# Gender - Sexuality - Marriage - Family

Reflections on behalf of the Council of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe

by Ulla Schmidt, Mariecke van den Berg,
Thorsten Dietz, Neil Messer, Paola Schellenbaum

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# Content

# Foreword

Sexuality, gender, marriage and family life are all topics that touch us individually at the most profoundly human level. The ways in which our intimate lives are lived out are shaped by our biology and our cultural context. Our Christian faith provides the lens through which we respond faithfully as bodily persons created in the image of God living out our gender and sexuality and forming relationships and families. These aspects of life provide joy. In intimate relationships we often find our deepest delight in life. Family life can be the bedrock of our human flourishing. At the same time, discussing these issues can be difficult, because they are so personal. We can never experience what another person experiences. Equally, that which can be the site of our deepest joy can also be the site of our ability to inflict pain and damage on one another.

For churches, these topics can be a joy and delight. The Christian tradition has rich wisdom from which we live, which points towards the fullness of life that Christ offers in our sexuality, relationships, marriage and family life. But as churches, we also find it difficult to talk well about these things. That is partly because of the many and varied individuals and their differing experiences who make up the baptised body of Christ. It is also because we are, as churches, both shaped by the surrounding culture in which we are seeking to bear witness to the gospel, and shape that culture by our presence within it. When do we appropriately find new ways to enable Christian discipleship to be lived out within the context of new cultural norms? When are we called to resist cultural changes that we perceive as a threat to faithful Christian living? When are we called to prophetic witness within society that calls the world to a fuller expression of our sexuality, gender, married and family life that is more Christlike? The Church has lived with such questions throughout the entirety of

its history. They are never easy to address. Discipleship is always concrete and existential.

As a church communion it can be a delight and joy to talk about fulfilment in life through caring and trusting relationships, by living out sexuality, gender, marriage and family life in a responsible way. We can delight in what we learn from our different traditions, theological and cultural. We can delight in the positive message of the Christian gospel that human beings are created as fundamentally social beings, called to be in relationships of friendship, desire, love, and affection, which serve as the foundation of society as a whole. But also, as a church communion, it is difficult to talk well about these topics. Whilst our common cultural context is Europe, within Europe there are different legal, cultural, ethical and national understandings of sexuality, gender, marriage and family life. Taking same-sex relationships as an example, there are parts of Europe where same-sex marriage has been taken for granted as a reality for nearly a quarter of a century, and places where it is constitutionally forbidden, and it is illegal to 'promote' same-sex relationships. The religious context of church life differs too. Who our immediate ecumenical and interfaith partners are can shape the space member churches have in which these issues are explored.

Because of the differences in our contexts, it is impossible for the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe to take one clearly defined position on the questions this study text examines. In asking for a study guide to these questions, the General Assembly was not asking for the communion to seek an agreed position, but rather a resource to help high quality reflection take place within and between member churches. The study guide differs from the CPCE's previous ethical guides on death-hastening decisions and care of the dying (2011) and on the ethics of reproductive medicine (2017) in the sense that we recognise more of a consensus emerged within

those previous studies. At some points, the text makes suggestions as to how a Protestant orientation might lead us to consider certain issues. These suggestions will helpfully provoke discussion and debate. What these suggestions are not in any way is a formal position of the CPCE. Throughout the study process, all points of view were taken seriously and representatives of the various positions were encouraged to explain their point of view.

This study guide brings together some of the latest understandings of sexuality, gender, marriage and family life from the natural sciences, the social sciences, with an awareness of legal and cultural issues. It seeks to reflect theologically from a fundamentally Protestant perspective on the questions that the topic raises, crystallized in the fundamental ethical ideals of freedom, responsibility, love and justice. We don't believe that anywhere else will churches find these varying perspectives brought together with such expertise and breadth of interdisciplinary awareness.

The study guide also offers case studies of how individual member churches have engaged with the topic. These demonstrate the great breadth there is within Protestant responses to the questions at hand. These examples may help us to understand different perspectives within the CPCE.

The study guide, like our Communion as a whole, is alert to the reality that sexuality, gender, marriage and family can be the most formative and flourishing contexts from which we live out our discipleship. However, we are deeply aware that in a fallen world, the areas of life this study guide touches upon can also be the site of great harm when love and trust is abused, and people are damaged emotionally, physically and spiritually. We hope that this study guide will promote further discussion within the Communion on how we

safeguard people from the devastating harm of abuse as best we are able.

The Church is not a family, even though we often speak of it as such in metaphorical terms. But in the Christian life, it is not the blood relationships of family that unites us, but our relatedness in faith, and the water relationship of baptism. Jesus redefines family for us, as he points to his disciples and says 'these are my sisters and brothers' (Matt. 12: 48-50). Through baptism, we are incorporated into Christ and become children of God (Gal. 3.28) and therefore sisters and brothers within one body, called to build one another up (1 Cor. 12: 12-27). Throughout the letters of Paul in the New Testament, we see Paul calling for a church frequently divided over cultural, ethnic and religious issues to find their unity in Christ. That call remains ours today – how can we passionately disagree about issues of gender, sexuality, marriage and family and at the same time find our unity in the waters of baptism into Christ, building one another up in love? We hope this study guide can contribute to this through opening up for us perspectives other than those we take for granted and helping us understand the variety of experiences and viewpoints that shape our conversations.

The painful reality of our differences on these issues were experienced at the General Assembly as we noted the decision of the Council to publish this guide. Sensitivities around these issues led the member churches of the Hungarian Reformed Church to withdraw their delegates from the Assembly. The Lutheran Church in Hungary sent a commentary on the study, which in many ways was received positively, but stated their fundamental conviction about marriage being between one man and one woman. Others expressed in debate their pain rooted in the situation they found themselves in either through personal conscience or because of their contextual realities.

We include the Statement of the Presidium of the General Convent of the Hungarian Reformed Church as well as the Statement of the Bishop's Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary as appendices. We do this out of a desire to be transparent and honest about our divisions on this issue. In publishing these two contributions we start off the process of reception and discussion of this study text in our church communion. The General Assembly showed the warm commitment from member churches and the CPCE itself to continue together in Communion, and to continue to embody that in the ongoing work of the communion.

Our thanks go to all those who have contributed to producing this study guide. Under the guidance of Council member Prof. Ulla Schmidt, a study group made up of Dr Mariecke van den Berg, Prof. Thorsten Dietz, Prof. Neil Messer and Prof. Paola Schellenbaum worked on the first draft, which was thoroughly discussed at a consultation of the member churches in Dresden, in February 2023. The study group then wove the suggestions made by the participants at the consultation and the CPCE Council into the document. This study guide is the longest piece of work that CPCE has ever published. The time that went into writing, discussing and revising it exceeds by far what can normally be expected of a study group.

The Council of the CPCE, in commissioning this study guide, prays that it will serve as a resource to enable our conversations about these difficult issues to be well resourced, and well informed from a variety of different disciplinary perspectives. The call to seek the truth in love requires us to seek out knowledge wherever it is to be found, and engage with that knowledge through the lens of the gospel.

We pray that as individuals, churches and our whole communion of churches continue to grapple with these difficult topics we will be

guided by the movement of the Holy Spirit, who leads us into all truth.

Rev. Dr John P. Bradbury
Prof. Miriam Rose
Rev. Marcin Brzóska

Presidium of the Council of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe

# Summary

## A study guide to gender and sexuality: topic and approach

Gender and sexuality, marriage and family, are domains of human life that have always been on the agenda of Christian churches and their theological reflections about what it means to live as a human being and as a Christian. This is obviously still the case in present-day Europe, where CPCE churches and theologies are confronted with these topics and called to engage with the form they take in human life and society today. This study is a response to this challenge. In accordance with a mandate by the CPCE 2018 General Assembly and the CPCE Council, its more specific aims are to

- provide information about the main scientific theories and concepts, cultural and societal tendencies related to understandings of gender and sexuality in contemporary European culture and society,
- explore how these understanding address and are addressed by theological arguments and reflections,
- consider the relationship between theological and ethical differences, on one hand, and being in church communion, on the other.

This entails both a descriptive and a critical or normative task. First, the study outlines theories from other disciplines along with theological positions regarding gender and sexuality, marriage and family. Second, it brings these theories and positions into critical and normative exchange with central and guiding commitments and principles of Protestant theology. The aim is not to formulate one,

distinct position as *the* justified Protestant line, but rather to identify a range of possible positions in light of these principal Protestant orientations, tentatively labelled a "Protestant corridor".

These principal Protestant orientations for reflecting on gender and sexuality, marriage and family, have three main components. First, that human beings are ultimately defined in their relation to God, being created in the image of God. Human beings live from receiving the gifts of creation in everyday life, from being justified through Jesus Christ in the grace of God by faith, and being renewed through the gifts of spirit and faith in baptism and the Lord's Supper. A human being is an embodied existence, a unity of body and mind. Second, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments bear witness to God's revelation, ultimately in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and are as such the ultimate authority for Christian life and faith. Scripture must always be interpreted: as the word through which we hear God's law and gospel, and as texts originating in a historical context that is also crucial to their right reception. Even though Scripture is the ultimate authority for Christian life and faith, it is not the only one. It must be read together with other sources: tradition, experience, and reason, including knowledge from other academic disciplines. Third, the key Protestant orientations for reflecting on gender and sexuality, marriage and family, also include fundamental ethical ideals, rooted in the understanding of God's creative and justifying purposes for human life, namely freedom, responsibility, love and justice.

# Gender and sexuality

Gender and sexuality have been studied from a range of academic disciplines, including biology, psychology, anthropology, sociology, feminist and queer studies, and theology. On the one hand, scholarly work has pointed to gendered patterns present in human bodies,

behaviours and social arrangements. On the other, these are prone to change. Feminist and queer theory point out that what was considered to be 'normal' in terms of gender and sexuality is constantly shifting and depends on time and social context. Biology provides statistical differences distinguishing men from women. At the same time, there are also significant differences among these groups. Moreover, the fact that gender is located in different places, which plays out differently for different people (e.g. genitals, chromosomes, gametes, hormone levels), makes it difficult to come to definitive conclusions about gender identity. Likewise, regarding sexual orientation, this study concludes that while there is a large and diverse body of evidence for a range of biological correlations with, and influences on, same-sex sexual attraction and activity, the mechanisms by which these biological variations influence sexual attraction and behaviour are far from clear.

From a theological perspective, two questions appear decisive for the position that theologians hold regarding gender and sexuality. The first is: does the creation account in Genesis 1-2 compel a binary understanding of gender and exclusive support for heterosexual relationships, or does it emphasize relationality and mutual love regardless of gender? The second is: what are the implications for human beings in the new creation in Christ (Gal 3:28) in terms of our understandings of gender and sexuality? Based on the different answers to these questions, we can distinguish three main positions, or trajectories, regarding gender.

According to the first trajectory, there are two different categories of human beings – male and female – that are distinct, exhaustive and based on biological features. This is supported by one reading of Genesis 1-2, which states that God created humankind as male and female. Galatians 3:28, that in Christ there is no longer male and female, is interpreted as saying that the biological polarity between

the male and female sex is no longer of consequence for social status in the renewed and transformed reality in Christ, but not that the polarity as such has been transformed or eradicated. The possibility of heterosexual procreation is seen as an essential part of biological sexual difference. For that reason, heterosexual relationships are preferred, and sometimes marked as the only justifiable form of relationship for Christians.

Positions along a second trajectory claim that our given bodies and nature are places where we encounter the grace of God's creative and redemptive love, and therefore significant for understanding what it means to live in accordance with those purposes. But they reject the idea that human nature as we observe it can be affirmed as unequivocally good, ordered by divine purposes and therefore as binding on human intentions and choices. Procreative possibilities are conditioned upon there being male and female gametes produced by male and female bodies, in which sense human bodies are binarily gendered as male and female. However, human bodies are sexed in other ways as well, which do not follow a clear, binary pattern, for example hormonal production, or physiological body-parts, as intersex conditions show. Along this trajectory, Gen 1–2 is understood as describing a contingently binary structure, where being created as human is primary, and as male and female secondary. And the new existence in Christ in a more fundamental way confronts being male and female as a relevant classification of human beings "clothed in Christ" (Gal 3:26–27). Christ, not Adam, is the true image of God (Col 1:15). Sexuality and sexual relations are acknowledged as domains of human life where creative gifts of love, commitment, self-giving, care, pleasure, desire and joy can be received and passed on, and as such as domains where humankind can experience and participate in God's creative and loving work. Although procreation is certainly a part of this, the potential for

procreation by male and female is not a condition for human sexuality to be aligned with these purposes of creation and love.

Positions along the third trajectory question the basis of any kind of essential difference between man and woman, meaning that there is no male or female essence that sustains different gender identities. The identification of bodily and natural features as defining gender and gender identity's allegedly ontological core is already set within, and dependent on, prior cultural and symbolic structures of meaning, not given in unmediated nature. New Testament texts about the renewed and transformed life in Christ, and its implication with regard to being 'man' and 'woman' play a dominant role (Gal 3:28; Col 1:13–18; 3:10). Gen 1:27 about humankind being created as male and female is read as describing a male–female continuum, including all human beings, rather than being a text about specific classes of human beings. From a more eschatological emphasis, human sexuality is then disconnected from gender structures based in nature or creation, and set within a new reality, where there is neither male nor female. Human sexuality is reset within a pneumatological context of how God's spirit indwells human beings and human life, lifting it above earthly distinctions and differences concerning gender and sexual orientation and identity, and instead positing "a new constructive understanding of embodiment".

When considering these three positions as potentially held within a Protestant corridor, one must acknowledge an important asymmetry. The first, exclusivist binary position, which considers acceptance of non-binary identity as incompatible with Protestant, Christian understanding of human beings created in the image of God as man and woman, thereby also excludes people of non-binary gender identity from participating in this status. The two other positions, viewing gender as either non-essentially binary or non-

binary, clearly do not exclude people of binary gender identity from the status of being created in the image of God. Given what is known about transgender identity as a potentially pervasive and deeply embodied sense of identity, not just a superficial and fluid preference, there are serious – potentially life-threatening – risks involved in insisting that transgender people must set this identity aside in order to see themselves as created in the image of God and included in Protestant Christian communion. These risks evoke concerns that must be taken into consideration when reflecting on the breadth of the Protestant corridor.

Furthermore, it is important to be aware of the power of language, of how words can wound deeply and – even unintentionally – deprive someone of their sense of worth and belonging to the Christian fellowship. Hate speech and dehumanizing language, like labelling opponents or LGBTQI+ people as "illness" to society or the Christian communion or lumping them together with criminal or anti-social behaviour, are unacceptable. Being in church communion always calls us to maintain a respectful tone, even in profound disagreement and conflict over the topics discussed here.

# Marriage and family

Marriage and the family have undergone significant changes since the end of 18th century, in the direction of intimacy, companionship and love, instead of the arranged marriages of the past. Being a civil contract, the dissolution of marriage through divorce or separation became possible and reconstituted or patchwork families are accepted in many European societies. These trends make the family a plural concept and they also change the ways in which maternity and paternity are experienced and give value to the different roles of grandparents. Rainbow families, transnational, interfaith and

global families also bear to witness to their diversity and joyful life, in times of rapid social and technological change affecting everybody.

All European societies face problems such as aging, declining fertility, and migration. These demographic trends show that major political, social, and economic changes occurred in Europe at different times, in the 1960s and 1970s in western Europe and German-speaking countries and in the 1980s in southern Europe. After the demise of state socialism in 1990s and the transition to capitalist political and economic conditions in central and eastern Europe, such rapid changes impacted on fertility and led to the postponement of childbearing, due to the difficult living conditions and general uncertainty. In many European countries, family matters have become a serious concern because of their societal consequences such as population decline, changes in age structures and social security costs.

Three basic models of marriage in Europe are reviewed, i.e. 'marriage for all', opposite-sex marriage with recognized civil unions or partnerships, and opposite-sex marriage only. Family members move across borders which involves cross-border divorce regulations. Diversity also affects family life, when we consider the life cycle of the family with members going through different life situations, i.e. a couple without children after they left home to build their family, or singleness as the result of choice, but also of divorce or widowhood. Social research has enriched the multiple views on family life, including the experiences of same-sex couples who also cope with challenges and discrimination.

Anthropological, sociological and psychological perspectives ask whether marriage and the traditional family are universal and central to the perpetuation of the species, or whether humankind

has conceived different solutions to the problem of loneliness, satisfying basic needs and reproduction. Relatedness and new kinship ties may suggest fresh reflections on marriage and civil unions, with or without children, opening up to the role of affective bonds that are stable but go beyond blood ties, and reach into the community. Anthropological theory suggests that marriage is not only a heterosexual institution and that same-sex partnerships, too, can contribute to stable human societies. Qualitative research speaks of 'chosen families' and this concept has come to include queer families; the debate among different critical positions is being reviewed. 'Queering the family' is thus not only about LGBTQI+ experiences of family life and organization; it also asks questions about the concept of the family, its power and gender balance, its defined and blurred boundaries that emphasize what people do, while being a family together.

Marriage, as the loving and responsible relationship of two people, has been a constant value throughout history, also for theological reflection. Both the biblical texts and church history show that the forms of marriage have evolved over time. The Reformation contributed to significant changes in the understanding of marriage with its departure from sacramental marriage.

From the 17th century, the motive of the covenant was increasingly emphasized for marriage. It strengthened the character of marriage as a mutual relationship and contributed to both spouses being increasingly seen as partners. The modern development of marriage taking on increasingly pluralized forms caused churches and theology to react differently. Some saw this as a threat and emphasized the binding nature of marriage. Others welcomed modern tendencies as liberation.

There are different ways in which marriage can be freshly viewed and more deeply understood today, in the face of current challenges. Love as mutual acceptance and care remains a central guideline for conjugal community. We can see responsibility for each other, in good times and in bad, as a realization of mature freedom. Precisely the legal character of marriage can well express the mandatory side of care. For the modern marriage of a man and a woman, justice always means that both support each other in developing their private and professional lives in a way that corresponds to their gifts and inclinations. Since the Reformation, the traditional characteristic of marriage – procreation – has no longer been a prerequisite for the validity of a marriage. Rather, married couples are fruitful in their joint commitment to one another and to others.

As with marriage, the theological interpretation of the family is inextricably linked with its historical developments. The Reformation`s idea of marriage as the secular vocation of all Christians led to a re-evaluation of family life as a place to serve God in the world. The increasing appreciation of the role of women and children was also given theological support. The patriarchal form of the family can be recognized as a culturally conditioned, narrow interpretation, which has been overcome today through more diverse and equitable forms of community.

The biblical texts themselves often compare the church with a family. This community of believers transcends the boundaries of the traditional family and, at the same time, realizes essential parts of family life. Crucially, families are places for meeting material, emotional, intimate and social needs. Realizing these goals is more important than preserving traditional roles. In this respect, the experiences of rainbow families today are instructive for all. They

show us that central values such as love, justice and responsibility can be achieved in very different ways.

# Churches, congregations and sexual abuse

Gender and sexuality, marriage and family, like other domains of human life, are marked by the harsh realities of human selfishness, destructiveness, power abuse and violence – which is also a challenge to churches. This topic is too comprehensive to be covered in full, but it is particularly disturbing when pastors or other church leaders exploit their position, and the trust and power it wields, for sexual abuse and misconduct, or other forms of boundary-crossing behaviour against members of their congregations ('congregants') and others. Churches and congregations are as exposed to the same risks of sexually abusive behaviour as other sectors of society, and those victimized by such behaviours similarly risk suffering the severely harmful consequences of traumatization. In addition, churches and congregations are home to relationships with a heightened risk of abuse due to the trust, care, dependence and power involved, such as the relationship between pastor and congregant. Since sexual abuse in such relations often involves elements of faith and spirituality, it might also damage the abused person's faith and spiritual practices, undermining trust in clergy, and the sense of being at home in, and belonging to, the church and congregation. In other words, sexual abuse in that context might also have additional harmful consequences. Churches, congregations, their pastors and leaders need to be aware of the risk and dynamics of abuse, taking responsibility for implementing safeguarding mechanisms, instruments for receiving and handling complaints, and

relevant support for those abused. They must learn to respond appropriately, including not trivializing or dismissing reports of abuse, not blaming the victim or making the victim co-responsible, and helping to relieve the abused person of their frequent sense of guilt and shame.

# Church communion, ethical disagreements and ethic of disagreement

Churches in Europe, also CPCE churches, are likely to disagree, even profoundly, on one or more of these topics. Yet CPCE are churches in communion, according each other table and pulpit fellowship based on the signing of the Leuenberg Agreement. This raises the question as to how church communion and ethical disagreements relate to each other. The study addresses this question with the aid of four case studies by individual CPCE member churches: the Waldensian Church, the Church of Norway, the Reformed Church in Hungary and the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren. Several important insights were gained from reflecting on these cases.

Prominent among these insights are, first, that the Augsburg Confession (Confessio Augustana – CA) article VII and its statement that "for the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the gospel and administration of the sacraments" cannot be understood as though ethical disagreements as such are not able to pose a threat to church unity. The "doctrine of the gospel" cannot be disconnected from Scripture as reliable testimony to the revelation of God's loving and salvific act, proclaimed as law and gospel. Second, disagreements on gender and sexuality,

exemplified by discussions about same-sex relations – although clearly profound and serious – do not necessarily imply disagreement about the status of Scripture, and so do not automatically threaten church communion. The third insight is that not only ethical disagreements might have an impact on church communion. Being in church communion also means bearing responsibility for how to relate to ethical disagreement. Church communion implies practising an ethic of disagreement.

Among other things, this involves commitment to the mutual and continued exploration of conflictual positions; being willing to reflect critically on one's own position in light of others' understandings of it and being accountable for our position towards others. It also implies an obligation not to withdraw from these mutual explorations without having engaged in them with dedicated effort. Church communion as involving this mutual responsibility to explain our own positions and understanding of Scripture, listening to those of others, carefully and continually reading and interpreting Scripture together, is central to what defines the CPCE, and is what inspired this study.

# Section I: Introduction

# Gender and sexuality, marriage and family: important topics for CPCE churches

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul talks about the new reality inaugurated by Christ: how in Christ Jesus we are children of God through faith, and baptized in Christ we are clothed in Christ. In this new reality of being united with Christ and children of God, "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" (Gal 3:28). These verses remind us of how in Christ we are invited to share in a transfigured reality, incorporated into a new identity, and they invite us to reflect on the implications of this new, transformed identity for all aspects of human life.

Gender and sexuality, marriage and family, are domains of human life that have always been on the agenda of Christian churches and their theological reflections. They are topics pertaining directly to what it means to live as a human being and as a Christian: in relation to oneself, to one's neighbour and in one's closest relationships, in communion with others in church and beyond, as well as in society at large. In the history of Christian church, there was never a time when they were not reflected on and debated, sometimes contentiously, alongside different ways of giving them practical, communal and social form.

Although some ways of perceiving and thinking about these areas have clearly dominated others throughout Christian history, there was never a period or epoch of unquestioned stability and permanence that in later times could be unequivocally invoked as 'classical', 'orthodox' or 'traditional' without further critical

reflection. Changes in churches' practical and reflective engagement with topics of sexuality and gender, married life and family, are not new. They have accompanied the Christian church throughout its entire history, in these and in many other fields.

Christians and churches continue to wrestle with these domains of human and Christian life, in critical reflection as well as in practical life in congregations and communities, in light of Scripture, traditions of Christian faith and life, and human experience. And today they do so out of concern for questions of particular relevance on ecclesial, societal and cultural agendas.

Questions about gender, such as relations of (in)equality and (in)justice, and accessible positions and benefits for men and women, have been on the agenda for decades and still are. More recently, the increased visibility and awareness of transgender and intersex conditions have also compelled churches to reflect on the understanding of gender itself, whether gender is a binary category according to which all human beings can be classified as either man or woman, or whether there is a third gender, whether gender is fluid, or is best understood as a continuum. Yet here again, we should be careful not to exaggerate the novelty of the question. Historical analyses have argued that the idea of two genders is actually a fairly modern idea in Western and Christian culture and thinking, and that prior to the 18th century people thought that there was one, male gender, and that women were simply imperfect of inadequate versions of that one gender.[1] Likewise, portrayals in medieval Christian art are known to depict key male figures, such as the disciples and even Christ, in ways that combine and blend

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[1] Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1990).

features of male and female gender.[2] This is not to preempt the following analyses and reflections or jump to conclusions, but merely to suggest that assumptions about 'this' always being the case in Christian thought about gender, sexuality and marriage should not be made too quickly.

The understanding of gender is also intertwined with an understanding of topics pertaining to sexuality, marriage and family. In past decades, churches' engagements have focused in particular on the assumption that there are two genders for the understanding and evaluation of sexual orientation and sexual relations, and therefore, of course, also for marriage and family. What, if anything, would dividing human bodies into two sexes, male and female, suggest or imply regarding morally approved and justified forms of sexual relations? That only sexual relations, and thus marriage and founding families, between persons of opposite sexes could be morally approved as fully participating in divine purposes for human life? Or that relations between persons of the same sex could also exhibit the defining qualities for moral approval and participation in God's purposes for human life? These questions are still very much on church agendas, within the CPCE as well. In addition, changing perceptions of gender, suggesting that the division into two biologically distinct categories of human bodies is not a matter of course, are untying links between genders, on the one hand, and reflections on sexuality and sexual relations, including marriage and family, on the other. The question is no longer just about people of same sex forming sexual relationships, partnerships and families – it is also about the understanding of gender itself, and its implications for the forming of intimate partnerships and families.

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[2] Gerard Loughlin, "Introduction: The End of Sex", in Gerard Loughlin (ed.), *Queer Theology. Rethinking the Western Body*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 2–3.

# Mandate: scientific theories, theological reflections, disagreement and church communion

At its 2018 General Assembly in Basel, the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe therefore, among many other things, resolved to launch a study process on "sexuality and gender", as well as on "ethical differences and church communion".[3] The background for this decision, in addition to the obvious relevance of subjects of gender and sexuality as explained above, must be found in CPCE's understanding of church communion, its objectives and commitments. Based on a common understanding of the gospel as required for church communion, and shared formulations on the Lord's Supper, Christology and predestination, CPCE churches have found sufficient common ground for communion.[4] Committing themselves to further deepening and examining this common understanding of the gospel, they also see themselves as charged with studying doctrinal differences which remain within and between them, but are not grounds for division, including reference "to newly emerging problems relating to witness and service, order and practices."[5] CPCE's 2018 General Assembly in Basel reaffirmed this commitment, defining "Protestant churches serve society" as

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[3] CPCE 2018 General Assembly Final Report: 3 resolutions on fields of work from 2019 onwards; 3.2. social ethics: "How can Protestant ethics deal with issues of marriage, family and gender? What theological statements can be made on marriage and family and on sexual ethics in general – including the questions that arise with the themes of intersexuality, transsexuality and the queer movement? And how should the CPCE deal with existing dissent on these issues? (3.2.4).
[4] Leuenberg Agreement, 6-28.
[5] Leuenberg Agreement, 38-39.

one of three aims exemplifying the overall mission of "being church together".

The CPCE Council followed up on the General Assembly's directions by opting for a study process on the subject of sexuality and gender, and using that as a case study to reflect, at the same time, on the issue of ethical differences and church communion. A preliminary group was tasked with drafting a plan for the thematic framework, working methods and timescale.[6]

Based on these preliminary discussions, the Council envisaged a study guide that

- defined key terms in the field, and provided an overview of core theories and political/cultural movements in recent years;
- demonstrated the extent to which this has, or might, become theologically or practically relevant to CPCE members churches, presenting theologically founded arguments;
- described three or four models from CPCE's member churches, with regard to how they handle differing standpoints on sexual ethics and gender issues in ways that allow for continued church communion, without sweeping conflicts under the carpet.

Central to the mandate for the study process was to provide information about the main scientific theories on the formation and discussions of understandings of gender and sexuality in contemporary European culture and society; to analyse how they address and are addressed by theological arguments and reflections; and to consider how theological and ethical differences, on the one hand, and being in church communion, on the other, relate to each other.[7]

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[6] CPCE Council, February 2019, Vienna, minutes, 8.3.3.
[7] CPCE Council, February 2019, Vienna, 7d.

The study, in accordance with its mandate, has concentrated on scientific theories and their interrelations with theological reflections, and has not gone into the specifics of practical, pastoral and liturgical matters. This does not imply that the study is of purely academic interest, without any bearings on practical church life. Quite the contrary, theories from other disciplines and theological reflections aim to provide better and more informed understanding of such matters, as will be elaborated more carefully below (2.2 and 2.3). They are therefore not only useful but also a necessary part of CPCE churches' engagement with such topics, in terms of pastoral, practical and liturgical life in the congregations.

With so comprehensive a mandate, it has been necessary to make selections with regard to theories, theological positions and hands-on issues. Our hope is that the guide may provide general resources equipping readers to also engage with questions that have been left out. Among the questions that have been omitted, although certainly relevant, are topics like sex work, pornography and online sex, as well as polyamorous relations, BDSM sex, or fetishism. Other issues are briefly indicated, but could not be given the extensive treatment they deserve within the scope of this document.

