference.

Paul starts as Saul, a religious fanatic who condones violence against those he thinks are wrong, until he realises that he is persecuting the very God whose honour he thinks he is defending. In contrast, the wise rabbi Gamaliel argues that *“if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!”* (Acts 5.34-38).

Later Paul has a showdown with the top church leaders of his day over the issue of demanding that converts to Christianity should obey Jewish law (Galatians 2), which would have hampered the spread of faith. Yet on the issue of eating food offered to idols, he takes the view that it is worth making concessions to others' conscientious scruples, even if these are wrong, if not doing so might undermine their faith (1 Corinthians 8). Being loving matters more than proving that one is right: *“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”*

On sexuality, in some churches top leaders make out that position 5 (or even a mixture of this and position 6) are a clear biblical norm while, in practice, some clergy or elders and congregations adopt position 4 or possibly 3. This is less than satisfactory, since it may appear to promote duplicity, while LGBT people and their friends may still feel unwelcome. However it is better than purging churches of minorities and dissidents and, possibly, fighting against God.

Yet if position 3 or 4 is believed by the majority of members to be most in accord with God's will, with a sizeable minority not yet convinced, obliging all congregations and ministers to celebrate same-sex partnerships could alienate those who are reluctant and inflame divisions.

It would seem that the most constructive approach is for church leaders to be open about the differences that exist, while acknowledging the extent of common ground in the middle of the spectrum, and allowing some flexibility of practice. Some ministers and churches might conscientiously choose to celebrate partnerships between same-sex couples, while others might opt not to do so.

At the same time, to move the debate forward, churches should challenge those with strong views on sexuality to spell out clearly the practical and theological reasoning behind positions they may take for granted, even if this seems obvious to them, and to engage with others' arguments.

This may be difficult for people who feel vulnerable, because it seems to them that their identity and deepest relationships are in question, or that the world is changing in ways that leave them bewildered and disempowered. However both advocates of change and church leaders should be encouraged to set a helpful tone in debating issues constructively and supporting human dignity for all.

Bishops and other senior clergy (or elders and ministers in other traditions) who coordinate diverse Christian communities would not be able to please everyone, but



should be able to articulate their own views coherently while listening to and caring for those who disagree. They in turn should try to be supportive of their bishop even if not entirely happy with his or her views and maybe partnership.

This is not to say that positions 3, 4 and 5 will be regarded by their different proponents as equally valid. Indeed, bringing differences into the open and encouraging prayerful and reasoned debate may bring forward the day when there is broad consensus on sexual ethics.

If churches can deal constructively with disagreement on this matter, it will surely also contribute to the overall quality of theological understanding and discussion. As family therapist and priest Sue Walrond-Skinner once asked: how will people discover, *by the way we disagree* as well as by our agreement, that we are committed to Christ and seeking the kingdom (or commonwealth) of God?

Meanwhile Christians sharing the 'middle ground' in the spectrum should be able to coexist, jointly seeking to make God's love known and practised and allowing one another some measure of freedom, recognising their deeper unity in Christ.

Such a stance is not about weak compromise, but is in theological terms truly radical – that is, *both* deeply rooted in Scripture and tradition *and* open to the change and transformation that a living community requires in order not to be left behind by the God who, in biblical terms, is always ahead of us, inviting us to discover more of the ways of love, truth and justice. [1]

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#### **NOTE:**

[1] This paper has been concerned with offering a realistic, but theologically rooted, way forward for Christians and church communities in facing the reality of their disagreements over sexuality. It should be noted that these do not have to be (and in Ekklesia's view should not be) simply mapped onto positions regarding legislative change over marriage and civil partnerships within wider society and other faith communities, or vice versa. For example, it is possible, both within the legislative stance adopted within, for example, the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill, for a church to withhold the conducting of same-sex weddings or partnerships within its own current polity, while not seeking to forbid other religious communities or civic bodies from conducting such ceremonies. A proper distinction between different churches and faith bodies on the one hand, and civic authorities on the other, can and should be maintained for the freedom and benefit of all. See 'What Future for Marriage?', Ekklesia, 2006.