# Mandate: descriptive-hermeneutical and critical-normative

This mandate entails a descriptive or hermeneutical task as well as a critical or normative one. On one hand, the study gives an account of scientific theories concerning gender and sexuality, as well as theological positions and engagements with these topics. Chapters 3.1-2 to 6.1-2 deal with theories from the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, which have all offered important insights and knowledge to the field of gender and sexuality, marriage and

family. We analyse the relationship between theology and other disciplines used in this study. With regard to theological positions, we believe that those included constitute a relevant range. In order to comply with this descriptive-hermeneutical part of the task, we have attached importance to presenting and accounting for the various theories and positions as fairly as possible, in ways that could be recognized and approved by those holding them.

In addition to this descriptive and hermeneutical assignment, the study also has a normative task, to offer critical reflections on theological arguments concerning gender and sexuality, marriage and family (3.3 – 6.3), in critical engagement with scientific theories.

## "Protestant corridor" as a normative approach

The study's normative ambition has not been to end up with one distinct, clear-cut position as *the* Protestant line, for example on same sex relations or gender transition. Rather, it has been to reflect on its topics in light of key Protestant commitments and convictions (explained in ch. 2), for example as laid down in the Leuenberg Agreement and key documents. In fact, reflecting on topics in relation to gender and sexuality in light of these key commitments does not necessarily lead into one, distinct position or response. In fact, several responses and views in these questions might be compatible with fundamental Protestant beliefs. The study has completed its normative task by reflecting on what theologically plausible and sound arguments regarding gender and sexuality there might be in light of these key Protestant commitments and convictions, rather than trying to pick out one specific response as *the* most persuasive. This is not to say that nothing else than key commitments like justification by faith or *sola scriptura* matters to

Protestant reflection on human life, morals and society. But it is to say that these fundamental commitments and convictions should guide and inform such reflection, a process which might warrant more than one response.

By analogy with the CPCE study document on reproductive medicine, *Before I formed you in the womb…*, this approach is called the 'Protestant corridor'.[8]

"Corridor" is here meant as a metaphor, and like all metaphors it aids understanding but also has some limitations and should thus not be pushed too far. The metaphor of 'corridor' is meant to suggest the following points: First, that not only one, but more responses might be justified in light of basic Protestant convictions, and yet the range of warranted responses is clearly not unlimited or a matter of 'anything goes'. Key Protestant commitments and principles, as for example described in section 2 "Theological Orientations", define the corridor's outer boundaries, and responses which fundamentally conflict with those convictions fall outside it. Second, a corridor fulfils its function by its directionality, by leading from one part of a building to another, and holding people to that direction. This should emphatically *not* be understood as though churches are universally expected to move towards and eventually reach the same standpoints. Rather, the "Protestant corridor" indicates a direction towards continuing and mutual exploration of basic Protestant commitments, towards a deeper and renewed understanding of these commitments and their implications in actual situations.

The metaphor also has its weaknesses, however, and should not be taken too far. Boundaries do not always take the form of an

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[8] Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, *'Before I formed you in the womb...'* *A Guide to the Ethics of Reproductive Medicine from the Council of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)*, 2017, 22.

impenetrable wall which clearly separates between inside and outside. And whereas the metaphor might indicate that outside or inside is more important than closeness or distance to the centre of a pathway or a centre of gravity, that is not what is implied by the notion of Protestant corridor. The reader will see that the study at some points quite clearly, at others more tentatively, suggests how positions might fall outside the corridor.

These normative reflections, aiming to identify warranted positions on the questions discussed from a Protestant perspective, is undertaken in the sections 'Theological reflection' (3.3; 4.3; 5.3; 6.3).

# Survey

As part of the study, the group considered it useful to have information concerning CPCE churches' action to prevent, handle and follow up on cases regarding sexual abuse and misconduct, as well as liturgical practices related to gender and marriage.

To that end, we prepared a questionnaire[9] consisting of 12 fact-related questions with predefined response alternatives and some additional open-text boxes; six questions concerned measures related to sexual abuse and misconduct, and six were about liturgical practices in the domain of gender and marriage. The questions were adapted and filtered for members consisting of more churches in one or more countries.

The survey was distributed in a letter to all CPCE members in February 2022, as a link to a web-based questionnaire. Reminders were sent out in May and June 2022. Some members who had not yet responded were contacted by phone in August–September 2022. In total, we received 53 responses. CPCE has 94 members, 9 of

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[9] See appendix.

which have not in any way been in contact with the CPCE office for the past three years,[10] and appear not to be active. When these are subtracted, the response rate is 62 percent. Comparing the total number of members with respondents with regard to region shows that German members are overrepresented, whereas members from the Northwest (Nordic countries, British Isles and Netherlands) and especially Southeast (Slovenia, Balkans, Romania, Greece) are underrepresented. Other regions (Southwest, Central, East) are largely represented according to their share.

# Structure of the study

The study is structured in three sections:

In Section I, the Introduction presents its motivation, task, and mandate, with chapter 1 outlining the historical, cultural, and societal background and context. Chapter 2 explains the overall theological orientations of the study.

In Section II, chapters 3 to 6 each engage with the main topics of the mandate: gender, sexuality, marriage and family. In accordance with the mandate and structured along the same outline, they include parts that are primarily descriptive and parts that are mainly critical or normative. 3.1, 4.1, 5.1 and 6.1 analyse relevant scientific theories regarding gender, sexuality, marriage and family, whereas 3.2, 4.2, 5.2 and 6.2 present important positions in historical and especially contemporary theological engagement with these four topics. These subchapters aim to present positions as fairly as possible, rather than passing critical judgement on them. The third subchapters 3.3, 4.3, 5.3 and 6.3, labelled "theological reflections", take up the

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[10] Information in an email from Oliver Engelhardt, CPCE Officer for Church Relations, 24.10.22.

critical-normative task by bringing insights and positions from the scientific theories and theological positions into critical and dialogical reflection with the theological orientations of chapter 2. As stated above, the aim is not to reach and identify one correct and authoritative answer, but to develop sound theological arguments and positions that could constitute a 'Protestant corridor'.

Section III addresses selected topics arising at the intersection between church life and gender and sexuality. Chapter 7 engages with problematic and conflictual dimensions of the topics, addressing sexual abuse and misconduct within the context of churches and congregations. Chapter 8, in accordance with the specific mandate, presents four cases from CPCE member churches, using this as a steppingstone to a more general reflection regarding the interrelation between church communion and disagreement in questions concerning gender and sexuality, marriage and family.

Towards the end of chapters 3 to 8 we have inserted a few study questions. These questions could be used for discussion in groups or for individual reflection. Needless to say, it is fully possible to read or concentrate on those chapters that are of particular relevance or interest. We do, however, recommend looking through Section I, in order to understand the basic approach of the study guide.

# Study group and working process

The members of the study group were appointed by the Council of the CPCE. Unless otherwise noted below, they participated from April 2019 to September 2023, when the final version of the study guide was submitted to the Council for approval and release.

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**Michał Koktysz**, theology, pastor/lecturer, OT/Biblical Hebrew, Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw, Poland. Evangelical Reformed Church in Poland (April 2019 – February 2023).

**Neil Messer**, theology and ethics, professor, University of Winchester, United Kingdom. United Reformed Church.

**Paola Schellenbaum**, psychology/anthropology, PhD, Italy. Waldensian Church in Italy.

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**Tamas Kodacsy,** theology, research fellow; pastor, Reformed Church of Hungary (October 2019 – September 2021).

A preliminary version of the study guide was submitted to the CPCE Council in September 2022 and discussed there, also by the CPCE Young Theologians group. A modified version was then submitted for a consultation in Dresden with representatives from CPCE member churches in February 2023. The rich discussions at the consultation resulted in a number of comments and suggestions for modifications. The study group, as far as possible within its resources, incorporated these into the final version of the study guide.

# 1  Context and background

Churches and their theologies not only encounter and engage with questions of gender and sexuality, marriage and family in light of their long and varied histories and traditions. They do so within, and entwined with, broader contemporary contexts of society and culture, contexts where gender and sexuality are understood and formed in specific ways. This chapter briefly outlines some of those ways, relevant as background and conditions of churches' encounter and involvement with these topics in a contemporary European setting.

## 1.1 Gender: pervading the everyday

Our basic experience with and knowledge of gender and sexuality, marriage, and family, does not come from academic theories, church debates or theological reflection. Rather, we derive it from immediate and embodied experience in our everyday lives, as individual persons and together with others. We are all born as someone's child, at birth defined as their son or daughter, boy or girl, or child with intersex traits. At least one man and one woman will have been involved in our coming into existence, in the sense that we are all the result of two gametes produced by a male and female body, regardless of whether these bodies are also there at our birth, and regardless of whether and how they remain in our lives when we grow up. Perhaps we are someone's sibling, someone we think of as a brother or sister, or to whom we are ourselves a sister or brother. Some are the life-partner of someone, although an increasing number live as singles. And some become parents, biologically and/or socially, forced to think about how – one way or

the other – that involves male and female human bodies. Whichever of these constellations are ours, they are places where we perceive ourselves in relation to others, but also as different from them. Gender is one of the dimensions according to which we understand both these relations and differences.

To some – perhaps even many – these experiences of themselves in relation to and different from others according to gender, are relatively painless and straightforward. From early childhood, into adolescence and adulthood, they are at ease with regard to integrating their sense of self with expectations they experience into their surroundings, concerning, for example, what to wear, how to play, comport themselves, who to fall in love with and be with, or what to be called. To others, integrating their sense of self, with experience of their body, or social and cultural conventions and expectations, is more of a struggle and potentially a source of unease, perhaps even inner conflict and tension. Some might experience such inner tensions and conflicts for a while, yet see them eventually abate or cease as they grow older. Others sense continuing and persistent incongruity between body, sense of self, and perhaps entrenched and internalized social norms and expectations. Some find ways to an integrated sense of self fairly easily. For others, arriving at a sense of feeling at home in the world and their body and life, in relation to and different from others, is associated with considerable and lasting confusion, pain and shame.

All these experiences exist in the midst of our churches and societies. Our churches and congregations, societies and local communities, hold a key to what it will be like to live in and with them.

How gender pervades our relations with ourselves and reality not only shows in our immediate, everyday experiences, but also in the language we use to articulate and structure that reality. A male-

female continuum is embedded in languages and their classification systems. German, Romance and Slavic languages, for example, have grammatical genders (masculine/feminine/neuter). Other languages, such as English, only have pronominal genders, whereas yet others lack such forms but have various linguistic resources to mark gender distinctions. Languages thus display and entrench structures of gender and gender differences in society and culture in different ways. Due to 'leakage' between linguistic gender categories and socio-cultural constructions of gender, they are also ways in which gender asymmetries and power structures live on and become operative.[11]

'Inclusive language', using inclusive or gender-neutral concepts for professional roles, rather than feminized/masculinized concepts, represents one attempt at interrupting perpetuations of social biases, gender asymmetries and potential injustices through language.

Christian faith and theological reflection are also familiar with how language is able to project patterns of gender asymmetry and power. Theological and ecclesial reflections have addressed the inherent gender structures in doctrinal and liturgical language, not at least with regard to language, metaphors and pronouns used about God. Gender is thus also a matter of significance to our relation to, understanding of, and speaking about God. Not because God is gendered, as God is obviously beyond gendered categories, but because God – revealed and acting in history – can only be

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[11] European Association for Gender Research, Education and Documentation, Translating Gender, www.atgender.org. See Rosi Braidotti, "The Uses and Abuses of the Sex/Gender Distinction in European Feminist Practices" in Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti (eds), *Thinking Differently. A reader in Women's Studies* (London: Zed Books, 2002).

understood and talked about in human languages and metaphors that are gendered.[12]

## 1.2 Gender, sexuality and values

Practices and policies of gender and sexuality are often considered to be affected by broader patterns of cultural values and their changes.[13] A powerful narrative in today's Europe is that there is a steady development towards increased support for the values of liberal, individual autonomy, a development applauded by some and decried by others, and argued to be visible not least in the domains of gender and sexuality. Equal rights for women on the labour market, abortion rights, same-sex marriage, tolerance for diversity of gender and sexual identities, or LGBTQI+ anti-discrimination policies are only a few of the examples referred to in this context.

There is obviously some truth to this narrative, but it is also too simple. First, values associated with freedom and individualism are quite diverse. According to a well-known version of this master narrative, it makes sense to differentiate between values associated with authority and values linked to 'a good life'.[14] First, modern societies are characterized by decreasing support for structures of

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[12] Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology. Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 170–172.

[13] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular. Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2004), 247. Also Morten Frederiksen, "Stabilitet og forandring i danskernes værdier" [Stability and change in the Danes' values] in *Usikker modernitet. Danskernes værdier fra 1981 til 2017* [Uncertain Modernity. Values of the Danes from 1981 to 2017] (København: Hans Reitzels Forlag, 2019), 14.

[14] Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy. The Human Development Sequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2005), 49.

authority associated with tradition, and increased support for structures of authority associated with rationality. That is, there is less support for the authority of religious institutions, stable gender roles, local community or the family, and more support for reason, equality and autonomy. Second, economic growth and material security allow people to become less concerned with survival, job and income security, stability and safety, and to become more concerned with ideals such as self-realization, authenticity, expressiveness, identity and tolerance. [15] These two patterns of value changes have somewhat different implications concerning gender and sexuality. Along the first pattern, gender and sexuality are emancipated from the authority structures of religion, traditional communities and gender roles. Along the second, they become subject to ideals such as self-realization, expressiveness and fulfilment of identity. The two are obviously connected, but not overlapping, which is also why it is possible for some to support equal rights for men and women, yet still be hesitant or critical about gender diversity and a broadened spectrum of gender identities.

Yet this picture needs further nuancing and modification. First, even though tradition-based collective structures have lost support as regulators of gender and sexuality, the authority of supra-individual structures as such has not decreased. Rather, it has taken on new forms, such as a multitude of bureaucratic, rational institutions that regulate and govern human life. [16] Whereas religion and family structures might no longer be powerful authorities of human sexuality or gender, health care system, education and schools, legislation and public administration are. The modern, autonomous individual, including their gender and sexuality, is by no means free and unregulated territory. They are regulated by formal rules and

[15] Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy*, 49–56.
[16] Frederiksen, "Stabilitet og forandring", 18–19.

directives but perhaps especially by re-politicized topics, whereby certain values or ideals are promoted through school systems, health care or social services to work from within the autonomous individual.[17] Schools, health care clinics, and social service centres teach about and advise on gender identity, sexualities, and family patterns. How and to what extent different countries and societies do this obviously varies a great deal. But the important point is that these are by no means domains just in the hands of autonomous individuals.

A second modification is also happening, namely that values do not change in one direction only. There are also indications of a reversal away from values of autonomy and self-expression, and towards values of tradition as well as survival.[18] People and groups whose identity and sense of worth and dignity are connected with ways of life based on traditional values of church, community, family and perhaps nation, might feel alienated, devalued and excluded when societal and cultural sentiments pull in the direction of expressiveness, identity issues, and creativity. This might also be associated with a sense of economic inequality and injustice, growing insecurity for those employed in traditional industries, and perhaps a sense of losing out to a more privileged, urban elite.[19]

With regard to our topic, gender and sexuality, marriage and family, this modifies and nuances the picture of a one-directional, linear development towards values of agency, expressiveness, diversity of identities, pluralism and authenticity. In Europe there are also tendencies towards increased scepticism about what is perceived as

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[17] Frederiksen, "Stabilitet og forandring", 19–20.
[18] Robert Inglehart and Pippa Norris, *Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-nots and Cultural Backlash*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2016). Referenced from Frederiksen, "Stabilitet og forandring", 20–21.
[19] Frederiksen, "Stabilitet og forandring", 22–23.

the erosion both of stable gender roles and identities, and of patterns and ideals of family life considered to be pillars of a valuable and sustainable form of community.

Churches, congregations and Christians within the CPCE are clearly not unaffected by, or immune to these broader societal and cultural value patterns.

# 1.3 Gender, sexuality, political movements and public debates

## 1.3.1 Feminism

Feminism is clearly absolutely central among political movements related to gender and sexuality. It is often seen to consist of three historical waves.

During the first wave, which took place roughly in the second half of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, one of the main issues was women's suffrage. In Europe, Finland was the first country to give women the vote (in 1906), while Switzerland was the last (in 1971). Other issues were women's access to employment (also after marriage), birth control, property rights and higher education.

In the 'story of feminism', there was then a lapse in feminist public presence until it arose again in the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Some of the issues that women tried to tackle were the same as during the first wave: equal pay and proper working conditions. New was a strong emphasis on women's bodies and autonomy. A classic from this period is *Our Bodies, Ourselves*,[20]

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[20] The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 1970.

which explicitly dealt with women's sexuality, sexual health and reproductive issues such as birth control and abortion, and which was translated into no less than 33 languages. The second wave adopted the first-wave strategy to struggle for equality in terms of legislation. It differed, however, by providing, often based on Marxist thought, a much more thorough analysis of the role of power in gender relations. A popular slogan from the second wave was "the personal is political", a phrase with which feminists indicated that the inequalities, harassments and abuse they experienced in their personal lives were the result of broader societal structures. It was during the second wave that feminism also moved to academia, starting up women's studies programmes. During this period, feminism became more diverse in its political goals when it was critiqued by lesbian women, working-class women and/or women of colour, for only attending to the needs of white, heterosexual and middle-class women. These women pointed out that, on top of sexism, they also faced the challenges of homophobia, poverty and/or racism.

This diversifying of feminism continued in the third wave which, starting in the 1990s, was characterized by the desire to include women's issues in the broadest sense of the word. This meant that besides gender, for instance, sexuality, race/ethnicity, class, religion and (dis)ability became grounds for activist alliances and academic analysis. An important key term is *intersectionality*: the critical approach that addresses how different dimensions of inequality relate to one another.[21] During the third wave, feminists also started to scrutinize gender identity itself. Rather than (merely) calling for women's equal rights, third-wave feminists ask: what is gender, what is femininity and masculinity, what is heterosexuality, in the

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[21] Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, *On intersectionality: Essential writings* (New York: The New Press, 2017).

first place? Relying heavily on the influential work of Judith Butler,[22] third wave feminists emphasize the constructed nature of gender identities, arguing that femininity and masculinity are behaviours that people learn by following a dominant script, rather than acting out an innate, biologically determined identity. This led to the emergence of queer theory and activism, a way of thinking and seeking for ways of social acting to uncover these scripts and resist their dominant norms.

These three waves do not constitute specific and distinct time slots. The history of feminism is more 'messy'. Some issues that were on the first-wave agenda are still relevant or recurrent today, such as whether birth control should be covered by health insurance, or legislation on abortion. And some issues prominent during the third wave were already addressed in some form during the first wave. Back in the mid-1880s, for instance, formerly enslaved Sojourner Truth criticized the women's movement for not seriously addressing matters of race, famously asking the question: "Ain't I a woman?" It would therefore perhaps be fairer to speak of generations of women and men grappling with gendered and other inequalities, working with the answers and insights provided by their predecessors, but also always needing to situate themselves in their own time and context, with its own challenges.

Current European public debates on gender issues show that while some of the achievements of the three waves of feminism are now taken for granted and are deeply ingrained in many Europeans' self-understanding, other achievements are still, or once again, subject to discussion and new questions have materialized.

Women's right to vote, participate in the political arena, obtain a degree in higher education or gain access to the labour market are

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[22] Judith Butler, 1991; 1999.

no longer topics for debate, although in many national contexts the precise arrangement of, for instance, parental leave are being discussed. However, the fact that some European countries have low levels of women's participation in employment, and/or a gender-segregated labour market, has fuelled discussions concerning gender quotas.

Religion frequently plays an important role in current debates related to gender, often involving regulation of bodies and embodiment. Recent debates on abortion are a case in point. In October 2020, the Polish constitutional court decided that abortions on the grounds of foetal malformations were now illegal, leaving as the only legal grounds for abortion cases when the mother's life is at risk or when the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest. This ruling led to many marches and protests throughout Poland. In the Netherlands, the issue of the obligatory 'reflection period' between the request for an abortion and its actual execution became a topic of debate in parliament early in 2021. And in Ireland, a referendum held in 2018 led to the repeal of legislation that prohibited all forms of abortion except for exceptional circumstances.

While in the case of abortion rights churches (most notably the Roman Catholic Church) play a prominent role, it should be noted that most current debates on religion and gender focus on Islam, rather than Christianity. The wearing of the face veil (hijab, niqab, burqa) by Muslim women has been a topic of discussion for decades now, and public debates will often flare up in national contexts when prohibitive legislation is proposed or introduced.

# 1.3.2 Sexual revolution and cultural debates over sexuality

When trying to understand (relatively) recent changes in the perception, regulation and practice of sexuality in European contexts, we cannot omit the sexual revolution. In the late 1960s many western European countries witnessed a brief, but intense, outburst of public displays of dissatisfaction with present sexual normativities. Social movements such as the feminist and gay liberation movement took to the streets, demanding visibility and equal rights. People started debating the ways in which sexuality was traditionally arranged and, in an attempt to distance themselves from traditional norms such as (heterosexual) marriage and the legal family, started experimenting with new forms of living and loving together, such as communes. In the introduction to their edited volume *Sexual Revolutions*, Gert Hekma and Alain Giami state that in the sexual revolution, "[s]exuality became politicised and society eroticised". [23] By this they mean that the increased visibility of activists and social movements was accompanied by the sexualization or eroticization of the public sphere. Nudity became more visible, both in the streets and in the media, while pornography became more widely available.

The sexual revolution implied a firm challenge to authority: that of the government, medical experts, clergy and educators. As a result, "[t]he holy triangle of marriage, reproduction and heterosexuality as foundations for sex was broken, and love and pleasure became its essential reference points"[24]. Two questions were heavily debated: that of birth control and abortion. The introduction of the

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[23] Gert Hekma and Alain Giami, "Sexual revolutions: An introduction" in *Sexual Revolutions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1-24.
[24] Hekma and Giami, 2014, 9.

contraceptive pill and legalization of abortion in many European countries made it possible for people, especially women, to shape their sexual lives differently, indeed outside of the 'holy trinity' of marriage, reproduction and heterosexuality.

In its extreme or eruptive forms, the sexual revolution was, as Hekma and Giami note, rather short-lived. It soon received criticism, not only from conservatives who wanted to defend traditional family norms, but also from progressives who raised concerns over some of its negative effects. The liberation of sexuality and pleasure had not necessarily been beneficial for all: women sometimes felt pressured into sexual intercourse under the pretence of 'not being prudish'. Freedom did not always go so well with safety. Some felt, moreover, that sex was increasingly becoming a commodity, and hence a form of capitalism and consumerism.

In Eastern Europe the developments were different. In some communist countries, there was an aura of taboo around sexuality. Language and words for sex, sexual organs and sexual orientations were either obscene or medical terms. There was no sexual education in schools and states used the phenomenon of sexual revolution for anti-Western propaganda. Pornography was illegal. In other countries, such as the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), the policies were different, and much more progressive regarding sexuality.

In the long run, however, the sexual revolution did contribute to significant legal changes which were, in various forms and at different paces, introduced in many European countries, including on divorce, prostitution, rape within marriage, partnership laws and same-sex marriage.

### 1.3.3 LGBTQI+ movement[25]

Although organized movements rarely existed before World War II, individuals advocated for the acceptance of homosexuality and the lifting of bans on sex between men as early as in the second half of the 19th century. At the same time, however, there was strong condemnation of homosexuality, partly also as a medical, pathological condition.[26]

After World War II, formal organizations began to emerge throughout European countries. At first, this was only more or less in secret, as sex between men was still prohibited in most countries. As Western countries gradually lifted bans on homosexuality, they became more visible, but sadly it was the AIDS epidemics in the early 1980s that really intensified mobilization.

Throughout 1990s, legal status for same-sex unions gradually became more widespread. There were increased efforts to secure LGBT rights[27] as human rights, including by international LGBT associations pursuing consultative status within the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, an effort which succeeded in 2016.

The first two decades of the 21st century have seen a double tendency. On one hand, trends from the 1990s have continued and

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[25] This section is largely based on Laura A. Belmonte, *The International LGBT Rights Movement: A History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

[26] Belmonte's book contains an interesting description of this pre-20th century history, among other things demonstrating how some of the national and religious cultures (such as Russian Orthodox Christianity) which today are explicitly and strongly anti-LGBT, in previous times were tacitly tolerant of sex between men, or at least did not actively condemn it.

[27] The history of the LGBTQI+ movement is a history of an expanding agenda, also reflected in the expanding acronym. This study generally talks about LGBTQI+ movement/identities etc., but in the following the shorter abbreviations are also used as they reflect the focus of the agenda at the time.

been further strengthened. Homosexuality has been decriminalized in ever more countries. Legislation for civil unions is more widespread, and more countries have introduced same-sex marriage. LGBTQI+ rights have been consistently pushed onto the human rights agenda, and some nations, such as the United States but also European countries, have at times included them on their foreign-policy agenda.

At the same time there have also been cases of state-organized or condoned persecution of LGBTQI+ people. In this climate, Pride events have become 'flashpoints' for a global LGBTQI+ community. These events have grown considerably since their inception two or three decades ago, and now increasingly comprise people of all identities, in solidarity with diversity of gender and sexuality. However, there are also criticisms. Some are concerned about risks of 'pink-washing', where commercial or political interests join primarily for their own, strategic agendas. Others are critical of what they see as commercialization and a predominantly Western, elitist, white male interpretation of LGBTQI+ identities and culture.

This period has also witnessed what started as advocating for tolerance, openness, equality and rights with regard to sexual orientation and sexuality directed towards one's own gender expanding into engagement for a more diverse understanding of gender, irrespective of sexual orientation. Transgender, intersex and queer have become much more visible on the agenda. Whereas, at least in many Western countries, the struggle for equality and recognition of gay, lesbian and bisexuals has come a long way, with at least formal equality and rights, the struggle for recognition of non-binary forms of gender has perhaps come less far. Here questions such as juridical gender transition, conditions for gender correctional treatment, but also everyday topics such as third-

gender language and pronouns, have become important topics for the LGBTQI+ movements.

# 1.4 Marriage and family: cultural and demographic changes[28]

Today's patterns of marriage and family in Europe and the West are likewise the result of well-known changes.

From a more long-term perspective, what might be defined as the underlying logic or objectives of marriage and the family have changed quite profoundly. Whereas affective bonds of love were, of course, not precluded in pre-modern forms of marriage and family, other factors of a political, economic and social nature were the dominant reasons for an alliance between two families in marriage.

At the turn of 19th century, companionate marriage started to replace arranged marriages, and orders of solidarity and emotions began to replace those of hierarchy, especially for women. Even until the 1940s and 1950s, and in some contexts still today, marriage was crucial as a step into adult social life, with unmarried women held in correspondingly low esteem as 'spinsters'. Even though affective, relational bonds had for some time been gaining a more prominent role as the motivation and reason for entering into marriage, it was not until socioeconomic conditions became more favourable, especially admitting women onto the labour market in larger numbers, that affective and relational bonds also become decisive for remaining in the marriage.[29] If mutual affection and commitment

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[28] Legislation concerning marriage is covered in chapter 5.
[29] Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Das ganz normale Chaos der Liebe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990); Monica Santoro, *Conoscere la famiglia e i suoi cambiamenti* [Getting to know the family and its changes] (Milan: Carocci, 2013).

eroded or withered away, partners – also women – were no longer compelled for economic and social reasons to continue in an unhappy marriage, at least not in the wealthier segments of the population.

Social realities in Eastern European countries were different. The roles of women in the workforce and to some extent in politics were very similar to those of men. Women had equality in jobs given to them in principle but not always in practice. Women/parents enjoyed social benefits, such as state-supported children's day-care and extended maternal leave. However, housework and domestic chores were considered women's work, which meant a great amount of stress for women, especially in times of economic hardship.

Key demographics illustrate this quite clearly. Over the last 60 years, what is called the crude marriage rate[30] in the EU has declined more than 50 percent, from 8.0 per 1000 persons in 1964, to 3.2 in 2020.[31] During the same period, the crude divorce rate has doubled, from 0.8 per 1000 persons in 1964, to 1.6 per 1000 in 2020.[32] There are clearly considerable varieties between different nations, but the

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[30] "The crude marriage rate is the ratio of the number of marriages during the year to the average population in that year. The value is expressed per 1000 persons." Eurostat, "Glossary: Marriage" in *Statistics Explained* https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Marriage (accessed 23.8.22).

[31] Eurostat, "Marriage and divorce statistics" in *Statistics Explained*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Marriage_and_divorce_statistics#Fewer_marriages.2C_fewer_divorces (accessed 23.8.22). Dataset includes all EU or EFTA member states in 2020. Although these do not comprise all countries of CPCE churches, the overall tendency still holds.

[32] "The crude divorce rate is the ratio of the number of divorces during the year to the average population in that year. The value is expressed per 1000 inhabitants." Eurostat, "Glossary: Divorce" in *Statistics Explained*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Divorce (accessed 23.8.22).

combined pattern of declining marriage rate and increasing divorce rate is the same everywhere. People are less likely to marry, and less likely to stay married if they do. Still, more than half the population (55 percent) in the EU over the age of 20 were married, with by far the highest proportion among those above 50 years of age (65 percent) and the lowest among the younger ones. 28 percent were single.[33]

Also, the mean age of first marriage has continuously increased 6 to 10 years from 1980 onwards, and above 30 for men in almost all European countries, and for women in many countries.[34]

Other forms of living together as a couple and as a family with children become more widespread. In 2011, 9 percent of the entire EU population above 20 years of age lived in consensual union, but more common for those between 20 and 29 years of age, of whom 15 percent lived together in consensual union.[35] And, finally, the proportion of births outside marriage has increased significantly since 2000. In 2012, 40 percent of births in the EU were outside marriage, an increase of 13 percentage points from 27 percent in 2000.[36] Yet, couples living together are more likely to marry in the

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[33] Louise Corselli-Nordblad, Andrea Geoffrey, "Archive: Marriage and Birth Statistics – New Ways of Living Together in the EU" in *Statistics Explained* https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Marriage_and_birth_statistics_-_new_ways_of_living_together_in_the_EU (accessed 24.8.22).

[34] Karin Winqvist, "Gender statistics – 25th CEIES Seminar. The Life of Women and Men in Europe – Introduction IV," *25th CEIES Seminar: Gender Statistics – Occupational Segregation: Extent, Causes and Consequences.* https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/4187653/5759477/KS-PB-04-001-EN.PDF.pdf/fbe01aeb-c7a4-4879-985b-c7d3c433d403?t=1414777066000 (accessed 24.8.22). Corselli-Nordblad, Geoffrey, "Archive: Marriage and Birth Statistics – New Ways of Living Together in the EU" in *Statistics Explained.*

[35] Corselli-Nordblad, Geoffrey, "Archive: Marriage and Birth Statistics – New Ways of Living Together in the EU" in *Statistics Explained.*

[36] Ibid.

event of having a child. An important point to notice is therefore how different forms of living together might occur during the life cycle.[37]

This can be boiled down to two points. First, marriage has long ceased to be a logical step associated with adult life, as a natural or expected part of it. Yet, more recently, marriage has also ceased to be the default form of living together. It is increasingly becoming one choice among others, when especially younger people live together as couple, also when they start a family and have children. And no longer being the default solution, it requires its own reasons or grounds. Choosing marriage over other forms calls for a specific motivation or justification. A question is therefore how churches and theologies of marriage are impacted by these social conditions and trends, and how they are able to provide this kind of positive motivation for people and couples who are exploring ways of sharing their lives in mutual love and commitment.

## 1.5 Conclusion

As churches and theologies are about to engage with questions concerning gender and sexuality, marriage and family, they need to recognize and take into account how these domains and phenomena of human life are also formed within a much larger context. Mindful of only covering a small part of the topic, this chapter has outlined how cultural and demographic trends, value patterns, and spheres of political and public movements are vital in showing how gender and sexuality are formed in present-day human and social life.

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[37] Monica Santoro, *Conoscere la famiglia e i suoi cambiamenti* [Getting to know the family and its changes], (Milano: Carocci, 2013).

# 2  Theological orientations

This chapter lays out key elements in the fundamental orientation of Protestant theologies as they engage with the topics of gender and sexuality, marriage and family. Three areas are important here: a basic theological understanding of the human being, of what human life is and of Scripture as the fundamental authoritative basis for Protestant theology and its relation to other sources, ethics and questions about the formation of Christian life in relationship. Yet, it is important to note that engaging with topics of gender and sexuality has also affected theological orientation. As we will show below, theological engagement with gender, for example in terms of feminist theologies, also has implications for all three areas of anthropology, hermeneutics and ethics. In this chapter, we will briefly indicate some of the implications theologies of gender might have on these orientations, and develop this further in the following chapters.

## 2.1 Theological anthropology

"What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Ps 8:4 [NRSV]) the Psalmist asked, thereby raising the fundamental question of anthropology. This is a question that cannot be fully answered by enumerating the comprehensive amount of knowledge accumulated by biology, psychology, philosophy and other life sciences, social sciences or humanities – however important and relevant it all is, also for theology. The particular nature of the "what are human beings?" question is also implied in this saying by the Psalmist, who embeds it in the recognition of God's providence towards humans.

For some, 'anthropology' primarily designates a scientific discipline that studies human practices and the meaning they have for human beings, communities and cultures. In a theological context, the notion of theological anthropology denotes a fundamental understanding or theory of what the human being is, an understanding which takes into account the implications of viewing human beings in relation to a transcendent reality and transcendent purposes.

Protestant theologies insist that human beings are fundamentally understood in light of their relationship to God. Rather than starting by defining human life in terms of its essence or nature, Protestant theologies start by seeing the human being as acted upon by God, as a recipient of God's care, and thus as someone called into relationship with God.[38] For example, the Augsburg Confession does not contain articles on the nature or essence of humankind per se, but numerous articles describe human existence in relation to God's ongoing story with the world and with human beings through creation, justification, sacraments, church and acts in the world. The Leuenberg Agreement reflects the same approach, by concentrating on how God acts upon human beings, and how we are called to respond.

This does clearly not make other perspectives superfluous. Sociological, biological, psychological, physiological, philosophical, historical, or other disciplines obviously provide insights about human life and human nature that are also indispensable to theology's understanding of human life and existence (see below on hermeneutics and ethics). This is very much the case when engaging with topics such as gender and sexuality, marriage and family, where disciplines in the humanities, social and natural sciences, have made

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[38] Martin Luther, *Disputatio de Homine*, 20–33. WA 39 I, 175–176.

key contributions to contemporary knowledge and understanding. Yet, at the same time as Protestant theology must relate to insights generated by these multidisciplinary approaches, it also argues that none of these insights can ultimately define the full truth about human life and existence. Humankind can never be reduced to inherent and innate qualities, to worldly capacities, talents, potentials, aspirations or relations. What ultimately defines human beings is not something they have or are by themselves, but their relation to God, who, as the Psalmist says, cares for them.

God's relation to humankind, as definitive of what the human beings are, is commonly explained in terms of a threefold distinction. First, as being created by God in God's image; second, as having become alienated in this relation to God; and third, as being called into a restored and transformed existence and relationship with God, through the redemptive and renewing acts of Christ's death and resurrection. However, here it is important to notice how theological engagements with gender would argue to understand and analyse these distinctions. Theological explanations of human beings as created in the image of God, as marked by sin, and as called into a transformed reality in Jesus Christ, would have to consider the theological significance of the gendered nature of human life and real experiences associated with it.

Being created by God is not only, or even primarily, explained in terms of the origin of human life, but rather in terms of its continuous dependence on receiving gifts of life from the hand of God. God's creative love operates continuously through the many sources of life in this world, be it in nature, culture or sociality. In few places is this expressed more vividly than in Luther's explanation of the first Article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism, where belief in God as creator is depicted in terms of God as the giver of

the sources of everyday life in its many material, bodily and relational dimensions.[39]

Being created in the image of God is, of course, taken to be distinctive of humankind, as stated in Genesis 1:27. There have been numerous accounts of what this means, also within Protestant theologies. Feminist/gender theologies have been especially concerned, with links between different understandings of image of God and women's positions and gender relations. They have also documented how women have been included or excluded from the status as image of God, and at what that entailed for social relations between men and women.[40]

Some positions [41] focus primarily on the texts in Genesis 1–2. Through exegetical analyses they arrive at a *functional* understanding, where being created in the image of God entails a mandate to represent God on earth as described in Genesis 1:28, stewarding and caring for the earth, procreating and filling the earth.[42] Other positions have understood the image of God as entailing a kind of *resemblance* between God and humankind. This resemblance could be given in faculties associated with personhood, such as reason or free will. Martin Luther, among others, understood it this way, but at the same time considered this status as having been lost through the Fall and mental faculties therefore also

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[39] Book of Concord, Small Catechism, The Creed, The First Article.
[40] A groundbreaking contribution in this regard, which analysed in detail how women were gradually included in the status of being created in image of God, and thereby also historicized the understanding of 'image of God' in Christian thought: Kari Elisabeth Børresen (ed.), *The Image of God. Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).
[41] The following categorization is taken from Claudia Welz, *Humanity in God's Image: An Interdisciplinary Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2016), 23–45.
[42] For example: Isolde Karle, „*Da ist nicht mehr Mann oder Frau…" Theologie jenseits der Geschlechterdifferenz* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 217–223.

corrupted.[43] However, they could also be given in form of relations, either with relations between the persons in the Trinity,[44] or with God's relations with creation as the model for human existence and human beings' relationality. This latter type comes close to the third approach, perhaps the most prominent in contemporary Protestant theology. According to this *relational* model, being created in the image of God means receiving life through God's loving and creative act, and thereby also being called into a responsive relation. This involves, first and foremost, responsiveness in terms of receiving in gratitude from God, in other words responding to God's loving actions in faith. And it entails caring responsibly for this gift, which means that rather than acquiring and holding on to it for themselves, human beings are free and called to pass on to others what they have received. Being image of God then constitutes being human in relatedness: in relation to God and in relation to other persons as well as to the rest of creation.[45] An essential aspect of this is that "we find our reality in what we give to and receive from others in human community".[46] Dependence and vulnerability, as well as giving and loving, thus characterize what it means for human beings to be created in the image of God.[47] Importantly, these appreciations of human life also imply acknowledging the particularity and freedom

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[43] Jane Dempsey, "The Image of God in Women as Seen by Luther and Calvin" in Kari Elisabeth Børresen (ed.), *The Image of God*, 236–266.

[44] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 176–189.

[45] Colin Gunton, "The Human Creation: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the Imago Dei" in Marc Cortez and Michael P. Jensen (eds), in *T&T Clark Reader in Theological Anthropology*, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 114.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.; Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Embodied, Relational, Desiring, Vulnerable – Reconsidering Imago Dei" *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 62 (3), 267–294.

of human beings, and the recognition of otherness together with relations.[48]

Some feminist theologies have been sceptical about understanding image of God as pertaining to relationality, arguing that this interpretation risks being used to delegitimize women's autonomy and independence in favour of their inferiority and subordination.[49]

Another key point is that this valuing of human beings as created in the image of God pertains holistically to body, mind and spirit, to their physical and spiritual dimension. The relationality, both in relation to God and in relation to others and reality, is located in the totality of the person, their bodily nature as well as mind and spirit.[50]

However, it is also obvious that human beings live in conflict with this status the image of God, that they neither receive in faith and gratitude the gifts of life from the hand of God, nor give them freely and lovingly to others. Christian theology labels this 'sin', that is, the condition of conflict with and alienation from the true basis and destiny of human existence. Christian theology has debated throughout its history whether this means that the status of being made in the image of God was irrevocably lost after the Fall, as Luther tended to argue, or whether it was corrupted and damaged, but not entirely lost or destroyed, as tends to be the dominant view in mainstream Protestant thought today.

What is generally affirmed, though, is that no part of human life, no human efforts or enterprises, are free from the wrongs and self-

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[48] Gunton, "The Human Creation", 115.

[49] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "*Imago Dei:* Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics" in Kari Elisabeth Børresen (ed.), *The Image of God,* 267– 291; Harriet A. Harris, "Should we say that personhood is relational?" in Marc Cortez and Michael P. Jensen (eds), *T&T Clark Reader in Theological Anthropology*, 330–341.

[50] Gunton, "The Human Creation", 115; Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Systematic Theology", [excerpt], in *T&T Clark Reader in Theological Anthropology*, 166–167.

centredness related to human sin. There is no aspect or dimension of human life that is unaffected by the self-centredness, distrust and lack of confidence at the core of human sinfulness. Therefore, perfection through human effort is unattainable. Human efforts and endeavours, even the most commendable and well-considered, will always also have to be seen as only "our best effort", principally open to further criticism and scrutiny as hidden selfishness and injustice, never good in an absolute sense. Yet, even in this state of being marked by sin, human beings still have the capacity – although never free from self-interest and self-centredness – to know and pursue what is right and good in a worldly sense, to serve the well-being of the neighbour and the common good of society. All this applies equally to the issues related to gender, sexuality, marriage and family.

The New Testament, especially the Pauline literature, takes a somewhat different approach to what "image of God" refers to, and what it means for human life. Here the emphasis is on Christ as the true image of God.[51] As the incarnation of God in human nature, Jesus Christ is the full realization of the relationship of immediacy, love and trust between humankind and God. Being the image of God also pertains to humankind in general, but in Paul it is described as something humankind is created to become, as a destiny awaiting us – and which is attained by being united with Christ and formed according to Christ as the true image.[52] Human beings are called to be formed according to Christ as the true image of God, envisaged as becoming one with Christ, dying and resurrecting with Christ, being clothed in Christ, and other similar expressions indicating the

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[51] 2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15.
[52] Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:23; Colossians 3:10.

transformation into a new reality. And fundamentally this happens in baptism as the basic transformative act.[53]

This transformation of a human being is, like creation, solely God's act, and not something that is in any way conditioned by innate human qualities or moral perfection. This is the absolute core of our Protestant tradition and its formulation of Christian faith, namely that a human being is justified by faith alone.[54]

As God the Holy Spirit acts upon human beings in preaching, baptism and the Lord's Supper, the justification and redemption won through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is imparted through faith. Overcoming the state of alienation through reconciliation and justification of human life cannot be brought forth or attained through human works, qualities or efforts – it can only be received from the hand of God. Human beings cannot overcome their own alienation and state of estrangement and conflict in human life; they receive it for the sake of Jesus Christ from God's hand through the Holy Spirit, as the sacraments are received and the Word of God is heard and believed.[55]

In sum, a pervasive characteristic of Protestant theology, through the three distinctions of being created, alienated/corrupted, redeemed, is that theologically speaking, human life is defined through its relations of belief or unbelief rather than through a self-contained inner essence.[56] This is also a decisive perspective for theological engagements with gender.

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[53] Colossians 2:12; Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3–5. Cf. Also Leuenberg Agreement, 14: "In baptism Jesus Christ receives irrevocably human beings fallen victim to sin and death into the fellowship of salvation, that they might become new creatures."
[54] Leuenberg Agreement, 10.
[55] The Augsburg Confession, IV; Leuenberg Agreement, 10.
[56] Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, "Liberating Aspects of Lutheran Theology" in Carl-Henric Grenholm and Göran Gunner (eds), *Lutheran Identity and Political Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick publ., 2014), 110–111.

# 2.2 Theological hermeneutics

## 2.2.1 The authority of Scripture

It is the consensus of all churches in the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe that Scripture is of fundamental importance for faith and life. The biblical texts are sacred writings of the church of Jesus Christ because and insofar as they bear witness to the gospel.[57] The uniquely authoritative role for the Bible in guiding and directing the faith of the Christian community is often expressed by describing Scripture as *norma normans* (the 'ruling rule'), whereas other sources such as confessions of faith are *norma normata* (the 'ruled rule').[58]

The normative significance of the biblical texts for ethical orientation is a matter of course for all Protestant churches today. But the questions of how Scripture should be interpreted, and what significance historical biblical studies and the humanities have for understanding biblical authority, have repeatedly proved contentious within and between many churches.

Even the common basis of the Leuenberg Agreement and the orientation towards Scripture expressed therein has never led to a desire to arrive at uniform positions in dealing with it and the churches' own confessional traditions in all areas of church order, ethical convictions and public witness. But the shared orientation towards Scripture and the struggle for further theological work form a framework that can be recognized as a common basis: "The

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[57] "According to Protestant understanding, the only source and guideline of faith is Scripture, because and inasmuch as it testifies to the gospel of Jesus Christ that underlies and arouses faith." CPCE, *Before I formed you*, 32.
[58] Michael Bünker (ed.), *Scripture – Confession – Church* (Leuenberg Documents 14), 71.

common understanding of the gospel on which the church fellowship is based must be further deepened, examined in the light of the witness of Scripture, and continually made relevant to a contemporary context."[59]

## 2.2.2 The doctrine of justification as an interpretative principle

The basis of church communion is the recognition that God's reconciling action justifies us. The fundamental significance of the doctrine of justification lies in the fact that it does not establish this common basis, but articulates it theologically. From this orientation towards the gospel follows the enduring significance of the distinction between law and gospel.[60]

Throughout their history, Protestant churches have emphasized the fundamental importance of the distinction between law and gospel. They are united by the conviction that this distinction is necessary for the sake of the clarity of the gospel. Only when the gospel of Jesus Christ is distinguished from all ethical demands can it be understood as an unconditional promise of God's love and mercy. The churches all emphasize that gospel and law should be neither mixed nor separated. In the biblical texts the testimony of God's love is always connected with the commandment to love as a fundamental orientation for life and action.[61]

Over time it became increasingly clear that the law should not be spoken of pejoratively. Whereas Israel's religion was often

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[59] Leuenberg Agreement, 38.
[60] Cf. in more detail Michael Bünker and Martin Friedrich (eds), *Law and Gospel. A study, also with reference to decision-making in ethical questions,* (Leuenberg Documents 10), (Frankfurt a.M.: Verlag Otto Lembeck, 2007).
[61] Ibid.

considered a legalistic "law-religion" when viewed through an anti-Judaic lens it is striking that the Hebrew Bible sees the law as a gift, an order of freedom that expresses God's gracious will. We believe in the one God as witnessed to in the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Awareness of the diversity of what law means in the biblical texts has also grown. The law is encountered in the prophetic tradition as grounds for accusation of the people of God. The law expresses God's fundamental demands on all human beings. These two aspects were particularly emphasized in Reformation theology in the distinction between law and gospel. However, the law should not be reduced to this demanding and accusatory function. For the law also proves to be wise instruction for a successful life in the covenant community with God. The law is an expression of an ethic of mercy that emphasizes the welfare of the poor and oppressed in a special way.

In biblical times, the law was already connected with the tradition of wisdom, which counts the orientation the law affords as part of faith. That orientation is towards that which all people understand to be good, when they carefully consider the world and possible experiences in the world. In this spirit, the Apostle Paul can also ascribe to all people participation in the knowledge of good and evil through the law in their hearts (Rom 2:15). Today it is no longer possible to assume a cross-cultural commonality of all values under natural law. In the modern age, human rights can be seen as an expression more of a moral universalism that is accessible from different cultural and religious traditions. Christian churches also see the orientation towards human rights today as an expression of a universalistic moral idea similar to the idea of natural law in earlier epochs.

The distinction between law and gospel is central to the doctrine of justification, which is the unifying and shared basis of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe. Just as the doctrine of justification expresses the common understanding of the gospel, it is also the decisive orientation for ethical questions. The love of God manifested in justification is at the same time "ground and standard for witness and service"[62] as a whole.

## 2.2.3 The historical character of Holy Scripture

The Reformation pointed the way to a historical interpretation of Scripture with its slogan *sola scriptura*. In the modern age, it proved vital to take the historical character of Scripture seriously. For ethical questions, the recognition of the historical connections of the biblical texts with their environment was of great consequence. Hence a thorough interpretation of the texts today cannot ignore the fact that many biblical statements share cultural presuppositions of their time that cannot be directly transferred to the present. In part, the assumptions of the living world back then (like slavery or monarchy) no longer exist in the same way today. In part, the concerns of the biblical texts have led to an increasing recognition of the freedom and equality of all people in the history of Christianity, such as the outlawing of slavery, the equal rights of men and women or the rejection of corporal punishment as a means of raising children. Biblical texts and statements are rooted in their historical context, and this context cannot be disregarded when the texts are read today. This might also include taking into consideration later

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[62] Mario Fischer and Martin Friedrich (eds.), *Church Communion. Principles and Perspectives* (Leuenberg Documents 16), 52.

historical developments, some of which might have been also inspired by biblical narratives and ideals.

Regarding church traditions, we must distinguish the "fundamental witness of the Reformation confessions from their historically conditioned thought forms".[63] This principle is relevant with regard to the biblical texts themselves. They cannot be read as timeless or ahistorical words and instructions from God. Instead, the specific situation and the formative cultural circumstances must always be taken into account.

It is from this perspective that the Bible remains an essential source for Christian ethical reflection and orientation. The principle of *sola scriptura* does not require that single individual statements are considered absolutely binding without regard to their historical context. Nor should allegedly unequivocal biblical statements be invoked as absolute decrees on ethical questions, without taking into account the differences between circumstances of life then and now.

## 2.2.4 Interpretation of Scripture in ecclesial communion

The Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe is based on the fact that they have found unity in the common confession of the gospel. This is compatible with a legitimate diversity of theological development of doctrine which does justice to the cultural challenges of the respective churches. This also applies to today's controversial questions of ethics. At the same time, such plurality cannot become limitless or arbitrary. Different insights must be brought into dialogue with each other. It must be shown that these

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[63] Leuenberg Agreement, 5.

differences do not call into question the common knowledge of the gospel as expressed in the Leuenberg Agreement and in the study document *The Church of Jesus Christ*.[64] And they must show how they can be understood as a careful interpretation of Scripture in the context of today's perception of the world.

Therefore, further theological work is needed, not to speak unanimously on all issues but at least to show that even different insights and positions do not call into question the common understanding of the gospel. For dogmatic and ethical questions, "the common understanding of the gospel […] must be further deepened, examined in the light of the witness of Holy Scripture".[65]

At the same time, there can be no claims to absoluteness for our own interpretation. We live in a diversity of churches, each of which is shaped by its specific confessional tradition. We are shaped by our cultural environment, which brings with it completely different self-evident truths. In this situation, no one stands above such embeddedness. No one can ultimately decide on the interpretation of biblical texts. We are tasked with a common search for knowledge in dialogue with one another, and as a learning community listening together to Scripture as it is given and opened to us through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## 2.3 Theological ethics

Scripture is where we find witness to the revelation of God in Christ, and where God speaks in the law and gospel, but Scripture does not

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[64] Michael Bünker and Martin Friedrich (eds), *The Church of Jesus Christ* (Leuenberg Documents 1), (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1995/2012).
[65] Leuenberg Agreement, art. 38.

provide definite solutions to all questions concerning human existence in this world.

Political, economic, social or cultural realities are not simply autonomous realities, shielded from the critical light of the gospel. But we cannot directly derive knowledge and understanding of this reality from our understanding of the gospel. This goes, as well, for the reality concerning gender and sexuality, marriage and family.

Ethical judgements are a mixture of both norms and ideals, and actual cases or situations. Ethical judgements must be norm-appropriate as well as situation-appropriate. Knowledge of the relevant norms and ideals and judgement of the situation at hand cannot be separated. Discernment involves careful recognition of the ethical question, combined with the perception of the situation of all those concerned, as well as an understanding of the consequences of actions for them. Taking notice of biblical norms such as justice and mercy can become the impetus to become aware of the injustice and mercilessness of living conditions in a contemporary situation. Only the mutual perception of norm and situation enables a thoughtful ethical judgement.

A framework for attempting this task can be found in the Methodist tradition, in which the sources of Christian faith and life are often summarized as *Scripture, tradition, reason* and *experience* – the 'Wesleyan quadrilateral', which has also been taken up and used widely in other Christian traditions.[66] In line with the Reformation *sola scriptura* position, tradition, reason and experience are not to be understood as independent sources of authority to be weighed against Scripture. Instead, they stand in what the American Methodist biblical scholar Richard Hays has called a 'hermeneutical

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[66] See Michael Bünker (ed.), *Scripture - Confession - Church* (Leuenberg Documents 14), 68-69, 11.

relation' to it. [67] In other words, in our theological and ethical reasoning, the witness of Scripture regarding the questions we are exploring is understood and interpreted with the aid of tradition, reason and experience.

In the remainder of this section, we will examine each of these four sources a little more closely, exploring a little further:

- What kind of contribution to our ethical discernment and action concerning sexuality and gender should we expect from each source?
- How should each be used – how can we best learn what it has to teach us?
- How should the insights from each be related to one another? For example, how might we deal with conflicts or tensions between the insights we gain from each?

## 2.3.1 Scripture

"God's speaking and actions in the history of his people Israel and the history of Jesus of Nazareth are made known through the witness of the biblical writings."[68] Christians often refer to Scripture as 'the word of God', yet this must be understood in a qualified sense. "*Jesus Christ* is the decisive Word of God"[69] – the Word who 'became flesh and lived among us' (Jn 1:14), who is in a unique sense God's self-communication to humanity. It is possible to speak of Scripture as the written word of God (or to speak of the word of God in Scripture) [70] in the sense that these written texts bear unique

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[67] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 296.
[68] *Scripture – Confession – Church*, 57.
[69] *Scripture – Confession – Church*, 56, emphasis added.
[70] Cf. United Reformed Church, *Basis of Union,* 12.

witness to the Word made flesh. We must also remember that "God's speaking through his Word is not only present in the church as a 'text' in the form of a written book. Through the Spirit in the preaching of the church God speaks to people in a living and actual way".[71]

The role of the biblical writings as witnesses to God's self-communication in Jesus Christ is what gives Scripture the uniquely authoritative status of *norma normans*, as described in 2.2.1. While that earlier discussion has outlined a Protestant view of the status and authority of Scripture, two further questions arise about its role as a source of moral authority for Protestant churches:

1) Does it teach us distinctive *content* about our moral obligations or moral living, which we could not discover simply by reasoned reflection on human experience? Or is the role of Scripture simply to provide us with a distinctive motivation and context for the moral norms which reason and experience can teach us? This question is discussed below under the heading 'Reason'.

2) In what forms does the ethical teaching of Scripture come, and how should Christians and churches respond to those different forms? For example, some biblical texts state specific rules (such as Jesus' prohibition of divorce, cited earlier). Some give more general principles (such as the command to love your neighbour as yourself: Mark 12:31 and parallels). Some texts take the form of narratives with moral significance, such as examples either to follow or to avoid (for instance, the stories of Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira: Acts 4:32–5:11). Others provide a worldview or vision telling us what kind of world it is that we live in; these texts may not give any specific moral instruction, but may provide an orientation or sense of

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[71] *Scripture – Confession – Church*, 56.

direction (so to say) that can guide us in making specific moral decisions.[72]

The CPCE text *Law and Gospel* argues that it is a mistake to look to the Bible for specific rules or commands because these should be understood as expressions of God's word in particular historical contexts, and our task is to discern God's word to us in our different historical context. To become too legalistically focused on specific biblical commands could obscure the essential message or heart of Scripture.[73] Others in our church traditions would disagree, arguing that biblical texts "should be granted authority (or not) in the mode in which they speak": [74] we should respond to commands as commands, principles as principles, and so forth. Having done so, we then have the 'synthetic task' of considering whether any consistent message about the issue we are considering emerges from the biblical texts, and the 'hermeneutical task' of discerning what that message means for us in our time and place.[75]

## 2.3.2 Tradition

Tradition can be understood as the accumulated wisdom of previous generations of Christians and churches, who have wrestled with (some of) these questions and biblical texts before us. If, as Hays recommends, tradition is not an independent source of authority as a counter-balance but 'stands in a hermeneutical relation' to Scripture,[76] then it is best understood as a record of how earlier

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[72] Hays, *Moral Vision*, 208-9.
[73] Michael Bünker and Martin Friedrich (eds), *Law and Gospel* (Leuenberg Documents 10).
[74] Hays, *Moral Vision*, 294.
[75] Hays, *Moral Vision*, 3-7.
[76] In contrast with a Roman Catholic view of the authority of Scripture and Tradition, e.g. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 81.

generations of Christian communities have heard God's word to them through the Scriptures in their own contexts. As we engage in the same task of discerning God's word to us in our context, we can learn and take inspiration from the ways they went about this task, without necessarily expecting that the word we hear will be identical to the word that they heard.

It is also necessary to read Christian tradition – including our own church traditions – critically, since all churches remain fallible and sinful human communities (*simul justus et peccator*). Particularly in relation to questions of gender and sexuality, we need to ask which voices dominate the church traditions we have inherited, and whose voices have been marginalized, excluded or silenced.

### 2.3.3 Reason

How much can we learn about "what the Lord requires of us" (cf. Micah 6:8) by the use of the reason that we have been given as rational creatures? To what extent do human finitude and sin limit the ability of our reason to discern what is right and good?

These questions are taken up in a particular way in the 'natural law' tradition, which is particularly associated with Roman Catholicism, but has historically also played a significant role in Protestant (especially Lutheran) traditions, and has attracted increasing Protestant interest in recent years.[77] In Romans 2:15, Paul states that God's law is 'written on the hearts' of human beings, even Gentiles who do not possess the Torah. Medieval Catholic thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas developed this idea into the theory of natural law: that humans as rational creatures are able to 'participate in' the eternal law by which God governs the universe,

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[77] *Law and Gospel*, 1.6, 2.2, 5.2.4, 11.2.2.

and so to discern good and evil.[78] In particular, Aquinas argued that we are able to discern the natural ends, goals or purposes appropriate to human life, and to draw moral conclusions from our knowledge of these ends.[79] The Reformers acknowledged the existence of a natural law imprinted on human hearts, and some affirmed its role in guiding action.[80] Others, however, were more sceptical about any natural human ability to discern good and evil, since our moral understanding is so seriously obscured by human sin.[81]

Some more recent voices in our traditions have taken a very positive view of natural law and the human ability to discern the good. Some Scandinavian theologians, for example, have maintained that natural law, as an equivalent to the Golden Rule and a principle of reciprocity, teaches the same as neighbourly love in the field of politics and law, according to Luther. The difference between Christian ethics and natural law is then not one of content, but of how the Christian person is willing to suffer, and thus forfeit some of his or her own rights – though not those of the neighbour who has suffered wrongs and injustices.[82] Another position resembling natural law thinking argues that certain given phenomena, such as trust and compassion, can be recognized as good in themselves prior to human will and acts, because they help to uphold and sustain the possibility of shared human life. These phenomena thus present

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[78] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 91, art. 2.