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Savitri Hensman was born in Sri Lanka and lives in London. She works in the voluntary sector in community care and equalities and is a respected writer on Christianity and social justice. She provides expert commentary on sexuality and LGBT issues, Anglican matters, welfare, family policy, politics and religion. Her work is widely published in the Guardian newspaper and elsewhere. She contributed several chapters to *Fear or Freedom? Why a warring church must change* (Shoving Leopard / Ekklesia, 2008). Her columns appear here:

<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/news/columns/hensman> Her blogs appear here:  
<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/blog/13>

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**FURTHER READING AND RESEARCH:**

***Journey towards acceptance: theologians and same-sex love*** -  
<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/17246> (Ekklesia, 27 October 2012)

There are too many Christians today – both for and against full inclusion of partnered LGBT people – who have little awareness of the debates that have taken place in theological circles over the past sixty years, and the process by which so many theologians today have come to support greater inclusion. Some seem to believe that calls for acceptance in the church are based on embracing society's values (at least in parts of the world where same-sex relationships are by and large accepted) and ignoring those aspects of the Bible and church tradition that do not fit. This is regarded as a mark of either faithlessness or progress, depending on people's own views on the subject.

However this does not in any way do justice to the considered work of most theologians who have argued the case for greater inclusion, drawing deeply on the witness of the Bible and the church through the ages, to discern how God has been and is at work in a complex and constantly changing world. Moreover it makes it harder to find common ground to enable fellowship and dialogue among those with different views, and promote mutual understanding even if disagreement persists.

This paper gives a detailed overview of some of the most significant affirmative theological work on same-sex love and the Christian tradition. She demonstrates the unhelpful and simplistic positing of a straightforward 'conservative versus liberal' divide on these issues, and draws on Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Reformed, Quaker and Anabaptist/Mennonite thinkers.

***Should equal marriage be rejected or celebrated by Christians?*** -  
<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/17245> (Ekklesia, 27 October 2012)

The possibility of opening up marriage in Britain by law to same-sex couples has been criticised by some Christians but welcomed by others. One of the more thoughtful critics is theologian John Milbank, who has eloquently expressed some common arguments against change. This response suggests that, while he raises important issues, his analysis is ultimately flawed. Taking into account such topics as tradition, sexual 'complementarity', childbearing and sacrament, there is a strong case for equal marriage.

***Using and misusing St Paul: wisdom, gender and sexuality*** -  
<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/17247> (Ekklesia, 27 October 2012)

This essay focuses primarily on the use and misuses of St Paul in fractious contemporary church debates about sexuality and gender. It can also be read in parallel with the growing body of theological and historical work on re-understanding one of the key figures in the history of Christianity, suggesting that Paul's project was to create a new community and dynamic which was capable of re-energising the suppressed radicalism of Torah religion in a dangerously imperialistic setting.

***What future for marriage?*** (Simon Barrow and Jonathan Bartley, Ekklesia, June-July 2006) - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/research/papers/rethinkmarriage>

In recent years the Christian churches have set great stall by 'family values' and the institution of marriage. Yet the form of marriage we know as such today is a relatively late invention out of something that once had much more to do with solidifying dynastic power. And most commentators agree that it is going through a tough time – with more people choosing not to marry, opting to forge

different (often informal) partnerships, and getting divorced in increasing numbers. This paper sets out a fresh approach, which proposes changing the law on marriage in its current form to distinguish between civic and religious unions.

***Fruitful love: beyond the civil and legal in partnerships*** (Ekklesia, December 2011) - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/15884>

An emotionally and sexually intimate partnership is, for many people, a school of love, writes Savitri Hensman. This is not as romantic as it might sound: fearfulness, selfishness, rivalry and other negative traits may surface, and hard work may be needed to overcome these. Yet this can be a path to spiritual growth, which may manifest itself in small ways or through acts of heroic altruism. Such relationships, whether between opposite-sex or same-sex partners, can help to bring forth good fruit.