[79] *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, art. 2.

[80] Martin Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten* WA 18, 81; Philipp Melanchthon, *Loci Communes 1521*, Gütersloh: H.G. Pöhlmann, 1997. 100. Cf. also J. Daryl Charles. *Retrieving the Natural Law. A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 2008), 114.

[81] E.g. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.8.1.

[82] Svend Andersen, *Macht aus Liebe. Zur Rekonstruktion einer lutherischen politischen Ethik* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010) 59–65; 269–270.

human agents with a tacit demand to live up to their inherent goodness.[83]

Other Protestants, however, have emphasized and even deepened the Reformers' suspicion of natural law. Twentieth century figures such as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, saw the human attempt to know about good and evil independently of divine revelation as a form of the sin of pride.[84] Protestants have also been wary of the way in which natural law reasoning has sometimes been used to claim the status of eternal moral laws for contingent, time-bound social norms and structures.[85] While this could be a danger for many areas of ethical deliberation, it is perhaps especially so in questions of sexuality and gender: Christian churches have often been tempted to reify particular cultural norms about gender roles, for example, into timeless universal laws.

Aside from the natural law tradition, the heading of 'reason' raises the question of how other areas of human learning (such as the natural and social sciences) can and should contribute to Christian ethical reasoning. Again, this question assumes a particular importance in the ethics of sexuality and gender, where (for example) disciplines like genetics, neuroscience and psychology have much to say about sexual orientation, biological sex and gender identity, while forms of sexual relationship, family life and kinship

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[83] Knud E. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2020); Knud E. Løgstrup, *Norm og Spontanitet* (København: Gyldendal). In this account it is recognised that agents might very well fail to meet this ethical demand due to their self-interest and sinfulness, which demonstrates how natural law positions by no means necessarily neglect human sinfulness.

[84] *Before I Formed You in the Womb*, 3.3.1.; see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (DBWE3, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (DBWE6, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 299-338; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV.1 (English transl., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 448.

[85] *Law and Gospel*, 5.2.4; *Before I Formed You in the Womb*, 3.3.1.

have been extensively researched by sociologists and anthropologists.

Quite apart from the general debates already mentioned about the possibility of discerning good and evil by the use of human reason, it is important to be keenly aware of the kinds of questions that different academic disciplines are and are not equipped to answer. For example, the natural sciences typically limit themselves to questions of 'material' and 'efficient' causation (what the world is made of and how particular effects are caused). This means that they do not have the resources in themselves to answer questions of purpose or the good, in the way that theological ethicists would understand those terms. [86] For example, biologists might find evidence to suggest that particular patterns of sexual behaviour are part of the evolutionary inheritance of our species – and therefore, in that sense, 'natural'. But whether those forms of sexual behaviour should be considered *good* is a separate question, which biology is not equipped to answer. Also, just as natural law reasoning has sometimes been used to legitimize and reify certain cultural norms about gender roles and sexual relations, it must be remembered that these other academic disciplines have at times served similar purposes. For example, evolutionary biological reasoning has sometimes been shaped by patriarchal assumptions about the differences between men and women, and then used to justify those same assumptions.[87]

However, these cautionary notes by no means rule out the possibility that other academic disciplines can make important and

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[86] See, e.g., Neil Messer, *Respecting Life: Theology and Bioethics* (London: SCM Press, 2011), 172-4; Neil Messer, *Flourishing: Health, Disease, and Bioethics in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 47.

[87] See Neil Messer, "Contributions from Biology" in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2014), 70-72.

valuable contributions to theological ethics. It can be said that one central concern of Christian ethics is what it means to *flourish* as human creatures: what forms of embodied and social creaturely life are consistent with God's good purposes for human creatures in creation, reconciliation and redemption.[88] The biological and social sciences cannot, by definition, answer questions about God's good purposes, but they can tell us a good deal about what embodied and social human lives look like. Even a theologian as insistent on the primacy of revelation as Karl Barth allowed that other scholarly approaches to the study of the human being could offer 'interesting commentary on a text which must first be known and read for itself if the commentary is to be intelligible and useful'.[89]

## 2.3.4 Experience

Individual and communal experience has held a particular importance as a source of Christian faith and understanding alongside Scripture, tradition and reason in the Methodist tradition ever since John Wesley's experience of feeling his heart 'strangely warmed' led him to a new assurance of his salvation in Christ. In a different way, it has assumed an important role for feminist, liberation and other contextual theologies. For these theological approaches the experience of oppressed or marginalized people, and action in solidarity with those who are oppressed or marginalized, often form the starting point for theological reflection, as in Gustavo Gutiérrez' well-known definition of theology as "critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word".[90]

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[88] See Messer, *Flourishing,* ch. 4.
[89] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III.2 (English trans., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 122.
[90] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (revised ed., English transl., London: SCM Press, 1988), 11.

These experiences of oppression may be brought into dialogue with various forms of social-scientific analysis and with Scripture and Christian tradition by way of a 'hermeneutical circle' that leads to new practical responses to the starting experience. A similar method of theological reflection, called the 'pastoral cycle', is widely used as a way of connecting theology with lived experience in pastoral and practical theology.

As well as feminist and womanist theologies, many theologies of sexuality (including lesbian and gay theologies) operate in this kind of liberationist mode.[91] The attention paid to experience in these theologies highlights the need for a critical awareness of how any Christian's particular experience will shape their reading and interpretation of Scripture and their understanding of Christian faith. The perspectives that result from our different social locations play an important part in influencing how we read biblical texts and think theologically, so that a theology done from the perspective of the privileged may look very different from a 'theology from below'.

This is nowhere truer than in theological reflection on sexuality and gender, so it is particularly important to be critically aware of the ways in which our own experiences of sexuality and gender constitute a 'hermeneutical lens' through which we read and interpret our Scriptures and theological traditions. For this reason, it is also particularly important to pay careful attention to the experiences of those whose stories do not neatly fit the majority views, established traditions and prevailing assumptions of church or society concerning sexuality and gender.

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[91] Though for a critique of liberationist lesbian and gay theologies (including her own earlier work) by a noted theologian of sexuality, see Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), ch. 5.

## 2.3.5 Ethical ideals: freedom, responsibility, love, justice

Protestant ethical tradition as explicated in previous CPCE documents, have crystallized fundamental ethical ideals: freedom, responsibility, life and justice. These by no means overrule or trump the practical ethical and moral material in the Bible, but rather are attempts at trying to keep together the rich moral insights and traditions handed down in the biblical texts, and the ways it has been brought to bear on human and social life. Therefore, they will also have to be read and understood in close connection with biblical texts, and not as free-floating, abstract ideals and principles.

The basis of Christian ethics and moral life is God's love, manifest in his creative, redemptive and renewing acts. It starts with what is received from the loving hand of God, in continued creation and most of all in the life, the words and deeds of Jesus Christ, his death and his resurrection. Nowhere is this intrinsic link between receiving from the hand of God and being called into the world to serve, more clearly expressed than in Martin Luther's famous statement that "a Christian is an utterly free man, lord of all, subject to none; a Christian is an utterly dutiful man, servant of all, subject to all".[92]

No moral efforts or accomplishments, no innate capacities or qualities, no worldly authorities can be the basis or foundation of salvation and ultimate fulfilment of human life. It can only be received in faith from the hand of God, as the redemptive act in Jesus Christ. In that sense a Christian is a free person. But being set free in this way from the pursuit of their own salvation through moral accomplishments, Christians are at the same time set free to serve their neighbour, to apply and invest their moral effort and

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[92] Martin Luther, *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*, WA 7, 21.

commitment as a servant to their neighbour and to the world. In that sense, justification by faith at the same time sets the Christian free and binds the Christian in service.

This also underlines how Christian freedom is in fundamental ways different from modern, liberal notions and principles of autonomy and empowerment. That is not to say that these principles cannot in concrete situations be relevant and legitimate concerns also from the perspective of Christian ethics. But the more fundamental idea of Christian freedom is an entirely different one, one that inherently links together being free and being a servant.

This double determination of the Christian as free and as servant by virtue of justification by faith, places the Christian in a state of responsibility, called to respond to God in faith and gratitude, and to respond to the neighbour and to the world in practical service. Responsibility, responding, in relation to other people and the world, cannot be reduced to the modern, moral subject's attributive responsibility for their actions and omissions. It entails a wider meaning of recognising how our lives are intertwined with the lives of others and a larger world through multiple interconnections and webs, and there to seek out and find ways to respond to the needs of others and of the world in specific situations and at real places.

Responsibility, responding to the needs of others, must be done in consideration of justice, a central category to biblical ethics. Justice, like freedom and responsibility, also takes on a broader meaning in Christian ethics than contemporary moral thought's emphasis on distributive justice. Again, these might also be relevant considerations from the viewpoint of Christian ethics, but this is not where it starts. It starts by recognising how justice originates and is linked to God's righteousness, the justice that does not concentrate on equality and equity but focuses on righteousness for the most

disadvantaged and deprived in society. Justice is justice for the disenfranchised and marginalized, those for whom God is calling for justice, as the Old Testament prophets remind us.[93] Feminist and gender theologies have offered important corrections to contemporary moral-philosophical notions of justice, recalling the understanding of justice as a practical consideration for the least advantaged, rather than an abstract calculus of fair distributions, but also reminding us of Christian and theological ethics' blindness to entrenched gender-related dis-privileges.

Scripture describes as the greatest commandment love of God and love of neighbour, to "love your neighbour as yourself."[94] It sums up, as Paul says, all other commandments.[95] This is not to say that it makes other commandments and other moral and ethical material in Scripture superfluous. Other commandments, ethical ideals, narratives, virtues and principles are understood and interpreted in light of the commandment of neighbourly love, whereas the commandment of neighbourly love is given shape, content and richness in light of other biblical ethical material, too.

The commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself entails the real regard for the other and the other's wellbeing, it is caring for and being disposed towards the weal and woe of the other. Grounded in God's love in justification by faith in Christ and the new identity as united with Christ, this goes beyond mutuality and serving the other out of rational self-interest, as a love prepared to suffer and to relinquish one's own interests for the sake of the other. Here as well, though, feminist and gender ethics have important reminders as to how this could indeed not be used to legitimize oppression and deprivation. The commandment of love does

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[93] Amos 5; Micah 6.
[94] Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27.
[95] Romans 13:9.

certainly not legitimize continued exploitation and oppression, whether in forms of domestic abuse or political oppression, by requiring the less powerful to relinquish their interests in the name of neighbourly love. Quite the contrary, it calls on the more powerful to sacrifice their interests, powers, rights in hands-on regard for the disadvantaged persons.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter we have attempted to set out the basic theological orientation of this document in relation to three questions that are of central importance for the reflections that follow on questions of gender and sexuality. First, how do Protestant theological traditions understand what it is to be human? Second, how should Protestant churches and Christians read and interpret Scripture in relation to questions of gender and sexuality? Third, how should Protestants, committed to the authority of Scripture as *norma normans*, approach ethical questions concerned with gender and sexuality? The themes and approaches outlined in this chapter will all recur in various ways in the discussion of specific topics in the remainder of the document.

# Section II

# 3  Gender

Gender has been integral to the entire history of Christian churches and thought. Often as an explicit object of interest, for instance as questions about which spiritual functions or roles were appropriate for men and women. But always as an implicit perspective, in the sense that gender is always part of the real and situated place from where ecclesial practices and Christian thought is done. In today's context, gender continues to pose questions to churches and their theologies, yet also with new dimensions, making the structure and notion of gender itself a topic of critical reflection and scrutiny.

This chapter first sets out how different academic disciplines understand gender, gender differences and gender identities. Do biological sciences see human bodies and human nature as clearly divided into male and female, or is even human biology less categorically differentiated? And do human sciences, and their theoretical perspectives on gender as culturally and socially entrenched patterns, reject the significance of human bodily experiences for the understanding of gender?

Second, it presents a range of theological engagements with the topic of gender, beginning with important insights of feminist theologies, as contemporary theology's early consideration of gender; it then delineates three main trajectories in contemporary theology's attempts to grapple with gender as binary – or perhaps not as binary.

A third subchapter offers more critical and constructive reflections, explaining positions justified by Protestant theology's fundamental concerns.

# 3.1 Theories of gender

## 3.1.1 Gender, feminist theory and social constructivism

As feminists started to claim social and political equality in three consecutive waves (see 1.3) they also began to develop an academic form of feminism. During the second wave, starting roughly in the 1970s, feminist thought entered academia, and the first chairs in women's studies were introduced. This allowed for the development of more in-depth feminist theories, critiquing not just social injustice but also the foundations and production of knowledge as such. Feminist academics began to rethink more fundamentally the social, cultural and scientific arrangements that caused women's oppression in the first place. In this paragraph we briefly discuss the most important insights from and shifts in feminist theory, with a focus on its development of a social constructivist perspective on gender.

Often, the work of French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir is seen as an important starting point for the development of feminist theory. In her well-known book *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*), 1949, De Beauvoir stated that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". This statement became one of the founding slogans of the feminist movement and can still be found on badges, posters, stickers and T-shirts in feminist bookshops. The main argument behind the statement is that when human beings are born, they enter a world that is already arranged according to a binary perception of gender that thoroughly permeates all of society. Based on their biological characteristics as male or female, children will learn to behave according to the social expectations that are

projected upon them. People learn to meet these expectations so well that their gendered behaviour will then come across as natural, while in fact it is learned.

The idea of gender as essentially the result of socialization became very popular in feminist thought and research, and it still is. Using methods from sociology, psychology and behavioural science, feminist scholars started to investigate what Gayle Rubin called the sex/gender system: "the set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention". [96] Much of this research focused on the influence of people's direct environment, such as parents, siblings and teachers. From these studies it became clear that indeed, as De Beauvoir had argued, children are socialized into their gender identity as boys or girls from the moment they are born. Baby girls are dressed differently, touched differently and spoken to differently from baby boys.[97] Teachers tend to interpret (and respond to) the same behaviour differently depending on whether it is shown by a girl or a boy. Next to the influence of family, day-care and school, scholars investigated the more indirect influence of literature and TV. It was shown that in children's books girls are typically characterized as passive and dependent, while boys go out on

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[96] Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" in R. Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210, 165.

[97] David Reby, Florence Levréro, Erik Gustafsson, Nicolas Mathevon, "Sex Stereotypes Influence Adults' Perception of Babies' Cries" in *BMC psychology*, 4(1) (2016), 1-12.

adventures to explore.[98] Likewise television displayed stereotypical roles for girls and boys.[99]

It seems, then, that there is much truth to the statement that women become women, and men become men, by stepping into a world in which the pressure to conform to gender norms is substantial. Quite often, the consequences of not conforming were, and sometimes still are, considerable. The policing of gender conformity can take many forms. It can take the form of compliments and enthusiasm when children show the desired behaviours and display the expected interests. But it can also take the shape of more subtle disciplining practices, such as showing a bit less of parental enthusiasm for a son who has an interest in 'girly' things. And it can be much less subtle, such as public shaming, bullying or even violence, when gender norms are challenged. Many people are able to give examples of these moments of gender policing in their own childhoods. And while awareness of the restrictive nature of gender roles has grown since these first studies, and many parents and educators nowadays prefer a more 'gender-relaxed' approach, this is only partly within their control. They cannot fully regulate the world of television and the internet, where it is shown that gender 'sells'. Generally, though, the socialization approach holds that if gender roles are learned, they can also be unlearned.[100]

While socialization had been given much attention and is still an important focus of much gender research, the sex/gender distinction on which it is based has also received quite a bit of

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[98] Sharyl B. Peterson and Mary A. Lach, "Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books: Their prevalence and influence on cognitive and affective development" in *Gender and education*, *2*(2) (1990), 185-197.

[99] Susan D. Witt, "Review of Research: The Influence of Television on Children's Gender Role Socialization" in *Childhood Education*, 76(5) (2000), 322-324.

[100] Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1971).

criticism. As Mari Mikkola explains, the belief in biological, 'given' sex, on the one hand, and socialized, changeable gender, on the other, reveals a belief in 'gender realism'. Within their respective groups, men and women are believed to all share some characteristic experiences. In the case of women, this could be the experience of being oppressed, or objectified. Mikkola argues that there are two main arguments for rejecting gender realism: the particularity argument and the normativity argument.[101]

The particularity argument holds that gender cannot be singled out as a cause for oppression, and that it cannot be understood as separate from, for instance, race, class, religion or sexuality. Women of colour pointed to the fact that their experiences *as women of colour* were very different from the experiences of white women. Often, these different experiences had deep historical roots. Black, enslaved women were sexualized in ways very different from White, free women, a history of gendered racialization that still impacts perspectives on women of colour today.[102] Another example is lesbian women, who pointed to the fact that gender cannot be understood from sexuality, and that their position in society differed from that of heterosexual women.[103] In response to these kinds of critique, feminist theory, under the influence of Black feminist scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, developed the perspective of *intersectionality*.[104] From this perspective, gender is no longer seen as something that can be singled out and studied in isolation. Rather,

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[101] Mari Mikkola, "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender" in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2022 edition)* https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-gender/
[102] Angela Harris, "Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory" in D.K. Wiesberg (ed.), *Feminist Legal Theory Foundations* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 248-258.
[103] Adrienne C. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980)" in *Journal of Women's History* 15(3) (2003), 11-48.
[104] Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality*, 2017.

it is perceived as one of several axes of identity that define a person's position in society. And these axes all define *each* other. So a person is not women *and* heterosexual *and* upper class, as though these had nothing to do with each other: a person is woman in a heterosexual, upper-class kind of way. All these aspects of identity are part of ideological systems in which they are framed in specific ways, and need to be understood always in relation to each other. Intersectionality may well be argued to be a paradigm shift in feminist studies, and it has resulted in much more complex analyses of the workings of social injustice and exclusion, in which gender is not always necessarily the main analytical lens.

According to the normativity argument, if there is no single trait that all women share, or one experience that characterizes the lives of all women on the planet, then there can be no such thing as a shared identity called 'woman'. [105] As probably the most influential philosopher within the field of gender studies, Judith Butler, argued, proclaiming such a shared identity runs the risk of its inevitably becoming normative. Categories of identity "are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary". [106] Butler is critical of the idea, present sometimes only implicitly in feminist theory and activism, that there is a core truth to gender identity. She sees this 'core' most clearly reflected in the idea that biological sex is a given, while gender is a social construct. One of Butler's main interventions in gender studies has been her denial of a fixed biological sex that is then shaped into a gender. Instead, she argues that sex, too, is socially constructed. Her argument is not that people do not have bodies, or that these bodies do not have certain characteristics, but that these characteristics are just as much given

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[105] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1999).
[106] Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism" in *Praxis International 11* (1991), 150-165, cited in Mikkola, 2022.

meaning in a social context, through language, whether it be that of biology, medicine or physiology.

One of Butler's main arguments, and one that has become equally formative for gender studies, is that gender is the repetition of a certain script, and that people become so skilled at *performativity* (an important notion) that they make it *look like* they are just acting out a core, given gender identity. It is as though people are actors so skilled in the theatre play of gender that they make the audience forget that they are actors, and that the audience is merely watching a scripted play. Butler's understanding of gender comes close to that of De Beauvoir in the sense that both are interested in the formation, the social construction, of gender. However, while for De Beauvoir (and many scholars after her) there was at least some truth to sexual difference, in the sense that the body forms the 'raw material' that is socialized into a gender, for Butler, there is only the illusion of such a core identity and, in the end, gender is an empty category.

In 4.1.4 we briefly return to the work of Judith Butler in order to explain how it also relates to questions of sexuality. For now, it is important to reflect on how Butler's work forms a firm basis for a social constructivist perspective on gender. What is emphasized from this perspective is how gender is the product of complicated systems of meaning, that is, how it is embedded in the interplay of language, symbols, objects, behaviours, etc. In socialization theories, much attention is paid to the way in which gender behaviour is learned. From a social constructivist point of view, the focus is more on the level of language and symbols: gender as the product of meaning-giving practices. Rather than asking "how do girls become socialized into girls?" social constructivism would ask: which behaviours, objects, clothes and movements are considered girly or feminine in this specific context? And why? And how are these behaviours, objects, clothes and movements understood in different

contexts? Social constructivism, then, is concerned with the way in which gender (and race, class, ability etc.) is context-dependent. It argues that meanings attached to gender are relative, because they change over time and are different in different places. For instance, the idea that pink is a 'girly' colour and blue a 'boyish' colour is a distinction that came about in the US only in the 1950s.[107]

The next question is about *why* certain notions of gender become dominant, and others less or not at all. This question is essentially about power. Who has the power to decide what is feminine or masculine, and are there any counter-narratives? Which shifts have occurred regarding these ideas, and who has been driving these shifts? Social constructivism is interested in gender as an ideology, as a mechanism of social control. It asks: who benefits from these arrangements? To give an example: if women are expected to thrive in the private sphere, and men in the public sphere, this means that the political realm, where decisions are made, will remain a male-dominated domain. Another example: if women are supposedly performing better in the humanities, and men in the 'hard' sciences, then the hard sciences (which receive much more funding and generally also give more status) remain reserved for men.

Social constructivism raises questions about how people, as individuals, relate to larger systems of meaning-giving. Are people merely the 'plaything' of a gendered world? Can individuals influence their own behaviour and ideas? Feminist theory has been developing its own perspective on the notion of *agency* to deal with these questions. Agency is the ability to act in the world, to influence one's circumstances. Many feminist theorists would argue that agency is possible, and that gender ideologies can be influenced and changed even if people always have limited options in their given

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[107] Jo B. Paoletti, "Clothing and Gender in America: Children's Fashions, 1890–1920" in *Signs* 13 (1987), 136–143.

context. At the same time, it is impossible for people to completely withdraw from the influence of gender ideologies. Since society is so heavily permeated with gender, at so many different levels, and since the 'disciplining' of divergent behaviour can be severe, it is impossible to be completely indifferent or solitary in one's choices. However, resistance is possible, for instance via activism, demonstrations and policies.

At this moment it is good to pause for two critical remarks about social constructivist gender theory. The first is about the position of men and masculinity: where do they fit in? The second is about the place of the body and embodiment, especially from the perspectives and experience of transgender and intersex people.

First, while gender studies may seem to be mostly about women, from the 1980s onward men's studies developed, later transformed into masculinity studies. Central notions were, first, that men and masculinity often remain an unmarked category even in gender studies. What is considered male and masculine seems to remain the default, unless it is explicitly brought to the fore. Second, if gender is learned and constructed, it can be unlearned and deconstructed, also for those who are socialized as men.[108] A central notion in masculinity studies, theorized most in-depth by Raewyn Connell, is that of *hegemonic masculinity*.[109] This concept refers to the type of masculinity that is normative in a given context. It is not necessarily the masculinity of the majority – just the one that most men seem to aspire to. It is often constructed by a negative response to what it is *not*: feminine or gay. A second important concept is that of *toxic*

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[108] Todd W. Reeser, "Concepts of Masculinity and Masculinity Studies" in S. Horlacher (ed.), *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 11-38.

[109] Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

*masculinity*.[110] This concept refers to ideals of masculinity that emphasizes aspects such as physical strength, a lack of emotion, dominance, sex-drive and self-sufficiency to such an extent that it becomes harmful for the men aspiring to these ideals, as well as their surroundings. In later stages masculinity studies, like gender studies, became more intersectional in its approaches, including, for instance, questions about race, class and ability in its analyses of masculinity.

Second, social constructivism raises questions about the significance of the body, and this question has been brought to the table especially by trans and intersex theory and theology. Trans theorist Jay Prosser, for instance, is critical of how social constructivist approaches like queer theory (about which more in 4.1.4) relegate transgender experiences, especially that of transgender transition, to the realm of biological essentialism. Within some forms of social constructivism, the body has become suspect to the extent that it can no longer form any basis for the experience of gender. But a strong emphasis on social construction and 'performativity' does not do justice to the specificity of transgender (Prosser specifically use the term 'transsexual') experiences of the body and its relation to gender identity. For many people identifying as trans, the body does matter. Joy Ladin, a Jewish Orthodox scholar of literature identifying as a trans woman, in her autobiography relates how she has read, understood and appreciated the work of Judith Butler on performativity - and still feels that her male body was not a body she could live with or even survive in.[111] Likewise, for Jay Prosser, a gender transition is "the transformation of an unlivable shattered

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[110] Michael S. Kimmel, *The Politics of Manhood : Profeminist Men Respond to the Mythopoetic Men's Movement (and the Mythopoetic Leaders Answer* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).
[111] Joy Ladin, *Through the door of life. A Jewish Journey between Genders* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).

body into a livable whole".[112] Various trans theorists have argued for a renewed interest in the body and embodiment, arguing that this need not at all lead to new forms of essentialism. In a likewise manner Susannah Cornwall, writing from a theological perspective, has argued that intersex bodies are 'troubling bodies' in a double sense of the word: bodies that troubled people, that made them feel uncomfortable; and bodies that questioned ('troubled') established norms in society, church, and – indeed – theories of gender and sexuality.[113]

To conclude: the institutionalization of gender studies at the university level has resulted in a thorough reconceptualization of the thinking about sexual difference and gender. From Simone de Beauvoir and later scholars, it came to analyse gender as a process of socialization. After the intervention of scholars like Judith Butler, the focus shifted to (also) the study of gender as an ideology that is expressed via language, symbols, behaviours and objects. This formed the basis for a social constructivist perspective on gender, where questions are asked about the relation between gender and power: who may define gender norms, who benefits from them? Theories on agency help us think about ways in which individuals can relate to a world that is so heavily regulated by gender norms. People are not completely at the mercy of gender norms, but neither can they withdraw from them. Rather, it is important to focus on the specific context in which people operate and ask: within this context, which options do people have to negotiate a position for themselves? When asking questions about gender, it is important to realize that 'gender' is not equivalent to 'women'. Men and masculinity are equally important topics to study from a gender

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[112] Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: the Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia U. P., 1998), 12.
[113] Susannah Cornwall, *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).

studies perspective − as are trans and intersex theories, theologies and experiences which, among many other contributions, redirect attention to the body and embodiment.

# 3.1.2 Biological theories and perspectives

## 3.1.2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter described the strongly social constructionist approaches often found in feminist theory and gender studies. In a very different vein, the study of sex, gender and sexuality has also attracted the attention of scientists working in various biological disciplines. This chapter will survey biological approaches to the study of sex and gender, while the biology of sexuality and sexual behaviour will be discussed in the next chapter.

These biological studies offer very different perspectives on sex and gender from the social constructionist approaches discussed in the past section, and often there is tension between these perspectives. From a social constructivist perspective, some people are apprehensive that biology will re-instate a form of essentialism which feminist studies has worked so hard to critique. Yet it is of vital importance to include biological perspectives, and they need not compromise the work done by feminist theorists. For one, the supposed disagreements are often a matter of simply asking different questions, and though there may be some direct disagreements, there may also be some points of contact between biologists and social constructionists. Biologists typically refrain from normative evaluations; they seek to explain and theorize observed biological phenomena in terms of physical mechanisms and processes of cause and effect. However, each biological discipline has its own questions and methods of enquiry. It can be very refreshing, in debates that often very much focus on ethics and

morality, to have more knowledge of how things 'work'. Second, as will become clear from the chapters below, precisely a biological perspective can point to variations in natural life and by demonstrating the vast differences, question the common understanding to which Christian traditions also refer in their dealings with sex and gender. The disciplines offering the most significant insights into the biology of sex, gender and sexuality include evolution, genetics (also epigenetics), developmental biology, and neuroscience. We will now address these disciplines.

**Evolutionary biology** explains how the living species we see in the world today (including our own) have developed from earlier ancestors by a long, gradual process of descent with modification. Darwin's theory of natural selection remains at the heart of evolutionary biology over 150 years after it was first published. According to Darwin, those members of a population with the characteristics that best equip them to meet the various challenges posed by their environment will be the most likely to survive and reproduce, so these characteristics will tend to become more common and more pronounced in the population over many generations. In time, this process of variation and selection can result in major changes to the characteristics of a species, and even the emergence of completely new species.

**Genetics** is the study of biological inheritance: how characteristics are passed on from parents to offspring. It began in the nineteenth century with the mathematical study of patterns of inheritance. Then in the mid-twentieth century, the discovery that deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) was the biochemical medium of genetic inheritance opened the way to tremendous advances in understanding the molecular mechanisms of genetics. The information carried by genes is encoded in the sequence of sub-units, known as nucleotides, which are joined together to make up

DNA molecules. However, what is crucial for the biological effects of genes is the regulation of their activity. Intricate and complex processes control which genes are expressed (decoded to produce their biological effects), when and where, at every stage of the organism's development. Many different mechanisms regulate gene expression, including 'epigenetic' changes: that is, chemical changes to DNA molecules that do not alter the nucleotide sequence. In recent decades, the science of **epigenetics** has developed in order to study these changes and their roles in genetic regulation.