***Sex, orientation and theological debate*** (Noel Moules, Ekklesia, March 2010) - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/11195>

This is a paper written by Noel Moules for the 'Body & Soul' weekend which took place in London on 27-28 March 2010, run by Ekklesia partner Workshop (<http://www.workshop.org.uk>). The document explores Christian approaches to sexuality and sexual orientation, as well as looking at how appropriately to handle the theological tradition and biblical texts which relate to the debate. The author spent his formative years in India and has studied (and taught) theology and education. Through Workshop, which is open and evangelical in its grounding, with a particular concern for Anabaptist and peace church perspectives, "learners and teachers work to discover God amid uncertainty, mystery and paradox. We are sensitive to the differences between the various traditions of the church, and aim to increase understanding about the reasons behind the sincerely held opposing views."

***Wrestling biblically with the changing shape of family*** (Deirdre Good, Ekklesia, March 2007) - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/4844>

In an excerpt from her groundbreaking book *Jesus' Family Values*, a New Testament scholar explains why simplistic appeals to scripture distort its meaning, and why for the Gospel family is built on magnanimity not exclusion.

***Listening and learning in the sexuality debate*** - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/6971> (Ekklesia, March 2008).

As part of the 'listening process' in the Anglican Communion over the extensive disagreements about human sexuality, Ekklesia associate Savitri Hensman prepared a paper on *Learning, Listening, Scripture and Sexuality* which seeks both to take the conversation forward and to affirm the role of lesbian and gay Christians as active and baptised members in the church, in accordance with a faithful and interpretatively sensitive reading of its the texts and tradition.

***Contrasting church attitudes on human rights for all*** (Ekklesia, February 2009) - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/8492>

Many faith communities are officially committed to human rights for all. Yet in practice, some of their leaders may be strongly opposed. Since 1948 Christians have played a significant role in extending personal and societal respect for human dignity. At the same time, church leaders have also questioned and denied rights-based precepts and practices in a number of instances. In church contexts, arguments about sexuality are significant because they highlight the extent to which protagonists are, or are not, willing to extend equal recognition and rights to those who are 'other', or with whose lifestyle they disagree.

***Binding the church and constraining God*** - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/6737> (Ekklesia, February 2008)

In a paper carefully analysing the popular use and misuse of biblical and doctrinal language about God and Church, Savitri Hensman shows that inflexible, one-sided, naïve or ideological conceptions of God in sections of the Christian tradition can reinforce domineering models and practices in the Church – which is in fact supposed to be a creative vehicle of Jesus' broken body in the world, not a defensive fortress. God is not confined by rules set by humans and our institutions, she argues, however powerful they may be by earthly standards. In the biblical tradition, God is at work outside as well as within institutions, including those that claim to be about God's business. Liberation, reformation and healing will continue to happen even if, at first, they are not acknowledged by the authorities (ecclesial and otherwise); and in time truth will break through our illusions. This paper is highly relevant to issues being discussed in and beyond Anglicanism, concerning its disputed future, and in other sections of the worldwide Church. It makes specific reference to the debate about an Anglican Covenant in the run-up to the Lambeth Conference 2008. It may also give those outside the Church a better understanding of how language and tradition is being applied and misapplied within very diverse Christian communities during a time of considerable upheaval and anxiety, both inside and outside the Church

***Ekklesia submission to the Consultation on the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill*** - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/18209>

The Scottish Government's consultation on the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill ended on 20 March 2013. In its submission, Ekklesia backed the proposal to introduce same sex marriage and religious and belief registration of civil partnership - while emphasising that our overall preference would be to distinguish legal marriage as a civil provision from religious or belief blessings and recognition.

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