As well as physical characteristics, various aspects of human behaviour are thought to be influenced to some extent by genetic factors. However, identifying genetic contributions to behavioural traits is a challenging exercise. One challenge is that it can be difficult to disentangle genetic from environmental and social influences on behavioural traits. Another is that any complex behavioural trait will be the product of a large number of genes interacting with each other and the environment, so that identifying the effect of any one of those genes may be very difficult. Typically, studies of families and twins are carried out to estimate the 'heritability' of a behavioural trait (the extent of the genetic, as opposed to environmental, influence on it). Once a heritability estimate has been made, molecular genetic studies are performed to try and identify 'candidate genes,' i.e. genes that may contribute to the trait.

A related field to genetics is **developmental biology**, which seeks to elucidate the processes and mechanisms by which living organisms grow, develop and change throughout their life cycles. A particularly important focus is embryonic and foetal development, during which an individual grows and develops from a single fertilized egg into a highly structured and organized infant. Since development is regulated by the precisely-controlled activity of hundreds or thousands of genes interacting with one another, a major focus of

embryology and developmental biology is elucidating these genetic pathways and the molecular mechanisms by which different genes affect development.

Finally, there is **neuroscience**: the study of the structure and function of human and other brains. Neuroscientists use a range of techniques and approaches, including the anatomical study of brains after death. In recent decades neuroscience has been revolutionized by the development of techniques such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), which allow both the structure and the activity of living individuals' brains to be studied non-invasively.

Caution is necessary in interpreting scientific findings and claims about human phenomena as complex as sexuality and gender identity. In some fields, particularly evolution, theories may be quite speculative, and it can be challenging to find the kind of evidence that enables them to be tested rigorously. Neuroscientific studies of sexuality and gender face multiple technical and methodological challenges. Defining the questions to ask, and designing experiments to answer them, inevitably involve non-trivial assumptions about the phenomena being studied. It is technically difficult to carry out brain imaging studies and statistically analyse the data. Studies are often done with quite small numbers of participants, which can make it difficult to achieve statistically significant results, and study samples may be unrepresentative of the wider human population.[114] Even statistically significant findings may not correspond to very large effects in the real world. And it is often unclear what neuroscientific findings tell us about causation: for example, if gender incongruence (GI) is correlated with a difference in brain structure from the majority population, it may not be easy to determine whether that

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[114] For example, a disproportionate number of published studies in psychology and neuroscience have historically used 'WEIRD' participants: those from Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic societies.

structural difference is a cause of GI or a result of the psychosocial experience of living with GI.

## 3.1.2.2 The biology of sex

This chapter will briefly summarize some biological perspectives on the origins of sexual reproduction, sexual dimorphism and intersex.[115] Biological theories about sexual behaviour and sexuality will be discussed in the next chapter.

Biologically, sexual reproduction means reproduction that involves genetic recombination: offspring receive a mixture of genetic material from two parents, whereas in asexual reproduction offspring receive all their genetic material from one parent and are identical to that parent. One basic puzzle is why sex exists at all, since asexual reproduction is quicker and less costly in resources. Various hypotheses have been proposed: one is that sexual reproduction allows the repair of genetic damage resulting from natural environmental causes, which would otherwise accumulate until it became harmful to all the members of the population. Another is that it gives rise to genetic diversity in a population, which increases the chances that some members of that population will be equipped to face new challenges in their environment. Both these proposals have their problems and their critics, and some authors argue that a combination of different factors is needed to account for the origins and persistence of sex.

The evolution of sexual reproduction has led to differentiation between the sexes. In most animal species this begins at the level of genes and chromosomes (the complexes of DNA and protein molecules found in their cells, where most of their genetic

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[115] This section draws on Neil Messer, "Contributions from Biology" in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender* (2014), 69-87.

information is stored). Humans typically have 46 chromosomes (23 pairs), two of which are the sex chromosomes. Typically, females have two X chromosomes while males have one X and one Y, though less frequent karyotypes (combinations of chromosomes) such as XXX and XXY also sometimes occur. The gametes (sex cells which carry the genetic material from the two parents) are also sexually differentiated in most multicellular organisms. In humans and other animals, females produce eggs, which are larger and more nutrient-rich, while males produce sperm, which are smaller, capable of movement and produced in much larger numbers. These are generated by different gonads (sex organs): females have ovaries that produce egg cells, while males have testes that produce sperm. The two sexes also have different genitalia and secondary sexual characteristics (such as breasts and distribution of body hair). The existence of physical differences between the sexes is known as **sexual dimorphism**.

Developmentally, sex determination is regulated by complex interactions between many genes both before and after birth, with epigenetic changes playing a role in the regulation of these genes and their interactions. [116] Initially, the foetus develops undifferentiated gonads. If a Y chromosome is present, these then develop into testes; otherwise, under the influence of a different combination of genes, they become ovaries. If testes develop they produce two hormones: Müllerian inhibiting hormone (MIH) inhibits the formation of female genitalia, while testosterone gives rise to the formation of male genitalia and secondary sexual characteristics.

Mutations in genes involved in sexual development can result in a variety of intersex conditions, in which the gonads and/or internal and external genitalia do not develop in the typical way. For

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[116] Jacques Balthazart, "Sexual Partner Preference in Animals and Humans" in *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 115 (2020), 34-47, at 41-42.

example, some individuals might have gonads associated with the opposite sex (an individual with two X chromosomes might have testes) or might have both testicular and ovarian tissue. External genitalia may be ambiguous in form, neither typically male nor typically female. Other individuals have the gonads associated with one sex and external genitalia that appear to belong to the other: ovaries with predominantly male genitalia, or testes with predominantly female genitalia.[117]

Conditions that result in atypical sexual characteristics are often described in the medical literature as 'disorders of sexual development' (DSDs).[118] However, some authors object to the use of the evaluative term 'disorder,' arguing that intersex conditions should be seen as natural, although statistically unusual, human variations. Some argue that the existence of these conditions challenges the male-female binary, and the various kinds of intersex should be recognized as sexes in their own right. The biologist and feminist scholar Anne Fausto-Sterling, for example, famously argued some years ago that (at least) five sexes should be recognized.[119]

### 3.1.2.3 Sex and the brain

There are many aspects to sexual dimorphism in humans, and one that has interested researchers for several decades is the question of sex differences in the brain. It is widely held that there are sex differences in many aspects of brain morphology, connectivity between different brain regions, and function. (It should be emphasized that these are differences *on average*: for any of these

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[117] For a detailed account, see Selma Feldman Witchel, "Disorders of Sex Development" in *Best Practice & Research Clinical Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 48 (2018), 90-102.

[118] E.g. Feldman Witchel, "Disorders of Sex Development".

[119] Anne Fausto-Sterling, "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough", in *The Sciences* 33 (1993), 20-24.

values there will be big differences among individuals of either sex, not only between the sexes.) For example: overall brain volume tends to be higher in men than women, even allowing for differences in body size; the cortex (the outer layer of the brain associated with 'higher' mental functions) tends to be thicker in women; women tend to have greater connectivity between the two hemispheres of the brain, while men have greater connectivity within each hemisphere; particular structures beneath the cortex differ in size and in the numbers of receptors for male and female sex hormones. [120] These differences are often believed to underlie differences in behaviour, cognitive function and psychopathology, though the supposed links are not well understood.

Several decades ago, it was proposed that the default form of the brain is female, but males' brains are masculinized by the effects of testosterone during foetal development. However, the situation is now thought to be much more complex, with different aspects of brain structure and function being modified by various hormones, genetic, epigenetic and environmental factors throughout the life cycle.[121] Some authors, such as the neuroscientist Daphna Joel, are highly critical of the idea of 'male' and 'female' brains. According to Joel's 'mosaic' hypothesis, sex-related differences in the brain are caused by multiple different mechanisms and vary independently of one another. They do not lie along a single male-to-female continuum: any individual's brain is a 'mosaic' of more 'male' and more 'female' characteristics, and it is rare to find brains in which most of the sex-related differences are near one or other end of the

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[120] Baudewijntje P. C. Kreukels and Antonio Guillamon, "Neuroimaging Studies in People with Gender Incongruence" in *International Review of Psychiatry* 28(1) (2016), 120-128.
[121] Daphna Joel et al., "The Complex Relationships between Sex and the Brain" in *The Neuroscientist* 26(2) (2020), 156–169; Balthazart, "Sexual Partner Preference", 41-42.

scale.[122] However, the mosaic hypothesis has attracted criticism from some neuroscientists, who still advocate something closer to a binary view of sex differences in the brain.[123]

## 3.1.2.4 Biology and gender identity

The concept of gender identity, and the sex/gender distinction, were first formulated in the 1960s by the psychoanalyst Robert Stoller.[124] While this distinction was initially welcomed by second-wave feminists as a way to speak of gender roles as socially constructed rather than biologically given, later feminists became critical of it for leaving biological sex unexamined as a supposedly fixed, determined category. It also raised problems through the growing awareness of intersex and understanding of the diversity and complexity of sex development, as discussed above.[125] But the other side of a sharp sex/gender dichotomy, the idea that gender is purely a social construct, is also called into question by biological studies of gender identity.

This is an emerging field of research in which scientific findings may be tentative and provisional, and theories even more so. Some authors in the field also emphasize the need for critical awareness of the ways in which both researchers' scientific backgrounds and their aims and motivations might bias the interpretation of their results: a desire to destigmatize transgender identity, for example, might

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[122] Joel et al., ibid, 157-62; Daphna Joel, "Beyond the Binary: Rethinking Sex and the Brain" in *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 122 (2021), 165-175.

[123] E.g. Marco Del Guidice et al., "Joel et al.'s Method Systematically Fails to Detect Large, Consistent Sex Differences" in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA* 113.14 (2016): E1965; for discussion, see Joel et al., ibid., 164-165, and Joel, "Beyond the Binary", 170-173.

[124] Cf. Richard Green, "Robert Stoller's *Sex and Gender*: 40 Years On" in *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 39 (2010), 1457–1465.

[125] Though please note that Stoller's thinking on sex and gender was informed by his clinical work with intersex as well as transgender individuals: see Green, 'Robert Stoller's *Sex and Gender*'.

predispose researchers to overemphasize evidence for biological causes.[126] Conversely, it is also important to be aware of the ways in which scientific research can be, and has been, used to pathologize and stigmatize gender nonconformity.[127] But even with these caveats, there is considerable and growing evidence of biological contributions to gender incongruence and transgender identity.

Genetically, there is consistent evidence for the heritability of both cis- and transgender identities. Heritability estimates are similar to those of other complex behavioural traits, and suggest that both genetic and environmental influences contribute to gender identity.[128] As recently as 2018, no candidate genes had been conclusively identified, but most of the attention in molecular genetic studies has focused on genes involved in the production and regulation of sex hormones, and genes for the receptors through which these hormones exert their influence on living cells.[129] As noted earlier, sex hormones are thought to influence sexual dimorphism in various brain characteristics, and there are some indications that genes associated with these sexual differences in the brain are also implicated in transgender identity.[130]

There is also evidence of epigenetic influences on gender identity. In a few studies, trans people have been found to have epigenetic changes that may influence the activity of genes involved in brain

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[126] Laura Erickson-Schroth, "Update on the Biology of Transgender Identity" in *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health* 17.2 (2013), 152—174, at 151.

[127] Tina J. C. Polderman et al., "The Biological Contributions to Gender Identity and Gender Diversity: Bringing Data to the Table" in *Behavior Genetics* (2018) 48, 95–108, at 97.

[128] Polderman et al., "The Biological Contributions", 105.

[129] Polderman et al., "The Biological Contributions", 102-103.

[130] E.g. J. Graham Theisen et al., "The Use of Whole Exome Sequencing in a Cohort of Transgender Individuals to Identify Rare Genetic Variants" in *Scientific Reports* 9 (2019), 20099; Madeleine Foreman et al., "Genetic Link Between Gender Dysphoria and Sex Hormone Signaling" in *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism*, 104.2 (2019), 390–396.

development, sex hormone pathways, and the regulation of other genes.[131] One complication of some of these studies is that gender-affirming hormone therapy is also known to cause epigenetic changes, but one recent study found evidence of epigenetic differences between cis and trans people *before* hormone treatment, suggesting a role for epigenetics in the origins of transgender identity.

Building on the research mentioned earlier about sexual dimorphism of the brain, neuroscientists have looked for evidence of changes to brain structure and function associated with gender incongruence and trans identity. As with epigenetic studies, these investigations are complicated by the fact that gender-affirming hormone therapy can itself bring about changes in brain structure and function.[132] However, a number of studies have investigated various aspects of brain structure and function in trans people before hormone treatment, and there does seem to be emerging evidence that their brains are distinctive in various aspects of structure and function.[133] It appears that the structure and function of trans people's brains do not line up completely with either their sex assigned at birth or their gender identification: instead, various authors suggest that trans people's neurobiology is distinct from both cis men and women.[134] One recent study has suggested that differences in brain structure

[131] Karla Ramirez et al., "Epigenetics Is Implicated in the Basis of Gender Incongruence: An Epigenome-Wide Association Analysis" in *Frontiers in Neuroscience* 15 (2021), 701017.

[132] Kreukels and Guillamon, "Neuroimaging Studies in People with Gender Incongruence", 124.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Ibid.; Sven C. Mueller et al., "The Neuroanatomy of Transgender Identity: Mega-Analytic Findings from the ENIGMA Transgender Persons Working Group" in *Journal of Sexual Medicine* 18 (2021), 1122–1129, at 1126–1127.

are not associated with sexually dimorphic areas of the brain so much as those areas involved in self-body perception.[135]

How should we understand all this? There is growing scientific evidence that genetic, epigenetic and hormonal influences on fetal brain development play a part in shaping gender identity and contribute to gender incongruence in some individuals.[136] However, biological factors are insufficient to account completely for gender incongruence, which suggests that a bio-psychosocial model such as Milton Diamond's 'biased interaction theory' is needed. [137] This theory proposes that genetic and hormonal influences on the prenatal development of the brain bias or predispose an individual's psychosexual development in certain ways, but it will also be shaped by their physical, social and cultural environment after birth and throughout their life. There is a risk that an exclusively biological focus dismisses some trans and intersex experiences.[138] It must also be remembered that trans identities are diverse, and there may be many different factors interacting in various ways that lead different individuals to identify as transgender, non-binary or genderqueer.[139]

[135] Amirhossein Manzouri and Ivanka Savic, "Possible Neurobiological Underpinnings of Homosexuality and Gender Dysphoria" in *Cerebral Cortex* 29 (2019), 2084–2101.
[136] For an additional review of the evidence, see Terry Reed, "Biological Correlations in the Development of Atypical Gender Identities" (2018), online at https://www.gires.org.uk/category/research/ (accessed 21 March 2022).
[137] Erickson-Schroth, "Update on the Biology of Transgender Identity," 166—167; Milton Diamond, "Biased-Interaction Theory of Psychosexual Development: 'How Does One Know if One is Male or Female?'" in *Sex Roles* 55 (2006): 589—600.
[138] For more work on Christian transgender experience, see for instance Alex-Clare Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2019); Ann-Christine Ruuth, *Jag kom inte ut, jag blev mig själv [I did not come out, I became myself]* (Stockholm: Nordstedts, 2022).
[139] Erickson-Schroth, "Update on the Biology of Transgender Identity", 167.

# 3.2 Theologies and gender

## 3.2.1 Feminist theologies as contextual theology

Within contemporary theology, engagements with gender emerged in 1960s and 1970s in US and Germany in terms of feminist theologies, from the beginning mostly in terms of focusing on women. Gender primarily came to entail a focus on women, through studies of women's experiences and voices in biblical testimony, ecclesial history, and Christian doctrine and practice. Feminist theologies insisted and insist on gender as a factor in understanding biblical texts, church history and Christian doctrine; noting and investigating how they included or silenced women's experiences, voices and roles also revealed how what had otherwise been understood as universally human was, in fact, particular and male. In that way, feminist gender-oriented approaches in theology contributed to a "more differentiated and at the same time more inclusive definition of what it means to be human".[140]

These contributions involved two interconnected dimensions or areas of studies. On one hand, a vast range of studies dealt with women's positions and roles in religious and social structures, in early Judaeo-Christian cultures, throughout the history of Christian church, as well as in contemporary Christian and ecclesial practices. On the other, they explored the symbolic and doctrinal fabrics of Christian church and culture, conscious of how they were rooted in socially and religiously gendered contexts, but also produced and cemented them. Feminist theological approaches emphasized how

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[140] Ursula King,"Introduction: Gender and the Study of Religion" in Ursula King (ed.), *Religion & Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 1–40.

the articulation, understanding and knowledge of central items of Christian faith cannot be grasped or worded independently of their context, a context also strongly organized in terms of social, cultural and religious formed patterns and meanings of male and female.

They also underscored how symbolic and doctrinal expressions of faith – of salvation, of the Trinity, or reconciliation, offering ways of grasping faith and reality that tended towards universalising and normalising male position, experience and dominance – maintained and perpetuated such structures, by providing them with tacit sanction and approval.

Feminist theologies have combined critical and constructive approaches. [141] Critically, they have uncovered how biblical and ecclesial practices were embedded in, supported by – but also supporting – cultural and societal patriarchal and oppressive structures, imprisoning women to subordinate positions in the home and family, and limiting participation in church and public political and economic life. Constructively, they have uncovered how, on some occasions, ecclesial and Christian life actually provided women with opportunities of agency and influence in church and society. For example, missionary work opened leadership roles for women that were inaccessible to them in their home church, and so did Christian diaconal and educational institutions.[142]

Critically, they have analysed how symbolic and doctrinal articulations of Christian faith had silenced women's voices and experiences, presenting as universally and normatively human what in reality was based on men's voices and experiences. Constructively, they have uncovered and retrieved sources within

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[141] King, "Introduction", 12–13.
[142] Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, "Women, Gender, and Church History" in *Church History* 71(3) (September 2002), 600–620.

Christian and ecclesial history, giving voice to women's experiences and contributions, and bringing them into ongoing theological conversations.

Clearly, feminist theologies are not a uniform class of theological approaches. The disagreements or tensions include one between concern for women's equality and equity in relation to men, and emphasis on the difference and particularity of women's lives and experiences (3.1.1). Another is between autonomy, independence and self-sufficiency as features and ideals that should also mark and be cherished in women's lives, in relation to dependencies and relationality as inescapable human conditions, more readily recognized in role patterns traditionally associated with women but fundamental to human life beyond gender differences.[143]

Feminist theologies have, however, become subject to their own criticisms, namely for universalizing and essentializing 'women's experiences', which in fact were only those of particular women: white, middle-class, heterosexual ones (3.1.1), neglecting the potentially quite different experiences of women of colour, non-heterosexual women, women with disabilities, or socially disadvantaged women – or combinations of these. The remaining contribution to theological conversations and understanding, however, was the recognition that theological explorations and reflections on the sources of Christian tradition and thought is always positioned and contextual, never done from 'nowhere in particular'. It is entangled with interests, biases and privileges, some of which can be related to sex and gender, and the effects of which must be taken into self-critical consideration.

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[143] Sarah Coakley, "Feminist Theology" in James C. Livingston, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza with Sarah Coakley and James H. Evans, Jr. (eds), *Modern Christian Thought. The Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 437–438.

Feminist theologies focused on how ecclesial practices and doctrines and theological knowledge tacitly privileged and essentialized experiences and positions of men, and therefore called for greater attention to those of women. However, attention gradually evolved towards gender, focusing on the meaning of ordering human and social reality according to a binary pattern of gender as male and female.[144]

## 3.2.2 Theological engagements with gender: three trajectories

Theological engagements with gender have to a large extent focused on its role and significance in a theological understanding of human life and how it ought to be lived according to God's purposes as man and woman. In recent decades questions about same-sex relations have been at the forefront. Do theological understandings of human beings as men and women entail that only sexual relations between a man and a woman can be approved? Or does no such restriction flow from theological meanings of the human being as male and female? Until recently, these questions were still discussed within a framework where it was largely a given that human gender would be understood as a binary structure of 'man' and 'woman', based on biological differences.[145] Not that the idea of gender as a binary structure of two distinct and ontologically different categories 'man' and 'woman,' had prevailed universally and continuously throughout Christian tradition. There are numerous examples in Christian sources of ideas and imagery concerning gender, which do

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[144] King, "Introduction", 13.
[145] Adrian Thatcher, "Gender" in Lisa Isherwood, Dirk von der Horst (eds), *Contemporary Theological Approaches to Sexuality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 29–30.

not conform to this image.[146] But for modern, enlightenment forms of Christianity, as well as modern, Western thought in general, the dominant conception of gender was that there are two,[147] that they are distinctly different, and that the differences are based in ontology, in unalterable features of humankind and nature. Increasing awareness of transgender and intersex conditions has questioned this as an obvious framework (3.1.2). These two raise different questions, however.[148] Transgender conditions question assumptions about continuity and congruence between a person's gender identity – the gender they 'feel like' – and the gender assigned at birth on the basis of biological, bodily features. And they evoke the question whether it might be warranted or approved to modify one's body to fit one's gender identity, and if so, on what conditions and under what circumstances. Intersex conditions question the premise that all human bodies display unequivocal, biological features according to which they can be categorized as a male or female body. The following outlines three main trajectories in contemporary theological engagement with gender. Neither sharply defined nor exhaustive, they indicate key positions and concerns.

## 3.2.2.1 Gender: binary and essential

According to the first trajectory, human beings do form two different categories – male and female ones – categories that are distinct,

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[146] Explicated, for example, in Gerard Loughlin, "Introduction: The End of Sex" in Gerard Loughlin (ed.), *Queer Theology. Rethinking the Western Body* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 2–3; Amy Hollywood, "Queering the Beguines: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch of Anvers, Marguerite Porete" in Gerard Louglin, ibid., 163–175.

[147] Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard U.P.).

[148] Susannah Cornwall, "Intersex and Transgender People" in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*.

exhaustive, and based on biological features. Along this trajectory, gender is a binary structure, grounded in human biological and sexual dimorphism. All human beings possess given characteristics which categorically define them as either male or female. These characteristics form the core of gender as 'man' and 'woman', irrespective of the fact that gender also consists of socially, historically and culturally formed enactments of femininity and masculinity. Underneath all social and cultural performances of gender, human life is still biologically differentiated into the male and female sexes, a biological fact inaccessible to social and cultural construction.[149] The feature often referred to is sexually dimorph procreation. Human procreation as the obvious condition for continued human life can only happen as a result of connecting male and female human bodies, at minimum their gametes.

Positions along this trajectory have engaged critically with questions pertaining to transgender conditions. [150] Transformation or modification of biological features in order to adapt one's biology and body to the gender of one's alleged identity and feeling, are looked upon with suspicion, considered to deny one's God-given nature, and wrongfully subject creation and its inherent value to human manipulation. Making the human body and its gender the object of cultural, wilful construction, absolutizes human freedom and disconnects it from the givenness of human bodily and physical nature, rather than viewing it as embedded in and given in and through this created nature.[151] Gender transition or modification is

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[149] Alexander Dietz, "Anthropologie" in Jantine Nierop (ed.), *Gender im Disput. Dialogbeiträge zur Bedeutung der Genderforschung für Kirche und Theologie* (Hannover: EKD, 2018), 80–91.

[150] Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 20–28; Susannah Cornwall, "Gender Variance and the Abrahamic Faiths" in C. Starkey and E. Romalin (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Gender and Society* (London: Routledge, 2022), 208–221. 215.

[151] Dietz, "Anthropologie", 89–90.

viewed as a manifestation of the human being's emancipation from and rebellion against God's loving purpose and intent for human life laid down in creation. Intersex conditions, on the other hand, are likely to be understood as pathologies.

Positions along this trajectory emphasize the creation texts in Genesis 1–2, and a particular interpretation of them at that. They especially invoke the account in Gen 1:27 of the creation of humankind in God's image, as man and woman, with the mission to "be fruitful and multiply". Created in the image of God, man and woman participate in God's creative purposes to multiply, to fill, subdue and have dominion over the earth – although these days churches and theologies would probably prefer "responsible stewardship" to a language of dominion and subdual. Galatians 3:28, that in Christ there is no longer male and female, is interpreted to say that the biological polarity between male and female sex is no longer of consequence for social status and position in the renewed and transformed reality in Christ, but not that the polarity as such has been transformed or eradicated.[152]

## 3.2.2.2 Gender: contingently binary

Positions along a second trajectory, unlike those along the first one, reject the idea that human nature as we observe and experience it – any part of nature, for that matter – can be unequivocally affirmed as good, ordered by divine purposes and therefore as binding on human intentions and choices. But they do claim, unlike those along a third trajectory (see 3.2.2.3), that our given bodies and nature are affirmed as places and realities where we encounter the grace of

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[152] Tina Beattie, "The Theological Study of Gender" in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender.* https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/34452, 9; Isolde Karle, "*Da ist nicht mehr Mann oder Frau…*", 227–229.

God's creative and redemptive love.[153] Nature and body are indeed not identical with God's creative and redemptive purposes. Intervening in them, for example by modifying or altering biological features in order to adapt the body to a person's perceived gender identity, cannot as such be rejected as conflicting with a divine order allegedly laid down in bodily nature. And yet, neither are they irrelevant or insignificant to enactment of our freedom and responsibility. Bodily nature and our given bodies are not just objects and raw material for living according to divine purposes. They are significant with regard to what it means to live in accordance with those purposes and forming our lives according to them. There are ways in which nature and bodies cannot just be deconstructed and transformed in light of human will and its imaginative efforts in terms of cultural, symbolic systems.

This does not imply that human bodily nature, for instance with regard to gender, delivers essential and absolute directives and objectives for human action. According to Tina Beattie, Catholic thinker Nancy Dallavalle's concept of 'critical essentialism' captures the sacramental quality of reality, reality as a place of divine work in creation and redemption, and therefore also theologically significant and relevant. [154] One example could be the way procreative possibilities depend upon there being male and female bodies, or rather, male and female gametes which inevitably are produced by male and female bodies. In that sense, bodies are not insignificant to what it means to see human beings as gendered, and gender cannot be formed in just any way, as mere embodiments of cultural and symbolic constructions. [155] And yet it is evident that human bodies are sexed in many other ways as well, ways that do not at all

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[153] Beattie, "The Theological Study of Gender", 11–12.
[154] Beattie, 12. Referring to Nancy A. Dallavalle, "Neither Idolatry nor Iconoclasm: A Critical Essentialism for Catholic Feminist Theology" in *Horizons* 25 (1), 23–42.
[155] Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender*, 172 – 173, referring to Linda Alcoff.

follow a clear, binary pattern, as intersex conditions testify so clearly, for example hormonal production, or physiological body parts. And it is equally obvious that not all human beings procreate. Procreative capabilities are vital as conditions for continued human life, and structured into a binary system of male and female they are relevant, but not exclusively determining, for defining human bodies as sexed. With regard to their relations to procreative possibilities, we might therefore say that human beings form two categories of 'men' and 'women,' whereas in other respects human beings are sexed, but in ways that do not form a consistently and exhaustive binary system.

Biblical texts are interpreted and used differently from the first trajectory. One such way is to point out that although the texts about creation in Genesis 1–2 clearly talk about the creation of man and woman, their primary concern or purpose is not to explicate or justify polarity and an essential, binary structure of human sex. In Genesis 1:26–27 the initial statement of intent – "Let us make humankind in our image" – as well as the subsequent creative act – "God created humankind" – concern creating humankind in the image of God, without any mentioning of 'man' and 'woman.' The text, and the world it reflects, are thus understood as envisaging the coming into being and existence of humankind, as separate from creation as man and woman linked to procreative purposes in Gen 1:27b–28. It reflects the possibility of talking about humankind and its creation more in general without, or before, specifying or classifying it as male and female. The status of being created in the image of God is a status that belongs to and is distinctive of humankind, not of male and female as individual and opposite categories (2.1).

The second account of creation of man and woman in Genesis 2:4–25 is read as emphasising how man – 'adam' – is formed from dust

on the ground – 'adama,' – an 'earthling,' and woman created as a partner or companion for this 'earthling' in his loneliness. Far more than difference and polarity between two sexes, the text underscores continuity between dust and the human being, as well as likeness and partnership between the human being and the companion, visible also in how the Hebrew words used here for 'man' and 'woman' have the same root, 'ish'.

New Testament texts, not least Pauline literature, are also central to understandings of gender along this trajectory. The new existence in Christ, to which the Christian is inaugurated and participates through baptism, not only eliminates being male or female as basis for social differences and hierarchies, as the first trajectory also argued. In a more fundamental way it confronts being male and female as a relevant classification of human beings "clothed in Christ" (Gal 3:26–27). Christ, not Adam, is the true image of God (Col 1:15), and it is therefore through unification with Christ that humankind is restored as the full image of God. Image of God as a reality that human beings attain by being transformed in Christ is not primarily understood in terms of male and female, and binary sexual difference. Galatians 3:28 is thus understood as explicitly countering how Genesis 1:28 describes humankind as "created as male and female." In Christ the human being is transformed into the image of God, where labels concerning sexuality and gender identity no longer function.

### 3.2.2.3 Gender: constructed and embodied meaning

Positions along a third trajectory of theological approaches to gender, question the basis of any kind of essence of difference between man and woman, meaning that there is no male or female essence that sustains different gender identities. This does not deny that there are biological and physiological differences we typically

associate with being man or woman, whether chromosomes, hormones, or reproductive organs. Nor does it deny that such features are relevant to classification of human beings as men and women.[156] The point is that these features, and the classification of persons as men or women they give rise to, are accidental rather than essential, contingent rather than necessary. None of them constitutes a 'male' or 'female' essence or nature, nor do they provide gender identity with an unchanging, ontological basis. Instead, the point is that they are viewed as basic elements of male or female gender identity within a cultural and constructed framework that already defines them as characteristic of being a 'man' or a 'woman': The identification of particular allegedly bodily and natural features as defining of gender and gender identity's allegedly ontological core is already set within, and dependent on, prior cultural and symbolic structures of meaning, not given in unmediated nature. It follows that limits or concerns for these symbolic and cultural constructions of gender are not given – either normatively or ontologically – in nature. Quite the contrary, cultural and symbolic constructions can in different ways transform gender, in the sense that they transform how gender is perceived, represented and enacted. They enable new ways of doing gender. Importantly, this does not entail the view that each and everyone can just 'invent' or perform gender according to their own vision or desire. After all, social and cultural constructions, not least in the domain of gender, are deeply entrenched in communities and societies. They can be nearly impossible to act against for the individual, and can be felt almost as nature, in the sense of given, inescapable structures. The claim that gender is socially and

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[156] Gerhard Schreiber, "Anthropologie" in Jantine Nierop (ed.), *Gender im Disput. Dialogbeiträge zur Bedeutung der Genderforschung für Kirche und Theologie* (Hannover: EKD, 2018), 95.

culturally constructed should therefore not be mistaken for a claim that it turns gender into an arbitrary, random individual feeling.

Invoking a transformative potential of cultural constructions hints at a possible convergence between queer theory and theological approaches emphasizing the renewing, transformative and even eschatological perspectives of Christian faith and theology. Queer theology, as an important position along this trajectory, does not see itself only as a theology reflecting the particular interests of LGBTQI+ communities. Although its inspiration derives from the experiences and perspectives of these communities, it claims to provide insights of broader relevance to theology. First, it claims a fundamental familiarity with theology as such, in theology's fundamental 'strangeness'. Theology, Gerard Loughlin argues, investigates and asserts how that which is known and received in Christ puts all earthly projects in perspective. [157] It brings the provocative strangeness of the mystery of Christ into contemporary society and culture. In that sense, 'queer' is fundamental to theology as such. Second, queer theology retrieves from old and new history of Christian thought numerous examples of 'queering' patterns of human life in light of Christian faith, including those of gender. Transformations of habituated gender structures are not a novelty imposed by late-modern, urban, gay culture, but are inherent Christian traditions, it is argued.[158] Thirdly, it questions assumptions about stable and fixed 'identities' based in an essence of, for example, nature, history, nation, gender or the like. Instead, it thinks of identity in relation to a horizon of possibility, open to transformation. In that as well, it sees itself as linked to the very core of Christian faith and its emphasis on Christ as the new identity of

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[157] Gerard Loughlin, "Introduction: The End of Sex" in Gerard Loughlin (ed.), *Queer Theology. Rethinking the Western Body* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 7.
[158] Loughlin, "Introduction", 9.

baptized persons, the identity which transforms all given, earthly identities.[159]

Along this third trajectory, the Pauline texts about the renewed and transformed life in Christ, and its implications with regard to being 'man' and 'woman', also play a dominant role (Gal 3:28; Col 1:13–18; 3:10). Genesis 1:27 about humankind being created as male and female is read as describing a male–female continuum, including all human beings, rather than being a text about specific classes of human beings.[160]And the text in Genesis 2:7.15-23 is understood as narrating the creation of human life, only later with creation of a partner described as 'man' and 'woman'. It underscores similarity and continuity, rather than essential difference, indicated by the Hebrew 'ish' as the root of both nouns in Genesis 2:23. The point is clearly not that today's views of fluid or third gender, of transgender identities or intersex conditions can be extracted from biblical texts. But no more can an idea of human being as two unequivocally distinct categories of 'man' and 'woman,' based on a biologically described essence of male and female nature. This is a matter that is beyond the biblical texts and the worlds within which they emerged. That is not, according to positions along this trajectory, to assert that nothing can be said about human beings as necessarily defining them, as an ontological basis of characteristics that they have – always and without exception. But such characteristics will pertain to human beings, not to 'man' or 'woman'.[161]

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[159] Loughlin, "Introduction", 9–10; Jeanne Hoeft, "Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism" in Bonnie Miller McLemore (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 419.

[160] Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender*, 144; Karle, *"Da ist nicht mehr Mann oder Frau…"*, 225–227.

[161] An argument to this effect, based on key elements of Lutheran theology, has been developed by Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, "Liberating Aspects of Lutheran Theology for a Post-Gender Politics" in *Lutheran Identity and Political Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 101–116.

### 3.2.3 Gender and liturgies in CPCE

In the survey of CPCE member churches, one out of the 53 respondents affirmed that they have a liturgy for gender transitioning. Clearly, this does not preclude that more churches might in fact have performed such liturgies, but without a formal, authorized liturgy for it.

# 3.3 Theological reflections on gender

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, what, for lack of a better word, might be called a modern, binary conception of gender, has had a strong hold on people in modern societies and cultures, churches and communities. Key points of this concept were, and still are, that:

- there are two genders, man and woman,
- which are both exhaustive and mutually exclusive, meaning that all human beings can be classified as either one or the other
- according to an essential core of biological and physiological characteristics (whether chromosomes, gametes, genitalia, neurology) – which some would then label as 'sex,' as a term for gender's biological core or layer
- and which is congruent and continuous with someone's sense of gender identity
- yet recognising the considerable impact of cultural and social patterns on understandings of what 'man' and 'woman' are.

Churches have to a large extent shared this perspective on gender, but as shown in 3.1 and 3.2, this modern, binary conception of gender now meets with questions that churches and theologies are also beginning to address and engage with. Categories of 'male' and

'female' are less distinct and mutually exclusive categories than this modern conception assumed. Biological features associated with being male or female occur in human beings to varying degrees rather than as 'either-or.' Intersex people, born with combinations of male and female bodily physiological characteristics, or a female or male body, but opposite chromosomes, question the dichotomous system of classification altogether. And people of transgender identity interrupt the idea of continuity between gender identity and bodily features according to which 'male' or 'female' were assigned at birth.

How do these questions relate to theological reflections on gender? As stated in the introduction, the purpose here is not to arrive at one definitive answer but to delineate a range of positions that are justified and plausible in light of key Protestant ideas and principles.

Three elements are especially relevant in this regard. First, theological anthropology, on one hand, provides basic perspectives on gender but, on the other, must also allow itself to be informed by new insights into gender.

Second, a fundamental hermeneutical cycle requires that theological understanding takes account of new insights regarding gender, while recognizing that these insights are not directly valid as theological formulations of gender in their own right. They need reflection and interpretation in light of the source of Scripture and Protestant interpretative tradition. In this interpretative cycle, Scripture guides the understanding of experience and scientific accounts, and experience informs our reading of Scripture, yet with Scripture holding primacy, according to the Protestant hermeneutical key of *norma normans* and *norma normata*.

And third, key ideals of Christian, Protestant ethics must be invoked and reflected on, since conceptions of gender also have obvious ethical implications.

## 3.3.1 Theological anthropology: emphasising human bodily nature

With regard to anthropology, it is appropriate to start by recognizing the significance of the body and bodily nature. Protestant theological reflections on gender underscore the role of embodiment and bodily nature. This is important with regard to contemporary approaches to gender of a social constructivist type, which are being criticized for foregrounding gender as a product of cultural and symbolic representations and discourses, and thereby downplaying gender as deeply entwined with human bodily nature.[162]

Clearly, God's creation and creative work cannot be directly identified with specific features of natural and bodily existence. But it is nonetheless as bodies, as bodily, physical existence and with a bodily nature, that human beings are bound up with God's purposes and God's creative and renewing giving of life. Life is received anew from the loving and creating hand and will of God as bodies and nature, and human beings participate in God's creative purposes of giving, sustaining and renewing life, albeit imperfectly and self-servingly, as bodies. Martin Luther's explanation in the Small

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[162] Which is not to say that this criticism is necessarily always justified. See Mariecke van den Berg, "Bodies and embodiment: the somatic turn in the study of religion and gender" in Caroline Starkey and Emma Tomalin (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Gender and Society* (London: Routledge, 2022), 149–160; Sarah Coakley, "The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God" in Marc Cortez and Michael P. Jensen (eds), *T&T Clark Reader in Theological Anthropology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 305.

Catechism to the First Article of the Creed, speaks richly about creation as bodily, physical and particular in relation to the individual human being.[163] Accordingly, a theological account of gender cannot ignore or diminish the significance of bodies or biology for understanding gender. Theological reflections are therefore also critical of viewing gender as pervasively socially constructed or determined through discourses only. This is not to say, either, that gender, or other dimensions of the human being, is directly revealed in bodily nature. Bodies or bodily nature are never accessed directly and un-mediated. We might sense a direct, immediate experience of one's body, being one with a sensation of being cold, or tired, or aroused, of having sensory impulses like touching or seeing. But once we start thinking of these different sensations, or body parts, becoming aware of and relating to them, they are mediated, for example in terms of some kind of signs, symbols or language. Even talking about nature as 'given' or 'created' is done by help of not only language but of cultural and interpretive frameworks according to which 'nature' and 'created' makes sense.[164] This also goes for gender. Gender does not appear directly on the human body, but only by help of the language structures and cultural frameworks used to interpret and articulate it.

That is not the same as to say that gender is socially and culturally constructed, just a cultural or social product written or engraved on human bodies. Gender is not just discursively produced and accessible to discursive manipulation. Such a claim would ignore the obvious material aspects of human bodily existence, not least in its

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[163] "…that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason, and all my senses, and still preserves them; in addition thereto, clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and homestead, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods; that He provides me richly and daily with all that I need to support this body and life." Book of Concord, The Small Catechism, The Creed, First Article.
[164] Berg, "Bodies and Embodiment."

finite and frail conditions of ordinary life. It would entail a kind of dualism between materiality and meaning, between body and mind, which is alien to Protestant theology (and presumably to any Christian theology).[165]

As became clear in 3.1.1, the above is not incompatible with intersex and transgender experiences. Not fitting a biologically defined category of male or female bodies is a profoundly bodily experience. The same might go for transgender people's experiences of a deep conflict between the gender they feel are theirs, and the gender ascribed to them at birth based on biological features. Bodies 'talk back' at us, and our attempts to furnish them with particular meanings through language, symbols and discourses. In that sense, gender is not only in heads and minds, in cultural and social patterns. It is very much also in bodies, according to both trans theorists and theologians, and more general Protestant theological reflections.

## 3.3.2 Scripture and experience

But in order to get closer to justified Protestant theological positions, in particular how they must relate to binary as well as non-binary conceptions of gender, it is necessary to probe deeper into key biblical texts, reminded of the hermeneutical cycle of reading Scripture and human experience in light of each other, with Scripture as the primary text.

First, it is worth recalling that the biblical texts explicating and narrating God's acting upon and relating to 'human being' in creation show limited interest in questions about gender and how human life is differentiated into male and female, as man and woman. Numerous texts talk about God's creation of humankind,

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[165] Beattie, "The Theological Study of Gender", 15.

without any interest in distinctions between 'man' and 'woman' (Ps 8; 104; 139:13). One might, of course, argue that this is partly because it was obvious in the context that human beings were either men or women, and/or that in accordance with patriarchal culture, the texts focused on men rather than male-female relations. Nonetheless, biblical literature offers scarce material to draw on for theological reflections on whether human gender should best be understood as a binary system of mutually exclusive categories of male and female – or in some other way.

The texts which most clearly set the question of human being as man and woman within the context of God's relation to human beings are, of course, the texts about creation in Genesis 1–2, and the Pauline texts in the New Testament about male and female in the renewed and transformed reality of Christ.

Starting with Genesis 1:27 and its description of how "in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them," the main connotations of 'image of God' were briefly outlined above (2.1). Looking at this text more in isolation, 'function' seems to be its central point, with the royal ideology of ancient Egyptian culture as its broader context. [166] Here an image is not just a portrait of someone, but represents that someone in a given context, as the king represents God on earth, and the king's images represent him. [167] Created in God's image, human beings represent God on earth, to carry out the tasks or missions associated with this, described in Genesis 1:28 as to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, subdue it and have dominion over every living thing. As image of

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[166] Walter Gross, "Die Gottebenbildlichkeit des Menschen nach Gen 1,26.27 in der Diskussion des letzten Jahrzehntes" in *Biblische Notizen* 68 (1993), 35–48. Reference from Karle, "*Da ist nicht mehr Mann oder Frau…,*" 218.

[167] Andreas Schüle, "Made in the 'Image of God'. The Concepts of Divine Images in Gen 1–3," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117, 1 (2005), 1–20. Reference from Karle, "*Da ist nicht mehr Mann oder Frau…",* 218.

God, a human being participates in God's creative purposes in relation to the earth. And an important point is how this function, by virtue of being created in the image of God, is now given to every human being, and is no longer the exclusive privilege of the king.

Procreation is part of this function, and participation in that as part of God's creative purposes and objectives, requires that humankind is created as man and woman. Human procreation is bound to and conditioned by there being male and female gametes, and male and female bodies to produce them. This could be viewed as one manifestation of the bodily finitude that is part of human existence, a finitude that cannot just be constructed away, or discursively changed.[168]

On this basis, it can be argued that the fact that it takes male and female gametes for human beings to reproduce, cannot be irrelevant to understanding of human gender. That human procreation is sexually differentiated into male and female cannot be taken out of the understanding of what human gender is, what else there might also be to say about gender and how gender cannot be reduced to sexually differentiated reproduction. Not all human beings have procreative capabilities, and those who do, do not all procreate. What classifies men and women as two different genders, according to this reflection, is thus not difference in terms of natural essences, but difference in relation to possibility of reproduction.[169] In that sense, Protestant theological reflection can talk about two distinct genders of male and female, but in a way that is contingent on the purpose and condition of procreation, rather than essential or absolutist.

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[168] Beattie, "The Theological Study of Gender", 15–16.
[169] Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender*, 172 – 173. Thatcher is here referring to Linda Alcoff's understanding of sexual identity.

The second account of the creation of man and woman, in Genesis 2:18–19, as argued above (3.2.2.2) foregrounds mutual partnership and companionship as the logic of creation of woman from man. Yet this partnership can clearly also involve procreation, although that is not specifically mentioned.

Reading these biblical texts in relation to experience allows a route for Protestant theological reflections that does not entail understanding gender as a binary structure of male and female, but rather as a continuum and an inclusive category. Genesis 1:26–27 and Genesis 2:18–19 could be read as emphasizing how they primarily inspire an inclusive and comprehensive notion and understanding of humankind. Genesis 1:26–27 extends the status of image of God to every human being, stating every human being's participation in the determination as image of God. The text can talk about creation of humankind as a general and inclusive term, and only subsequently, in a second passage, mention creation of man and woman. And the subsequent mentioning of creation of man and woman is understood to refer to the whole of human reality by naming its poles.[170] "The labels 'male' and 'female' thus mark poles with many fluid crossings – and not a definitive either-or".[171]

A similar inclusive reading is possible with regard to Genesis 2:15–23. Rather than a two-sex model of gender as a binary structure of man and woman, it underscores partnership and companionship in equality. According to these routes of interpretation and theological reflection, it is not gender as a binary structure of man and woman in polarity that stands out in the text, but rather man and woman as large and different groups or categories, yet still belonging to a

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[170] Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender*, 144.
[171] Karle, "*Da ist nicht mehr Mann noch Frau…*", 227. ("Die Etiketten 'Mann' und 'Frau' markieren demnach Pole mit vielen fließenden Übergängen - und kein ausschließliches Entweder-oder.")

larger, inclusive category of humankind, placed along a continuum rather than essentially different kinds. This reading is possible, but equally possible is one which is more hospitable to the fact and experiences of people of intersex and transgender identities, compared to readings which imply categorizing transgender and intersex as inadequate or abnormal cases of distinct, dichotomous kinds of 'male' and 'female'.

These reflections on gender as inclusive also draw heavily on human beings re-created and renewed in Christ, as expounded especially in Pauline literature. Essential in this respect is first how Christ is understood as the true image of God.[172] Not the first human being is the true image of God, but Christ. In Christ, God's image as the representation, indeed identification with God is present, in a way which clearly superseded the first human being. In Christ, the image of God becomes present and manifest in a new, perfected way.[173] In this sense, being image of God is still a destination for human beings, a destination that can be reached by being united with Christ, and "transformed into the same image". [174] This union with Christ happens in baptism, where a human being dies and is resurrected with Christ.[175]

This true image of God, which is Christ, is irrelevant to any differentiation into man and woman. It surpasses gender, moves beyond it, to a reality which in the present, the 'already' we already partly grasp, and which in the future, the 'not yet', may further unfold. It is this 'beyond gender' that humans become part of when they find their identity in Christ. This is famously underlined in Galatians 3:27–28, stating that those who have been baptized in

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[172] 2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15.
[173] Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender*, 146–147.
[174] 2 Corinthians 3:18.
[175] Romans 6:3–5.

Christ have become clothed in Christ, and for them there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, as all are one in Christ Jesus. It contrasts with the description in Genesis 1:27, asserting that this differentiation as male and female does not apply to the human being as such, who in Christ is transformed into the true image of God.

This emphasis on finding our identity in Christ should not, however, become an 'easy fix' that can be misused to depoliticize queer or other minority claims to identity. A risk of emphasizing baptism as a form of identity-erasure and of elevating Galatians 3:28 as the single most important instance in Scripture regarding sexuality and identity is that critical voices from the margins are (once again) silenced. If we are all one in Christ, and differences between people are dissolved, someone might claim that there is no further need to listen attentively to, make room for, and take seriously, the perspectives of those who have been pushed to the margins by Christian traditions. Particular life experiences are still important points of departure for 'doing theology', and are not made irrelevant by the gospel. A double move is constantly necessary: on the one hand, cultivating a longing for a future where difference no longer leads to exclusion and othering; on the other, taking seriously the viewpoints, emotions and experiences that sometimes are dismissed by those who within this difference hold positions of power.

### 3.3.3 Gender and ethics

From the above, two approaches or positions seem to be warranted or justified in line with key Protestant ideas. One conceives of gender as binary, based on sexually differentiated procreation, considered to provide gender and its otherwise diverse manifestations with a biological basis of distinction between male and female. Another

conceives of gender as not confined to a binary structure, but rather as a continuum or involving a third category of 'non-binary'. Both positions, however, acknowledge how bodily nature and social and cultural patterns are inextricably entwined in gender.

Yet there is more to say, in that these positions must also take into consideration the fundamental, guiding ideas of Protestant ethics, as briefly stated above (2.3.5).

### 3.3.3.1 Justice

Justice means taking account of how positions contribute to the lives and opportunities of those most affected by them. For Christian ethics, justice goes beyond fairness and equity, and requires particular consideration to be given to those who are the most disadvantaged and marginalized. Sometimes is it obvious who are the most disadvantaged and sometimes it is not. In the questions discussed here, there are good reasons to consider people who feel excluded, looked down upon or in other ways stigmatized because of transgender identity or intersex condition as among the clearly disadvantaged. This places an obligation especially on those holding a binary understanding of gender to do so in ways that do not jeopardize or hamper fairness for transgender and intersex people in their pursuit of opportunities. This would, for example, imply not imposing or participating in discriminatory policies or measures. And irrespective of which view you hold regarding binary/non-binary gender, it implies an obligation to be mindful of how, whether as a church leader, pastor or civil servant, someone contributes to sustaining and fostering gender roles and patterns that are inhibiting and limiting.

### 3.3.3.2 Responsibility

Responsibility reminds us of the way each and every one of us is intertwined in each other's lives, through close and intimate bonds of family, friend or parishioner, and more distant bonds of citizen or professional. Through actions and behaviour, as well as omissions, we impact the life world of these others, directly or indirectly, and are endowed with responsibility for how we do so. Clearly this is also the case when it comes to gender. In close relations, whether as family members or friends, as pastors, teachers or health care professionals, we clearly ought to be mindful of the possibilities and risks of sustaining or eroding other people's feeling about themselves, also in terms of gender identity. This responsibility cannot be discharged simply by holding what is considered to be the right view, whichever that is. It requires discretion and discernment of the actual situation and the ways one person is entwined with the life of another.

Responsibility is also relevant at an institutional level, such as schools, health care systems and legal-administrative systems. Here European societies are encountering questions requiring careful and considered judgement. How to define indications for and access to gender correctional therapies, not at least for minors? How to educate in schools about gender diversity, in ways that are congruent with fundamental principles and ideals of public education, as part of a greater idea of the common good? For Christian communities, answering these types of questions includes taking notice of, and taking seriously, the experiences and needs of women, queer and transgender people, as well as the academic knowledge that speaks to these experiences. If research and (by now well-documented) accounts of trans experiences show that for people who experience gender incongruence or gender dysphoria, it is not detrimental to have access to the appropriate medical,

psychological and spiritual care and support, church communities may not stand in their way to receive this support. Even if, in the context of congregational life, people conclude that fully supporting a gender transition, for instance, is beyond what they feel they can offer, the community is called to go the extra mile in the support and love that it *can* give, and to refrain from resorting to absolutes. In light of this, always ruling out gender transition in principle is difficult to reconcile with a Protestant understanding of responsibility as a key ethical commitment, and thus also very difficult to include within the Protestant corridor.

### 3.3.3.3 Love

The notion of neighbourly love as a core and sum of Christian and Protestant ethics is not just an inner and spontaneous emotion. It commands us to show practical concern for the other in the circumstances where we find ourselves. This includes, but is by no means limited to, the persons we actually encounter. It might well be someone at a distance, a group with whom we have little or no direct interaction, but whose needs, distress or grievance we become aware of, and which call upon us to be a neighbour to them, according to the parable of the Good Samaritan. Whereas natural law and moral insight available to all will talk about reciprocity and doing to others as we would have done to us, neighbourly love is being willing to give up our own interests and to suffer for the sake of someone else, as Christ suffered for us. This is not a claim that can be imposed on someone else but a calling one perceives as a Christian. What this might involve in encountering the person to whom gender identity or gender conditions have become a struggle and source of pain cannot be defined in general and abstractly, but only in assessing the concrete situation. One thing can be said though, namely that neighbourly love of the other involves recognizing the other as 'other', as not just an extension of one's

own ideas, preferences and views. Neighbourly love thus forbids submitting the other to external agendas foreign to them. It also forbids the use of offensive, derogatory or diminishing language that dehumanizes the other, or suggests that they are of less value. Especially considering the fact that gender has a strong linguistic dimension, neighbourly love urges us to weigh our words. Love asks us not to speak 'words that wound'.[176] Historical gender injustice asks for healing, and this healing may well come to a great extent from a transformation of language. Christians, knowing that the tongue is a "rudder" (James 3), are well equipped to recognize the transformative power of language. They can be part of this process of healing through the transformation of language and draw on the extensive archive of tradition to find creative ways to make their own contribution.

### 3.3.3.4 Freedom

The principle of Christian freedom constantly reminds us how justification and salvation, fulfilment and perfection of human life, lie beyond moral effort and endeavour, beyond inherent characteristics of gender and body, and are exclusively an act of God. This clearly does not diminish or trivialize the import of the efforts of human moral enterprise. But it does make them provisional, in principle always open to and in need of revision and critique. In that sense gender, and our related concerns, practices and reflections, belong, in Bonhoeffer's words, to the penultimate, not to the ultimate.

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[176] B. Applebaum, "Social Justice, Democratic Education and the Silencing of Words that Wound" in *Journal of Moral Education*, 32(2) (2003), 151-162.

# 3.4 Study questions

What are the most relevant/important insights your church or congregation can derive from the gender theories of disciplines other than theology, according to your view? And why?

How would you position yourself, your congregation and/or your church, in relation to the three main trajectories concerning gender outlined in 3.2? Where do you, or your church's views, resemble or differ from this position?

Which questions concerning gender challenge your congregation/church at the moment, and how might the material and reflections offered here (especially 3.3) help in reflecting on and addressing that challenge? Why / why not?

How would you relate the texts in Genesis 1–2, and Galatians 3:28–29 with regard to their implications for understanding gender? Which other texts and stories in the Bible do you find relevant to think about gender with? Why / how?

# 4 Sexuality

This chapter deals with human sexuality. A complicated issue, if only for the fact that sexuality might refer to sexual activities as well as to an identity. It is simultaneously something we do and something we are, or even 'have'. Sexuality raises questions about pleasure and procreation, about desire and sin. It has been puzzling scholars from many disciplines. Where in the human body should 'sexuality' be located? Is sexual identity predetermined? How is love involved in humans' sexual activities? Next to understanding sexuality, societies have tried in all kinds of ways to also regulate it, for instance in the institution of marriage. How are these norms about sexuality formed, and what are their effects? This chapter addresses these questions about knowledge on and regulation of sexuality. Moreover, it contains reflections on how we can think about sexuality theologically. As human beings we are created in the image of God as relational beings. Sexuality can be an element of the relations we have with others. Within the context of Christianity, sexuality has been understood as a beautiful and valuable expression or even celebration of relation, but it has also been mistrusted as potentially sinful. How have theological perspectives changed? And how can we think about sexuality in light of the world to come?

# 4.1 Theories of sexuality

## 4.1.1 Biology[177]

The range of different biological disciplines and perspectives introduced earlier in Chapter 3 has been used to study and theorize about sexual behaviour and sexuality, as well as sex and gender. This subsection will survey insights and theories about sexuality from evolutionary biology, genetics and neuroscience.

### 4.1.1.1 The evolution of human sexual behaviour

Evolutionary theorizing about the sexual behaviour of humans and other animals began with Charles Darwin, though it has only been intensively studied since the 1970s. The dominance of Darwin and the questions that preoccupied him resulted in a strong focus on reproduction as an essential part of sexual activity (rather than, for instance, pleasure). The basic evolutionary assumption is that sexual behaviours, like other physical and behavioural traits, tend to be shaped by evolution to maximise 'inclusive reproductive fitness': that is, individuals' success at getting as many copies of their genes as possible into the next generation. Inclusive fitness can be affected by individuals' ability to survive long enough to reproduce, this being the basis of Darwin's theory of natural selection described earlier.[178] It can also be affected by success or otherwise in mating, an insight which led Darwin to propose his theory of *sexual selection* alongside natural selection. Darwin theorized that not only features which promote individuals' survival, but also those that promote mating

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[177] This section draws on Neil Messer, "Contributions from Biology" in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, 69-87.
[178] See 3.1.2.2. Note that the term 'inclusive fitness' and the idea that it is about the propagation of genes are both more recent additions to evolutionary theory since Darwin's time.

success, will tend to become more common and pronounced in the population. These might be features that enable males to compete with their rivals for access to females (such as stags' antlers), or those that make males more attractive to females (such as peacocks' tails).[179]

In the 1970s, Robert Trivers developed Darwinian ideas about sexual selection into an influential theory of *parental investment*.[180] The basic idea is that the sexes differ in the minimum resources they must invest in reproduction to have a chance of producing viable offspring. For male mammals the minimum investment is ejaculation, whereas for females it includes the much longer and costlier processes of gestation and lactation. Trivers theorized that males' reproductive fitness would therefore be maximized by mating more frequently and indiscriminately, but female reproductive fitness would be promoted by mating less frequently and being more selective about their mates. Other evolutionary theorists such as David Buss have developed Trivers' theory into extensive accounts of human mating strategies and sexual preferences, with aspects as wide-ranging as competitiveness, attitudes to casual sex, criteria for choice of sexual partners, jealousy and sexual violence.[181]

This evolutionary theorising has attracted wide-ranging criticism since Darwin's time. In particular, feminists have critiqued both Darwin and his more recent successors for importing unexamined patriarchal assumptions into their theories. For example, Darwin's

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[179] As well as survival and reproduction, individuals' inclusive fitness can also be promoted by enabling *other* individuals who carry copies of the same genes (especially close kin) to survive and reproduce. This insight is the basis of evolutionary theories of altruism and group co-operation.

[180] Robert Trivers, "Parental Investment and Sexual Selection" in B. Campbell (ed.), *Sexual Selection and the Descent of Man* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1972).

[181] David Buss, *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* (3rd ed., New York: Basic Books, 2016).

account of sexual selection has been heavily criticized for its assumption that females are more sexually passive and 'coy' (his word) than males. According to feminist biologists like Anne Fausto-Sterling and Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, such patriarchal assumptions have meant that Darwin and more recent evolutionary biologists simply failed to pay attention to female agency and sexual strategies (though Buss has attempted to respond to such critiques in successive editions of his book *The Evolution of Desire*).[182] A few biologists such as Joan Roughgarden have rejected sexual selection theory altogether.[183] Others, however, have sought to work within the Darwinian sexual selection paradigm while avoiding the patriarchal biases that have often affected it: one important example of this approach has been Hrdy's influential research on the mating and parenting strategies of female primates.[184]

## 4.1.1.2 Biology and sexual diversity

While sexual selection theory focuses on heterosexual mating, sexual activity between individuals of the same sex is known in many animal species. [185] In humans, numerous studies from different countries have found that a significant minority of both men and

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[182] Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother Nature: Natural Selection and the Female of the Species* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1999); Anne Fausto-Sterling, "Beyond Difference: Feminism and Evolutionary Psychology" in Hilary Rose and Steven Rose (eds), *Alas Poor Darwin: Arguments Against Evolutionary Psychology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 174-189.

[183] Joan Roughgarden, "Evolutionary Biology and Sexual Diversity" in Patricia Beatie Jung and Aana Marie Vigen (eds), *God, Science, Sex, Gender: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Christian Ethics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 89-104. By her own account, however, most biologists have been reluctant to accept her critique of sexual selection theory: "Q&A with Joan Roughgarden on the Problems with the Theory of Sexual Selection". https://mitpress.mit.edu/qa-with-joan-roughgarden-on-the-problems-with-the-theory-of-sexual-selection/ (accessed 31 March 2022).

[184] E.g. Hrdy, *Mother Nature*.

[185] Roughgarden, "Evolutionary Biology and Sexual Diversity", 92-93.

women report some level of same-sex [186] sexual attraction and activity, thought the percentages vary between studies. Male and female same-sex sexuality differs in various ways: for example, in most studies, women are more likely than men to report slight to moderate same-sex attraction, while men are more likely than women to report mostly or exclusively same-sex attraction.[187]

From an evolutionary perspective, the existence of same-sex attraction and activity is often thought to be a 'Darwinian paradox', because a behavioural trait of sexual attraction to one's own rather than the opposite sex would appear to decrease reproductive fitness. Such a trait would therefore be expected to be selected against and gradually disappear from the population. Various evolutionary explanations for its persistence have been proposed: for example, that same-sex activity promotes social relationships and co-operation, or that same-sex attraction is a side-effect of traits that promote heterosexual activity and reproductive success for one or other sex.[188] However, some commentators have pointed out that the supposed paradox disappears (or at any rate decreases) if one does not assume that same-sex sexual attraction always and everywhere leads to exclusively, or mostly, to same-sex sexual activity. While same-sex attraction has a very long biological history

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[186] It could be argued that, rather than speaking of same-sex relationships, the term same-gender would be more appropriate, as it appears more inclusive: while sex is fixed to a binary and bodily reality of male and female, gender allows for a broader range of possibilities, depending on how a person identifies and presents themselves. However, as was argued in 3.1.1., according to Judith Butler not only gender but sex, too, can be claimed to be fluid. Switching to ´same-gender´ thus does not seem to solve the problem of inclusivity. We therefore decide to stick to the better-known term same-sex, while recognizing that sex, like gender, does not let itself to be defined neatly in binary categories.

[187] Messer, "Contributions from Biology", 80.

[188] E.g. Andrew B. Barron and Brian Hare, "Prosociality and a Sociosexual Hypothesis for the Evolution of Same-Sex Attraction in Humans" in *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019), 2955, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02955; Severi Luoto, "Did Prosociality Drive the Evolution of Homosexuality?" *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 49 (2020), 2239–2244.

in our own and other species, the figure of 'the homosexual', as a person exclusively attracted to their own sex, may be a distinctively modern social and cultural construct.[189]

Considerable scientific effort has gone into investigating the biological bases of same-sex attraction, and a good deal of evidence has been published about genetic, epigenetic, hormonal and neurobiological influences or correlations. However, a clear picture has not yet emerged about the biological mechanisms underpinning same-sex attraction and behaviour. One challenge lies in the complexity and diversity of same-sex attraction and behaviour: for example, some studies make binary comparisons between subjects who identify mostly or exclusively as 'homosexual' or 'heterosexual', while others simply seek self-reports of any same-sex attraction or behaviour, which will include a wider and more varied range of sexual experience. Complexities like these must be kept in mind when reviewing the scientific literature on same-sex attraction and activity.

Twin studies and other heritability studies consistently indicate some degree of heritability for same-sex attraction or homosexuality, though heritability estimates vary quite widely between studies.[190] The search for candidate genes has so far not produced conclusive results. One of the first and best-known was a linkage between male sexual orientation and a region of the X chromosome known as Xq28, reported in the early 1990s,[191] though subsequent attempts to replicate this finding met with mixed

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[189] Pieter R. Adriaens and Andreas de Block, "The Evolution of a Social Construction: The Case of Male Homosexuality" in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 49(4) (2006), 570—585.

[190] Jacques Balthazart, "Sexual Partner Preference in Animals and Humans" in *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 115 (2020), 34-47, at 39-40.

[191] Dean H. Hamer et al., "A Linkage between DNA Markers on the X Chromosome and Male Sexual Orientation"' in *Science* 261.5119 (1993), 321–327.

success.[192] Further studies have identified genetic linkages to loci on various other chromosomes, and various genes in Xq28 and these other loci have been investigated. These potential candidate genes include some that are thought to be involved in brain development, some in the production and/or activity of sex hormones and other hormones, and some in olfactory responses to odours that could play a role in sexual attraction and activity.[193]

Apart from genetic evidence concerning genes involved in sex hormone activity, there is other evidence that sex hormones, particularly during embryonic and foetal development, may influence sexual orientation and identity later in life. There is good evidence that epigenetic changes affect the sensitivity of the developing embryo and foetus to sex hormones such as testosterone, and some authors speculate that epigenetic changes regulating sensitivity to sex hormones could also influence sexual orientation.[194] Some researchers have attempted to directly identify epigenetic markers influencing sexual orientation, though this has not yielded conclusive results so far. There is also more direct evidence for the pre-natal influence of sex hormones. For example, girls with the condition known as congenital adrenal hyperplasia are exposed in the womb to raised levels of male sex hormones, and there is evidence of a higher incidence of same-sex attraction and behaviour among these individuals later in adult life. There are also structural differences between the sexes that are thought to reflect differences in hormone levels in the womb. One of the best known is finger length ratio: men and women on average have different ratios of the second and fourth digits (index and ring fingers). Several studies have found that lesbian women tend to have a 'masculinized'

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[192] Balthazart, "Sexual Partner Preference", 40.
[193] Ibid., 40-41.
[194] Ibid., 41-42.

finger length ratio, and it is suggested that this reflects an environment in the womb that is more typical of male foetuses.[195] A more recent study, however, found no such difference.[196]

Although it is assumed that genetic and hormonal influences on sexual orientation work via the development of the brain, the neurobiology of sexual orientation and identity is still poorly understood. In the early 1990s, post-mortem studies suggested some structural differences between the brains of gay and straight men, though these results and their significance were disputed.[197] The development of imaging techniques like magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) has made it possible to discover more about aspects of brain structure and function that correlate with sexual orientation. One recent study suggested that there is lower sexual dimorphism between the brains of gay men and lesbian women than those of straight men and women.[198] Another by the same authors, however, indicated that there is not a simple 'feminization' of gay men's brains: some structural features resembled straight men's brains, others those of straight women, while some were different from either.[199] In terms of brain function, it has been claimed suggested that gay men score lower on spatial ability and higher on linguistic ability than straight men, a functional profile said to be

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[195] Ibid., 36-37.

[196] Luke Holmes et al., "The Relationship between Finger Length Ratio, Masculinity, and Sexual Orientation in Women: A Correlational Study" in *Plos one* 17(3) (2022), e0259637.

[197] Nicholas C. Neibergall et al., "Hormones, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Identity" in Lisa L. M. Welling and Todd K. Shackelford (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology and Behavioral Endocrinology* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2019), 201-214, at 209.

[198] Amirhossein Manzouri and Ivanka Savic, "Possible Neurobiological Underpinnings of Homosexuality and Gender Dysphoria" in *Cerebral Cortex* 29 (2019), 2084–2101.

[199] Amirhossein Manzouri and Ivanka Savic, "Multimodal MRI Suggests that Male Homosexuality May Be Linked to Cerebral Midline Structures" in *PLoS One* 13(10) (2018), e0203189. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0203189

'female-typical'.[200] Other functional studies have investigated the brain's response to odours: for example, two studies suggested that gay men's brains responded to the smell of male sweat in a similar way to those of straight women rather than straight men, while for lesbian women the pattern was reversed.[201] Finally, in numerous studies brain activity while viewing erotic material has been found to show patterns of arousal when the material corresponds to the subject's sexual orientation and aversion when it corresponds to the opposite orientation – perhaps not surprisingly.[202]

In sum, there is a large and diverse body of evidence for a range of biological correlations with, and influences on, same-sex sexual attraction and activity. However, the mechanisms by which these biological variations influence sexual attraction and behaviour are far from clear. Despite this lack of clarity, researchers such as Jacques Balthazart believe the evidence indicates that "sexual orientation is largely influenced, if not entirely determined, by biological factors acting during the foetal or early post-natal life, largely independently of social influences".[203] Even Balthazart, however, acknowledges that any adult behavioural trait, including sexual orientation, involves the interaction of innate biological factors with the individual's social environment. Others might wonder whether this acknowledgement gives sufficient weight to the complexity, diversity and culturally shaped character of human sexual desire and activity.[204]

[200] Qazi Rahman, "The Neurodevelopment of Human Sexual Orientation" in *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 29 (2005), 1057-1066, at 1062.
[201] Neibergall et al., "Hormones, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Identity", 209.
[202]Ibid.
[203] Balthazart, "Sexual Partner Preference", 35.
[204] Cf. Adriaens and de Block, "The Evolution of a Social Construction".

# 4.1.2 Psychology

After the range of different biological disciplines and perspectives on theories of sexuality, as well as sex and gender, this subchapter analyses the relationship between mind, self and emotions through the lenses of psychologies. Brief examples are offered in order to reflect on how these disciplines have historically addressed issues of sexuality in their theoretical analysis. First, evolutionary psychology highlights how the brain understands emotions, then psychoanalysis goes deeply into profound relational aspects of sexuality. Finally, attachment theory and social psychology show the way relatedness and interactions function throughout the entire life.

## 4.1.2.1 Three functional levels in the brain

Evolutionary psychology underlines how sex and affection have different origins. It was only in later stages of human evolution that reproductive sex and affective bonds of attachment mingled, thus allowing for relatedness and love relationships. But phylogenetic evolution shows that the analysis of (female) submissive behaviour and of (male) aggressive behaviour or violence in interpersonal relations is often thought to be polarized. The connection between sexuality and fear allowed men to exert dominion over women for centuries.[205]

Archaic parts of the brain are involved in deploying aggressive and dominant behaviour – both physically and verbally – and even if such an attitude is not adaptive because it is destructive, it easily emerges when it is not overcome by different behaviours of affective bonds and positive sociability.[206] Jaak Panksepp's research on affective

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[205] Silvia Bonino, *Nature and Culture in Intimate Partner Violence* (London: Routledge, 2018).
[206] Ibid.

neuroscience shows how psychologists need to understand emotions to understand behaviour and how neuroscientists need to understand emotions to understand the brain. The human brain has three functional levels involved in human sexuality. First, a deep reptilian brain, which is important for survival and reproduction, regulates those functions such as: feeding, sleep-wake cycle, exploratory attitudes, fight and flight responses, sexual arousal, with innate plans of action. Second, an emotional and limbic system, whose main structures are amygdala, hippocampus and thalamus; these regulate the deep brain and are responsible for thirst, hunger and mood, while being involved in social relations such as reward processing, habit formation, movement and learning, maternal care and group play. Third, the cerebral cortex, where learning and action control of both emotions and agency allow for adaptive responses to the outside world, with degrees of freedom. Brain plasticity, learning new things, memory and long-term storage occur across parts of the cerebral cortex, while allowing humans to deal with culture, education, art, myth, religion and science. The plasticity of the brain lasts until older age, through curiosity and continuous learning.[207]

This shows that instinctual drives such as rage and aggression, or sex without personal affective relationship and involvement, are not the ultimate response for human interactions, as individuals can learn other behavioural responses that might be evoked, especially when the social environment is able to positively reinforce attitudes such as mutual pleasure, psychological gratification, dialogue and understanding, through education and culture. For example, sexuality associated to submission is still present as part of that archaic brain, when the other partner is only perceived as an object

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[207] Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neurosceince. The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1998).

of one's own desire. But this behaviour is not innate – it can be changed because there are other ways of experiencing joyful sex, when attachment means communication, in which mirroring and reflection of otherness becomes a sharing of emotions and sentiments. Such loving dispositions have different effects for both individuals and groups, at the personal and collective level. When parenting and bringing up children are considered ways to practise reciprocity and mutuality, this nurtures loving relationships.[208]

Love is an autonomous force that is interrelated with sexuality. Are empathy and compassion experienced in mother-child relationships as processes that occur in the brain while interaction takes place? Mirror neurons were originally discovered in 1991 in the premotor cortex of monkeys, when interaction takes place by internal or external imitation of others' motor acts; but they are increasingly being studied in the field of more complex functions such as language, care and emotions, also later in life. [209] In humans, neuroimaging demonstrated the existence of two main networks with mirror properties: voluntary and affective behaviour.[210] Mirror neurons seem to enable an understanding of other persons' feelings, in different ways from mere emotional contagion, but research is still at an early stage.[211]

## 4.1.2.2 Psychoanalysis and object relations theory

Classical psychoanalysis considers sexuality as pervasive of human experience and Sigmund Freud included the social and affective

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[208] Silvia Bonino, *Nature and Culture in Intimate Partner Violence*.

[209] Elena Pulcini, "What Emotions Motivate Care?" in *Emotion Review*, 9(1), 2017, 64–71. https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073915615429

[210] Luigi Cattaneo, Giacomo Rizzolatti, "The Mirror Neuron System" in *Arch Neurol*. 66(5) (2009), 557-560.

[211] Leonard F. Haüsser, "Empathy and mirror neurons. A view on contemporary neuropsychological empathy research", *Praxis der Kinderpsychologie und Kinderpsychiatrie*, 61(5), 2012: 322-35.

elements as interwoven with genital and physiological aspects that were later criticized as being too 'biological'. The Oedipus complex showed how early childhood is a phase of development of humans as sexual beings. It incorporates affective/social and physical/physiological elements, with stages of psychosexual development through the discovery of the child's body. Moreover, the sexual dimension of human life is a field in which defence mechanisms (denial and projection) operate as coping mechanisms while bridging the gap between internal and external reality. They are psychologically unproductive in the long run, as they do not allow for full and active investment. A major Freudian contribution was the psyche operating through the concept of Superego, in addition to the instinctual Id and the Ego realistic psychology, with the internalization of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, not only in behaviours but also in internal patterns of feelings and emotions.[212] In adult life, other domains allow psychic dynamics to be further explored, for example in literature, poetry and drama.

The profound relational aspect of human sexuality has been developed in psychoanalysis by 'object relations theory'. According to Donald Winnicott, his book *Playing and Reality* (1971) shows how the creative tension that characterizes each relationship is integrated by needs and desires with a renewed understanding of 'illusion' as an essential aspect of human behaviour and experience. The notion of 'transitional' or 'intermediate space' is a shared space of interaction that is open to an interplay of individual and shared meaning. The creative play with reality is typical of early childhood but it continues through adult experiences at the intersection between inside and outside, such as intimacy, love, artistic

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[212] Brendan S. J. Callaghan, "Contributions from psychology" in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender*, (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2017), 100.

expression, science, culture, and religion. Believers participate in this interplay when they celebrate the human-divine encounter.

### 4.1.2.3 Attachment theory and social psychology

Attachment theory was developed by John Bowlby in his book *Attachment and Loss* (1969); it was defined as "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" to be analysed through the anxieties and distress experienced by children when they are separated from their primary caregivers. In such circumstances, they would not only seek for food and proximity, but they would ask for emotional closeness in order to receive comfort and care. Later research showed four different attachment styles. They are: 'secure attachment' with a joyful and loving environment which is a foundation for attachment; 'ambivalent-insecure attachment' with poor parental availability; 'avoidant-insecure attachment' with preference for other than parental care; and 'disorganized-insecure attachment' with parental figures that embody both comfort and fear. In later life as adults, these different patterns will influence the ways in which adults encounter their loving partner.

These classical authors have received criticisms in contemporary debate, and this fosters dialogue and reflection. To look only at individual psychology is not sufficient and the role of social psychology is important. Psychologies in the plural allow for a path of sexual development that assign a place to biological determinism and/or degrees of social constructivism, while in between there are interactionist approaches. In the art of becoming, processes of individuation that build on the acceptance of self and other must also include a greater range of differences. The variety of human experience is wider than theoretical research, since social psychology backs itself up with empirical studies. In this regard, discussion about gender identity and sexual orientation shows how

developmental patterns are many, while offering a more nuanced understanding of human sexuality, as desire is a crucial component of sexuality, and it cannot be reduced to categorization. It is more fluid, creative and reciprocal. There are, in fact, many types of heterosexualities and of homosexualities, because identity and identification are different psychological processes that combine in various ways, being active with different levels of consciousness. They also tolerate degrees of contradiction when classifications strive for a symbolic order.[213] The history of psychiatry shows how views on homosexuality have vastly changed in the last 70 years, from the first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*, 1952), where homosexuality was classified under "sociopathic personality disturbance", to the most recent version, *DSM* 5, that removed pathology from homosexuality (2013).[214]

## 4.1.3 Anthropology

In the pioneering ethnographic work by Margaret Mead [215], the anthropologist questioned the universalist assumption according to which masculine and feminine traits of personality are based on sex in all cultures, showing how they are instead slightly linked to sex, as are the clothes, the manners and other behaviours influenced by social conditioning. Children's upbringing was also considered to be moulded by culture that determined differences, both between and

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[213] Vittorio Lingiardi, *Men in Love: Male Homosexualities from Ganymede to Batman* (New York: Open Court Pub., 2002).

[214] Sarah E. McHenry, "Gay is Good: History of Homosexuality in the DSM and Modern Psychiatry" in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 18(1) (2022), 4-5, doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp-rj.2022.180103

[215] Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (London, New York: Harper Perennial, 1971), first edition 1928; Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (London, New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), first edition 1935.

inside communities. In the 1970s, the 'interpretive turn' introduced by Clifford Geertz [216] helped social scientists to address not only material culture but also symbols and meanings of interactions and language practices that were to be interpreted in their cultural contexts. Since then, there has been a flourishing of ethnographic reflection on the difference between women and men in fieldwork, as they were exposed to interlocutors who would no longer speak for a culture but would express their position in it. For anthropology, as well as for other disciplines such as philosophy, sociology or history, gender and women's studies, which were bringing together scholars of various disciplines, this represented an interdisciplinary openness that is still valid today in trying to develop a common theoretical language.[217] It is to be noted that different cultures and societies differently construct and represent normative notions of sexuality, intersecting with geography, ethnicity, social class, age and sexual orientation. Such diversity is an open-ended richness that calls for further scientific research, in order to better understand how it is embodied and actively transformed by subjects. When addressing these issues, it is important to remember that all knowledge is in the making and that the task of interpretation is always provisional.

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[216] Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation* of *cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
[217] The relationship between theology and anthropology is often considered 'awkward' or 'sui generis' but recent research has flourished, see Joel Robbins, "Anthropology and Theology: An Akward Relationship" in *Anthropological Quarterly*, 79, 2 (2006): 285-294; Paola Schellenbaum and Letizia Tomassone (eds), "Sui Generis. Per una teologia sui generis, non più autosufficiente" [Sui Generis. For a theology sui generis, no longer self-sufficient] in *Protestantesimo.Rivista della Facoltà Valdese di Teologia*, 68(3-4) (2013), 239-44; Anna Stewart and Simon Coleman, "Contributions from Anthropology" in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender*, 116.

## 4.1.3.1 The nature-nurture controversy

As far as interdisciplinarity is concerned, the connections between mind, self and emotions critically investigate the "psychic unity of mankind" while questioning the nature-nurture or the nature-culture conundrum that brings together interpretative theorists, cognitive scientists, ethnologists, psychoanalytic theorists, critical theorists, and the role of language. From the 1980s, this impacted on theories of child development that had been dominated by well-known child psychologist Jean Piaget, but has recently entered a post-Piaget era. Children are no longer considered to be undeveloped or naïve experimental subjects but are regarded as protagonists on their way to knowledge through exploration and continuous learning. The problem is always how innate characteristics relate to the environment and what role specific cultures play, if any. The scientific debate remains open to different possibilities and in the nature-nurture controversy it is reasonable to make a fifty-fifty proposition. This means a shift from a behavioural definition of culture (actions and customs) to a growing attention to cognition and emotion (symbols and meanings, conceptual structures in internal and external worlds).[218]

When sexuality is under scrutiny, the question that anthropology asks is what is 'human' in a specific culture, as some societies consider homosexual behaviours to be 'against nature'. Common human nature, as will also become clearer in the chapter on the family, is not universal in terms of values. But what is human refers to the capability of preserving a balance with nature while protecting it from human greed, as all living beings interact in interconnected ways. In this sense, what is against nature is violence and corruption, not specific sexual behaviours. Sexuality and sexual roles are also

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[218] Richard A. Shweder and Robert A. LeVine (eds), *Culture Theory. Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1984).

important as meanings to describe the social roles that men and women were assigned by culture.[219] Moreover, culture and religion are not only sites of meaning – they are to be considered symbolic systems/networks, with entanglements of actors and implications for society, economics, politics, family and tradition.[220] This approach impacted on ethnographic research, which stopped ignoring women, previously defined as 'muted groups', and started to critically question dominant approaches.[221] Giving voice to minorities and including them in ethnographic accounts allowed researchers to capture the vitality of a community.

## 4.1.3.2 Social meanings of sexuality

Anthropologists Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead looked cross-culturally at the 'performative' aspect of sexuality and gender.[222] They wrote about how gender operates within the cultures, both in poorer local communities and in richer post-industrial societies, with access to new technologies and mass media. For feminist anthropology, the 'sex/gender system' described 'a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention' while gender was the 'socially imposed division of the sexes' according to which women are oppressed as women.[223] The role of culture in assigning sexual roles was then underlined in the 'performative' aspect of sexuality and its social meanings. Fluidity within and beyond

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[219] Francesco Remotti, *Contro natura. Una lettera al Papa* [Against Nature. A letter to the Pope], (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2010).
[220] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
[221] Henrietta Moore, *Feminism and Anthropology* (Oxford: Polity, 1988).
[222] Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, *Sexual Meanings. The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1981).
[223] Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" in Rayna Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975).

sexuality indicate that human beings have their ideas on the relational aspect of femininity and masculinity. For example, the relationship between sexuality and language starts at birth, when a baby is proclaimed a boy or a girl, within the cultural norms of socialization, interactions, and rituals. Performativity, in the anthropological sense, simply means a positioning as sexed beings in relation to others and beyond deterministic generalizations of sexuality. It does not refer to the sexualized performance of sex, not even by a lesbian woman or heterosexual man.

Sexuality may be studied and researched by anthropologists in contemporary multicultural societies, where power operates with education, social class, structural violence and poverty, in addition to heteronormativity, i.e. the assumption of a person's heterosexuality. These combine and reinforce each other or change over time and circumstances. [224] Creative connections between sociolinguistics and anthropology explore social categories as emerging through performativity.[225] This approach has been widely debated and it has encouraged some important consequences. First, masculine and feminine identities have been conceived as emergent in language and do not exist outside their expressions. Second, they emerge in interactions and rituals, which are situated in historical and social contexts. Third, consider the linguistic routines studied by anthropologists – they can be used and projected by speakers in creative ways. In so doing, categories change according to dialogical

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[224] Ann Oakley, *Sex, Gender, and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, *Sexual meanings. The cultural construction of gender and sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1981); Jane F. Collier and Sylvia J. Yanagisako, *Gender and Kinship. Essays Toward a Unified Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1987); Sylvia J. Yanagisako and Carol Delaney, *Naturalising Power. Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1995); Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 2001).
[225] Patricia Whelehan and Anne Bolin (eds), *The International Encyclopedia of Human Sexuality*, First Edition (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

practice. Conversation analysts stress the emergent quality of speech, which might orient change in the unfolding of talk. The debate on the importance of conscious and unconscious behaviour will continue to play a major part and performativity will still be studied as it relates to sexuality. Four, far from being limited to the idea of a female mediation with the world, the female experience of a real body and the practice of the unconscious – linking political practice to psychoanalytic thought – foregrounds the female experience as central. A critical theory of culture based on this practice links together language, desire, narration and subjectivity.[226]

## 4.1.4 Queer Theory

A final approach to sexuality we would like to raise here, building on the previous discussion of anthropology, is that of queer theory. The term 'queer' has changed its meaning throughout the long history of its use. From a rather neutral term, 'to query' ('to investigate'), it changed into an adjective denoting that which is odd, out of the ordinary, peculiar. In the 20th century it then changed into a pejorative term for gay men, who responded by claiming the term for themselves in an affirming way. Queer consequently became an activist badge of honour for LGBTQ+ people. In its more popular use, this is still the way in which the term queer is applied: as an umbrella

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[226] For example, in Italy the Diotima group of women that gathered around the philosopher Adriana Cavarero produced a gendered thinking about the world and took a stance against the very erasure of sexual difference, thus denouncing patriarchy's pretence of neutrality and impartiality. This group also encouraged the practice of entrustment that splits the world in two spheres, female and male, introducing the role of a symbolic mother and the idea of a female genealogy, its past history and its present needs. Some critics have highlighted that such a separatist perspective carries a bio-essentialist connotation that gender does not have. See Maurizio Viano, "Sexual Difference by the Milan Women's Collective Bookstore" in *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought* (1999), 8.

term for gay men, lesbian women, bisexual people and sometimes also transgender people. When referring to the belonging to any of these groups, 'queer' denotes an identity. It is also, however, a theoretical perspective on sexuality and gender that is actually (and rather confusingly) quite critical of identity categories to begin with. In this chapter we explore the term in that capacity although, as will become clear, many of the 'older' meanings of queer still resonate in its current use.

One of the tried-and-true practices of sexual and gender minorities has been to demonstrate how very much the same they were as everybody else, and how their experiences, love and relationships were of no less value than those of heterosexual people. Same-sex marriage is but one example of the equalizing of the love between same-sex and different-sex people, and it is often seen as a move towards equality: queer love needs to be recognized, since it is 'just as good' as heterosexual love. From a queer perspective, this pursuit of 'normality' and inclusion is met with suspicion, and the 'admittance' to the institution of marriage is distrusted by some queer theorists who see it as a form of incorporation of sexual minorities into heterosexual frameworks. [227] In a nutshell, queer theory is not about wanting to be included in the normal, but contesting the normal. Queer theory asks: how did the normal come about? Via which processes of inclusion and exclusion did it become the normal? How does the normal exercise power over people?

In particular, queer theory questions the historical formation and current effects of heteronormativity and cisnormativity. By heteronormativity we here mean the often implicit expectation that everybody is heterosexual until proven otherwise, which is demonstrated in daily conversations, but also in the ways in which

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[227] Brandon A. Robinson, "Is this what equality looks like? Sexuality Research and Social Policy" 9(4) (2012), 327-336.

societies are traditionally organized. By cisnormativity we mean the expectation that everybody identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth, and how this is reflected in how society is organized. While challenging normativities and 'normals' in a wider sense, these two 'normals' have been prominent on the agenda of queer theory for decades.

A first concern of queer theory, then, is to trace back, as far as possible, the formation of norms. Although established norms have the tendency to disguise their own historicity and present themselves as 'having always been the case', they do have specific formation histories. Queer theorist Jonathan Katz, for instance, investigates how heterosexuality was first coined as a term and then became constructed as the normative sexuality in the West.[228] As a product of the upcoming field of sexology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it is a relatively recent term. It was, in fact, the growing scientific interest in *homo*sexuality that made it possible for the norm, heterosexuality, to name, establish and promote itself. Katz's argument is not that people were not heterosexual before this time, but that the fact that we now use to describe certain experiences, acts, emotions and identities as specifically *heterosexual* is quite new. And, referring back to 3.2.1 on social constructivism, queer theory would state that terms like 'heterosexual' shape, rather than describe, social reality.

The two key thinkers mentioned in the subsection on social constructivism, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, are also considered foundational for the field of queer theory. Foucault's best-known work in this regard is *The History of Sexuality*.[229] In this

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[228] Jonathan Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
[229] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Part 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1978).

study, Foucault investigates how sexuality, while often considered private and taboo, has in fact been a topic of importance in all sorts of ways throughout history. Though a shift has occurred from talking about sexuality in the confessional booth to speaking of it in the therapist's room, the scientist's classroom and the popular magazine's advice column, sexuality has been discussed, investigated and, above all, regulated in multiple ways. For Foucault this was important, because religious, scientific, governmental, and popular discourses on sexuality created subject-positions. For instance, that of the homosexual and the heterosexual. The creation of a subject-position means that the production of knowledge on a certain topic, such as sexuality, invites people to identify with the character that belongs to this topic, through which this topic is personified. The moment 'the homosexual' becomes a persona in scientific and popular literature, a character with certain traits, and preferences, it becomes possible for people to relate to this persona and state "I am like that".

In Foucault's study, the most important shift regarding sexuality has been that it changed from something people *do*, an activity, to something they believe they *are*, an identity. Yet for him it was important to always pay attention to how this possibility of identification came about, and to always keep in mind that even though we may take some identities (such as straight, gay or lesbian) for granted now, they are in fact constructed identities with very specific genealogies. We need to be critical of this process of construction because the creation of knowledge involves power. The individual who creates categories can decide who does and who does not fit their mould. Moreover, once categories are created, they can be used to govern people, to regulate their behaviour. For Foucault, this regulation is not inherently good or bad, it is just something to be aware of. For instance, terms like 'lesbian' or 'gay'

enable policies directed at sexual minorities, and these may be restrictive (for instance, in Turkey, gay men were for a long time banned from military service), or emancipatory (for instance, anti-discrimination legislation). The important question is not *whether* people are regulated, because they always are in one way or another, but *how.* Which categories come to be seen as denoting the normal, and which as denoting the deviant? How may categories be applied to discipline people into the normal?

In 3.2, we briefly touched upon the notion of *performativity*, coined by Judith Butler. It refers to the view that gender is not the inevitable outcome from a 'given' core identity, innate in all human beings, but is rather the performance of the script of social expectations people try to meet. This raises the question as to whether queer can be seen as an identity, and perspectives on this differ among those using the term. For some, queer is an identity they proudly (re)claim and that suits them well. Queer denotes an identity outside of the heterosexual and/or cisgender norm. However, if the performative nature of gender can be demonstrated, it will be evident that Butler's work also has consequences for thinking about sexual identity. If masculinity and femininity are seen as not fixed but fluid, constructed in a normative but ultimately arbitrary way, open to change, then what does it mean to be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual? What does it mean to feel attracted to the same or the opposite sex or gender, when both 'sex' and 'gender' are such unstable categories? Though many queer theorists recognize the importance of the strategic use of such categories, they have also come to bracket identity labels such as gay, straight or lesbian. While recognizing that these labels can be very important for people and also enable people to claim a social space for themselves, many queer theorists will emphasize that these labels are, in a way, random and provisional.

To *queer*, as a verb, consequently refers back to the exposure of, and critical and playful engagement with, established norms of gender and sexuality. This act of *queering* may involve both academic study and grassroots activism. Importantly, *queering* something (such as history, time, the literary canon, the Bible or education) does not automatically imply the formulation of a critical perspective on *non-normative* identities or activities. Queer is not necessarily about LGBTQI+ people, drag shows or camp performances. Heterosexuality (and cisgender identity) are equally interesting topics from the perspective of queer theory. From a queer perspective it is interesting, for instance, to show that there is not 'one' heterosexuality, but that it takes many forms, and that some heterosexualities are more equal than others. A romantic relationship between partners of just about the same age, for instance, is accepted more readily than when there is a large age difference, especially when the woman is older than the man. A marriage between partners who spontaneously met and fell in love is more according to the dominant script than a marriage between a man and a 'mail order bride'.[230] In many Western countries, the romantic ideal of the 'chosen' marriage is preferred over an 'arranged' marriage. Sadomasochism is sometimes frowned upon, as are polyamorous relationships. There are all kinds of hierarchies involved in heterosexuality, too, and this means that people who identify as straight will also find that their love lives and relationships are disciplined in all sorts of way.

As mentioned previously, queer theory could thus be defined as a critical perspective on the norm and how it regulates people's lives. While its focus has traditionally been on sexuality and gender, other normativities (and transgressions) have also been the focus of queer theory, For instance, racially mixed marriages question norms of

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[230] Don Kulick (ed.), *Queersverige* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 2005).

whiteness and racialized norms regarding relationships. Or: there has been a growing interest in connecting queer theory to 'crip' theory – the theoretical perspective that questions ableist norms, for instance, the assumption that people have bodies without disabilities and therefore have equal access to a building, a meeting, a demonstration or a text.

Finally, queer theory and queer activism is not just about deconstructing norms and exposing their restrictive effects, but also about imagining alternatives and finding the playful as well as confrontational strategies needed to start thinking and living out alternatives. We find such a queer alternative among the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (SOPI), an activist group studied by Religious Studies scholar Melissa Wilcox. [231] The SOPI are a collective of (mostly) gay men, originating in San Francisco, who started dressing as Catholic nuns in order to address social issues in their neighbourhood. Importantly, the organizations emerged in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, drawing attention to those who were suffering, address social stigma, commemorate those who passed away and organize fundraising to promote safer sex. The sisters established an order of various communities, also based on the Catholic model, in which they sometimes live in houses, become novices, take sister-names (often with a funny connotation, such as sister Irma Geddon), are governed by a 'mother inferior', etc. Though this may seem mostly parody and play, the sisters are very serious about their community and about the charity work that they do. In the order of the SOPI it becomes clear how queerness and religion can coincide. The figure of the nun enables the sisters to claim a semi-religious, female identity. Yet they also change this identity by

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[231] Melissa M. Wilcox, "Spirituality, Activism, and the 'Postsecular' in the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence" in Peter Nynäs and Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip (eds), *Religion, Gender and Sexuality in Everyday Life* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 37-50; Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Nuns* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

adding glitter and glamour. Both their own identities as gay men as well as the archetypal identity of the Catholic nun change as they are merging.

To conclude, from a queer perspective, sexuality and gender are reconsidered as the results of repeated, seemingly natural, yet ultimately arbitrary norms of gender and sexuality. When people become aware of these norms they may (of course within the limits of the possible), try and purposely fail at performing these norms. This is relevant for people who fall outside of the heterosexual norm, such as those who identify as gay, lesbian and bisexual, but also for people who in some ways align with that norm in the sense that they identify as heterosexual, but in other ways fail to live up to its expectations, for instance because their preferred relationship differs from the norm. Drag, play, and other creative forms may be helpful in deconstructing sexuality and gender and imagining alternatives.

## 4.2 Theologies and sexuality

Whereas 4.1 presented some of the central contemporary theories regarding sexuality, this chapter presents contemporary theological positions regarding human sexuality, before the next one analyses justified Protestant reflections concerning sexuality.

The emphasis here is on theological positions concerning the understanding and meaning of sexuality in human life, to serve as a basis for reflecting on more specific topics and questions such as same sex relations, rather than addressing a range of individual topics in isolation from each other. We will therefore not attempt an extensive exegetical analysis of the biblical verses most often used

in the discussion on same-sex relations, which have been dealt with in numerous places already.

## 4.2.1 Sexuality, human identity and divine purposes

Contemporary theological considerations of sexuality have, if not universally, then at least to a large extent, incorporated a modern understanding of sexuality, where sexuality is viewed as a dimension or part of human self and identity, and not just isolated, individual acts of a particular kind. [232] That is certainly not to suggest that theological considerations or evaluations of human acts and practices in the domain of sexuality have been abandoned. However, the meaning and assessment of acts, ways of living and being with oneself and others, are usually viewed within a broader context including, but not restricted to, sexuality as a dimension of human selfhood. [233]

This represents a change compared to earlier strands in the history of theology, which tended to focus on human sexuality either within the context of marriage in relation to the purpose of procreation, or with regard to virginity, celibacy and ascetic life. Throughout the history of theology, some positions have been suspicious of sexual, procreative acts as entwined with human sinfulness or at least sexual renunciation as a more valued form of life, not least prevalent in the

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[232] Elizabeth Stuart, "The Theological Study of Sexuality" in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*" (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2014). This link gives the index of its 41 articles by different authors: https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199664153.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199664153

[233] Daniel J. Louw, "Beyond 'Gayism'? Towards a Theology of Sensual, Erotic Embodiment within an Eschatological Approach to Human Sexuality" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 132 (Nov., 2008), 111.

early and early medieval church.[234] Others have considered them as not necessarily sinful, and even possible expressions of loving service and a way of giving oneself to the other, according to the will of God, a view ascribed to Martin Luther but also found in early Christian sources (such as the early Gregory of Nyssa).[235]

# 4.2.2 Sexuality, image of God and human relationality

## 4.2.2.1 Human relationality and sexually differentiated bodies

Contemporary theologies are marked by profound differences and sometimes disagreements in their engagements with modern and contemporary questions and understandings of sexuality. Across the differences, they seem to share in affirming sexuality as a part of human beings' God-given life. And even though it is also, as are all aspects of human life, marked by human sinfulness, contemporary positions distance themselves from a view typically attributed to Augustine, that sexual acts of procreation are in a particular way the origin or 'transmitter' of sin.

They share the understanding that sexuality, viewed from a theological perspective and as a topic of theological anthropology, is subject to reflections and assessments in terms of God's goods and purposes for human life, but these positions clearly differ in their

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[234] Sara Moslener, "Sexual Renunciation in Christian history and theology" in Lisa Isherwood and Dirk van der Horst (eds.), *Contemporary Theological Approaches to Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 2018), 90–101; Kathy L. Gaca, "Early Christian Sexuality," in Thomas K. Hubbard (ed.) *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities* (Oxford: Blackwell Publ., 2014), 558–573.

[235] Sarah Coakley, "The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God" in Marc Cortez and Michael P. Jensen (eds), *T&T Clark Reader in Theological Anthropology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 300–311.

assessments of sexuality in relation to the divinely ordered purposes and goods of human life and community.

A dominant form of engagement with human sexuality, as already mentioned, focuses primarily on sexuality in relation to its place and meaning in human relationality. And prominent in this regard is the view that relationality, and sexuality within it, is an innate dimension of human life as created in the image of God. Sexuality is one way of realizing human life's fundamental relational nature, and the way human sexuality and its enactment contributes to relationships according to divine purposes is essential to its evaluation and assessment. [236] As created in the image of God, human life is fundamentally relational, constituted by being placed in relations with that which is other than self, most fundamentally God, but also manifest in the outward relations: with other humans and with nature. Sexuality is perceived as an especially pertinent expression of this relationality.

From here, however, views go in two quite different directions. One direction, typically ascribed to key mid-20th century Protestant theologians such as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, argues that the distinction as 'image of God' not only relates to human relationality in general, but is more specifically sustained by human beings as male and female.[237] As image of God, human beings are free, but free in the sense of being 'free-for-the-other', in relationships. But this *analogia relationalis*, as Bonhoeffer calls it, is intrinsically related to the duality of human beings as men and women. [238] Viewed not only as relational, but as fundamentally

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[236] Stuart, "The Theological Study of Sexuality", 4–5.
[237] Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology, vol 2. The Works of God* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1999), 88–90.
[238] Michael Brain, "Sexuality and community in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 71(1) (2018), 73.

complementary, oneness is found by men and women in relation to each other. Being human is thus complete and truly human through the mutual relationship between a man and a woman. In the words of the more contemporary theologian Robert Jenson, who firmly espouses a view of this kind, "[s]exuality is therefore the way in which our directedness to each other, the intrinsic commonality of human being, is built into the very objects as which we are there for one another."[239] To him, it is only by virtue of existing as a body and only as body that the human being can be there for the fellow human being, for a 'you.' This, he claims, is also the case for the spiritual, renewed body anticipated in baptism according to Paul (1 Cor 15:42–49). Sexuality, Jenson asserts, is "the chief marvel" of this body, which is constitutive for the I's ability to be there for the 'you'. Relying on Karl Barth, he emphasizes how the human being is constituted as directed towards the other as a sexually differentiated body as man and woman, in terms of objective bodily differences between the two. Here there is also a direct link to an understanding of gender, in the claim that maleness and femaleness are constituted in the body, not in psychology or a socially constructed thing. This is also conveyed in the creation stories in Genesis (Gen 1:26–28; 2:18–24), which he links, and interprets as underlining how ordination of the human being to its purpose, whereby it is designated as 'good,' presupposes the sexual other in terms of woman to man. Humanity is not created and does not exist other than as male and female humanity.[240]

Sexuality is, according to Jenson, the coincidence of sensuality – the awareness of the other and captivation by that awareness through all senses, like touching, seeing, hearing – and objective male-female differentiation – "humanity's provision with bisexual reproductive

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[239] Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 2, 89.
[240] Ibid., 90.

apparatus".[241] Consequently, only in the form of the heterosexual attraction and fellowship is sexuality thus affirmed as part of God's creative and life-sustaining work.[242] 'Homoeroticism', in Jenson's words, is therefore not a form of sexuality at all. Even though the pleasures and affections associated with sexuality might be involved, it has been disconnected from sexuality's function and deepest meaning. There can therefore not be such a thing as 'same-sex marriage', either.[243]

Recent readings of Bonhoeffer, however, point at a broader perspective on human relationality as the framework for understanding human sexuality theologically. The corruption of human relations and community, exerted by sin, certainly pertains to human sexuality as well. Although forms of community remain intact, sin has altered the I-you relation, orienting the human being inwards towards the self, rather than outwards towards the other in trust and giving love. "Male-female relationships after the Fall are now a sign of division and hostility, with each individual viewing his or her own being over and against the other and seeking to transgress the limit of the other, to claim a right over them. [...] in terms of an individualistic absorption of the other."[244] This indeed sounds grim, but in light of how we in recent decades, also within churches, have been made painfully aware of sexuality's potential for abuse and transgression, how it can be manipulatively employed for pursuing one's own needs in disregard of the other, it clearly also speaks convincingly about the phenomenon of sexuality in human life.

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[241] Ibid., 89.
[242] Ibid.
[243] Ibid., 93.
[244] Brain, "Sexuality and community", 76.

Bonhoeffer further strongly emphasizes that in spite of how sin have destroyed and corrupted human relations and community, including sexuality and spousal love, it has also been reoriented in Christ, sanctified and redeemed. God preserves human community including sexuality by reordering it, not through orders or patterns of human life laid down in creation, but through divine 'mandates', which refer to Christologically reoriented forms of natural life. This pertains to natural forms of human life, but reordered and oriented towards Christ and the transformation of sinful reality he inaugurates through justification and salvation. There is continuity with the created, past reality in terms of reference to 'the natural' and to God's creational intent. But the natural "simultaneously has reference to what is to come in Christ in the justification and renewal of the world."[245] The point and value of the natural – such as human sexuality and marriage as its institutional form – is therefore not to affirm the given, but to pursue its reordered purpose and goal in Christ.[246]

This understanding of 'mandates,' in terms of reordering and reorientation towards Christ and the transformed reality he inaugurates, has more recently evoked the question whether it implies sexual difference and division of human beings as male and female as essential to human ontology or not. Arguments are made that even though Bonhoeffer considers procreation as a purpose of sexuality, alongside companionship, joy and love between partners in marriage, this did not in principle exclude same-sex marriages as conflicting with an ontological nature divided into male and female, although Bonhoeffer did not himself consider that possibility.[247]

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[245] Ibid., 80–81.
[246] Ibid., 81.
[247] Brain, Sexuality and community", 83–84, also Christiane Tietz, "The Role of Jesus Christ for Christian Theology" in Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler (eds), *Christ,*

## 4.2.2.2 Human relationality, sexuality and relations of trust

These interpretations of Bonhoeffer point towards the second direction within this overall relational approach to sexuality. Here, affirmation of human sexuality is not restricted to heterosexual relations formed according to binaries of male and female. Instead, sexuality and sexual relations are acknowledged as domains of human life where creative gifts of love, commitment, self-giving, care, pleasure, desire and joy can be received and passed on, and as such as domains where humankind can experience and participate in God's creative and loving work. Although procreation is certainly a part of this, the potential for procreation by male and female is not a condition for human sexuality to be aligned with these purposes of creation and love. As Elizabeth Stuart argues: "[I]t is not the gender of those in relationship that matters but whether their sexual relationship manifests the values and virtues of the kingdom of God and one of these is to receive the gift of sex with joy and gratitude."[248] An example of this is the statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust", issued by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which sets its reflections on human sexuality within a combined theological framework of creation and transformation. Without explicit references to Bonhoeffer and divine mandates, there are nonetheless resemblances with his ideas of how created, but sinful reality and natural life, including sexuality, are transformed, renewed and reoriented in Christ.

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*Church, and World: New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Theology and Ethics* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).

[248] Elizabeth Stuart, "The Theological Study of Sexuality" in Adrian Thatcher (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2014), 18-31.

The statement starts from how human beings are invited and entrusted to participate in God's continuing creation.[249] The double work of God's law enables human participation in God's intentions and purposes of protection, flourishing and renewal of life and relations,[250] a participation which stands under God's promise of a renewed and transformed future, of an open, changing and inexhaustible creation (Rom 8:19–25; 2 Cor 5:17).[251]

The Christian vocation and destiny to freely and lovingly serve the neighbour is a crucial part of this,[252] and viewed in this perspective, human sexuality is oriented towards living faithfully in this world, rather than towards humankind's salvific destiny. This entails first acknowledging how sexuality, like all other domains of human life, is inherently ambiguous. On the one hand, it is associated with creative and renewing powers, which contribute to human flourishing through the joy and fulfilment of giving, as well as receiving, physical and emotional intimacy and care, the pleasures of romantic and erotic love, desire and contentment, and mutual devotion and commitment. But on the other, as are all parts of human life, sexuality is inevitably also permeated by sin, and therefore equally liable to be associated with destructive powers of egotism, disrespect and exploitation, both physical and psychological and emotional abuse, harm and violence.[253] What the statement does not mention, and which should be kept in mind, is that even though sin encompasses and conditions all of humanity and the whole of reality, the harm exerted as a result often systematically hits some

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[249] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA], *A Social Statement on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (Minneapolis: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2009), 5.

[250] ELCA, *Human Sexuality*, 6, referring to Martin Luther, *Von weltlicher Obrigkeit*.

[251] Ibid., 5–6.

[252] Romans 13:8-10. See also chapter 6.3 for further explication on vocation and family.

[253] ELCA, *Human Sexuality*, 10–11, 13.

people and groups harder than others. This is also the case with regard to sexuality. Sexual stereotypes, such as that of being promiscuous or sexually predatory, for instance, hit people of colour differently from white people, and women in different ways from men. Here, the work of liberation and queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid comes to mind. She argued that theology itself is sexual and guilty of creating or perpetuating such stereotypes, for instance in creating a category of 'the poor' as a sexless class of people. The reality, however, is that sexual vulnerability is very much part of being poor, especially for women and sexual minorities, and keeping sexuality out of (liberation) theology fails to address this not-so-romantic reality from theological thinking and acting.[254]

Hence, in line with the calling to neighbourly love in the midst of the complexities of human life in this world, this approach to human sexuality also entails recognising the manifold and complex situations human beings find themselves in. Being single or in a relationship, experiencing a young or an aging body, gender identity,[255] or sexual orientation, are just some of the contexts and complexities that surround sexuality in human life.[256] If we are called to live faithfully with regard to sexuality in light of God's promise of openness, renewal and transformation of created reality and life, we must recognize and respond to these conditions as a calling to foster and enhance trust within human life, human relationships and

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[254] Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology. Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).
[255] Susannah Cornwall, "The Future of Sexuality Debates in the Church: Sacred Challenges and Opportunities for Theological 'Traditionalists' and 'Revisionists'", *Modern Believing* 62, no 1 (2021), 13; Stuart, "The Theological Study of Sexuality", 8–9; Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, "Queering Desire" in Lisa Isherwood and Dirk van der Horst (eds), *Contemporary Theological Approaches to Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 2018), 124–132.
[256] ELCA, *Human Sexuality*, 8–9.

society. [257] This involves respecting and promoting trust as that which sustains and enables human relationships also in the domain of sexuality, not only between individual persons, but also in communities and societies. It involves, among other things, respecting and valuing the dignity of each individual, protection of people from all kinds of harm, exhibiting compassion and justice for all, especially the most vulnerable, ensuring accountability and responsibility, promoting welfare and the common good, and loving – in *agape*, *eros* and *philia*.[258]

## 4.2.2.3 Human relationality, sexuality and eschatological, embodied life

Other approaches differ from these two main types of engaging with human sexuality, but are still concerned with sexuality in terms of its meaning for closeness and intimacy in relations and human encounters. They approach sexuality in terms of eschatology and the meaning of redemption, renewal and transformation in Christ for human life. Human sexuality, according to Daniel Louw, can be viewed as a spiritual issue and phenomenon both from a general and a Christian perspective. [259] By describing it thus, he intends to underline how sexuality pertains to the "ensoulment of the body" and "embodiment of the soul". It pertains to the person's innermost being and the quest for meaning.[260] But precisely as this spiritual reality, embodied soul and ensouled body, it is transformed by and participates in an eschatological reality, brought forward by Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. [261] Sacramentally and spiritually, the

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[257] Ibid., 12–15.
[258] Ibid., 14–15.
[259] Louw, "Beyond 'Gayism'?", 112. Louw starts from 1 Corinthians 6:13–20 as a key text for an eschatological grounding of human sexuality.
[260] Ibid., 111.
[261] Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12.

Christian as totality of body and soul, becomes in-corporated into this new reality, indwelled by God's spirit, so that this status as a transformed and renewed being in Christ, and the self-giving love it entails, becomes more fundamental than the worldly, given features of human life. In this renewed, eschatological reality gender differences are also secondary to the primary identity as a new being in Christ, famously expressed in Galatians 3:28 (2.1. and 3.3). Set within this reality, human sexuality is disconnected from gender structures based in nature or creation, and set within a new reality, where there is neither male nor female. Human sexuality is reset within a pneumatological dimension[262] of how God's spirit indwells human being and human life, lifting it above earthly distinctions and differences concerning gender and sexual orientation and identity, and instead positing "a new constructive understanding of embodiment".[263]

Following from this, several questions and considerations arise concerning manifestations of human sexuality according to this destiny and designation. How it manifests bonding relationships of trust and faithfulness; how the identity in Christ trumps any other identities and self-understandings emerging from context and culture; how sexuality cannot be understood as merely determined by biological or neurological factors or drives, but is fundamentally a spiritual issue; how Christian love is linked with rejection of exploitation and abuse of power, to mention but some. [264] This approach to sexuality in terms of a spiritual reality in the risen Christ, and the reality of love into which the Christian is integrated, by no means leads to a subjectivist and situational ethic. An understanding of binary gender as essential is, however, seen in perspective, and

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[262] Galatians 5:22.
[263] Louw, "Beyond 'Gayism'?", 113–114; Stuart, "The Theological Study of Sexuality", 8–9.
[264] Louw, "Beyond 'Gayism'?", 115.

made obsolete as an ethical standard for manifestations of human sexuality thanks to this transformed, eschatological reality in Christ.

## 4.2.3 Theology, sexuality and singleness

The theological approaches above (4.2.2) relate to the domain of sexuality mainly within the framework of human relationality, in light of its meaning and purposes within a relationship, as a particular form of realization of human relationality. This clearly evokes the question whether, and how, we can make theological sense of sexuality as a dimension of a human life apart from, or outside, relations with others. The term *amatonormativity* is helpful here. It was coined by philosopher Elizabeth Brake, who defines it as "the assumption that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types. The assumption that valuable relationships must be marital or amorous devalues friendships and other caring relationships."[265] Lest this study, too, falls into the trap of automatically assuming everyone is or wants to be in a romantic relationship, we should ask: can there be any kind of theological significance or valuing of sexuality disconnected from relationship and partnership, if its purpose and meaning is closely connected to relationality as a fundamental human feature? The above-mentioned positions, exemplified by the ELCA statement on *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* and Louw's approach to sexuality as embodied and eschatological, are primarily concerned with the challenges or questions evoked by same-sex relations, and have little to say about theology and sexuality apart from relationality.

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[265] Elizabeth Brake, *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2012).

As stated above, one third of all households in the European Union are single-person households; in some countries it is well above 40 percent. Obviously, singles, too, to a large extent have sexual encounters and shorter or longer sexual relations. But first, that is not necessarily the case for all. And second, the theological value ascribed to sexuality in terms of human relationality, including the above-mentioned positions, tends to presume or presuppose stable and enduring marriage-like relationships, not more transitory and episodic ones.

Two accounts reflect on single life in light of a theological approach to sexuality, relationship and marriage, yet perhaps mainly rehabilitate single life in terms of its spiritual or social status and significance, rather than reflecting on the possible meaning and value of sexuality within it.

Rowan Williams briefly reflects on single life and singleness within his more overall approach to sexuality in terms of "the body's grace". In his view, the core of sexual desire and sexual encounters is not oneself being attracted to and aroused by the other. It is, in a more profound way, the other's becoming aware of oneself being attracted – and responding to that attraction and arousal with joy and attraction.[266] As joy in the other's attracted response to one's own bodily presence and bodily attraction, it is therefore also profoundly vulnerable and insecure. But it is also an experience of grace received – the body's grace – when the other does respond to one's bodily presence and attraction with joy and pleasure.[267] But conditioned by this vulnerability and exposure, it is therefore also a grace that must be learned and takes time – to expose one's

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[266] Rowan D. Williams, "The Body's Grace" in Eugene F. Rogers Jr. (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality. Classic and Contemporary Readings*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 312–313.
[267] Ibid., 314–315.

attraction and receive in terms of the other's perceptions, although Williams does not deny that this grace can also be received in episodic, transitory encounters. Williams not only reflects on singleness in terms of "casual, uncommitted relationships".[268] He also attempts to grapple theologically with desire and sexuality in relation to what he calls "single vocation".[269] Whether he thinks of this as a deliberate commitment to be celibate, or whether it also involves a lasting state of being single – yet in principle open to relationship and marriage – is not entirely clear.[270] Either way, his argument is that the body's grace in terms of experiencing another's gracing delight in oneself, can more easily be identified and discovered where a person has learned or become "trained" to being perceived by God as the causeless object of God's love. And, Williams argues, those living in what he calls vocation as single, exposing themselves not to the desirous recognition of the sexual partner and spouse, but to the desirous perception of God and God's love, are in a special position of embodying this form of grace.[271] Obvious questions ensue from this, not only about how sexual desire, which clearly does not evaporate from the single life, can be converted and transformed into perception of God's gracing desire, but also how the single person's experience of God's graced perception could be transferred to the non-celibate's experience of the graced body in the sexual encounter with the partner. It is perhaps more convincing as a rehabilitation of single life in terms of

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[268] Jana Marguerite Bennett, *Singleness and the Church: A New Theology of the Single Life* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2017).
[269] Williams, "The Body's Grace", 317.
[270] John Bradbury, "Called to Become … A Vocational Theology of Marriage" in John Bradbury and Susannah Cornwall (eds)*: Thinking Again About Marriage. Key Theological Questions,* (London: SCM Press, 2016), 135–151.
[271] Williams, " The Body's Grace," 317.

its potential spiritual significance, rather than as giving theological value to the single person's non-relational sexuality.

John Bradbury, by contrast, addresses the question from the perspective of the forms of presence open to the single person as compared to the one in a committed relationship. His point is that the single person, who still sees him or herself with a vocation for married life, and might therefore also feel the sadness of missing fulfilment of this vocation, could in that situation also experience joy from being available for other, deeper relationships, relationships the married state might have precluded. Similarly, the single person might provide gifts of relationships in other and profound ways to people and networks, and might be able to be present for others in ways married people are not always. Hence single people could nurture life in community in particular and distinct ways. [272] However, this seems like a rehabilitation of single life, though, unlike Williams, more in terms of its potential social significance than a theological consideration of sexuality outside of relations and relationality.

A question in this connection is whether, in light of a multidimensional account of human sexuality's meaning and significance, there is room for a theological affirmation not only of non-procreative but also non-relational sexuality.[273] Can sexuality, seen theologically, be disconnected from relationality as an exclusive and overriding purpose, and viewed as including the experience of bodily desire, pleasure and lust? Can it be seen as a distinctive and independent objective, and not only as a corollary or accompanying secondary aspects of the mutual relationality as its more primary objective? If so, solo-sexuality as a form of sexuality lived and

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[272] Bradbury, " Called to Become …", 148–149.
[273] Gerhard Schreiber, *Im Dunkel der Sexualität. Sexualität und Gewalt aus sexualethischer Perspektive* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 544.

enacted without a 'personal other' might be considered an independently valuable dimension of sexuality. In that case it might, in the words of Gerhard Schreiber, not simply be rated as a remedy for loneliness or as a form of second-rate expression of sexuality (sexual *Reifungsdefizit*), but affirmed as a genuine choice and temporary – or more permanent – non-partnership form of sexuality.[274]

Schreiber thus opens up the possibility of thinking theologically about masturbation, but what still remains to be discussed is whether there could also be affirmative theological perspectives on the one-night stand, or understanding of casual dating. As mentioned above, Rowan Williams' theological account of human sexuality in terms of what he calls "the body's grace" in his own words allows for the possibility of also discovering this grace in transitory, brief and episodic sexual encounters.[275] And he argues that recognising this should not make us fear weakening or compromising the significance of commitment in Christian understanding of sexual bonding as essential to experience of the body's grace. Leland Spencer argues that, indeed, casual sex can for some people be a profoundly spiritual experience, since it can be a moment of submission and offering oneself to the other. Moreover, for religious queer people, it can be an encounter that breaks with the religious norms of their community, a space in which they can – for the moment – exist in a sexual way.[276]

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[274] Schreiber, *Im Dunkel der Sexualität*, 544.
[275] Williams, "The Body's Grace", 315–316.
[276] Leland G. Spencer, "Embodied Queer Theology in Showtime's Queer as Folk" in *Argumentation and Advocacy* 56(2) (2020), 79-96.

# 4.2.4 Sexuality, desire, the human being and God

The above positions characteristically represent how churches and their theological reflections have tended to engage with sexuality as isolated from human life and human relations, and therefore as predominantly a topic for theological ethics.

But there are also theological positions, which, not at least by retrieving classical sources, have argued that sexuality also concerns the human being's relation to God, and that understanding 'desire' as a key component of sexuality is also highly relevant and significant in understanding human relationships with God. The background is, of course, that if the proper human attitude and directedness towards God is love, as the commandment of love tells us,[277] then it is obviously relevant to reflect on relations between love of God and other aspects or forms of human love, and what they might teach us about relations between God and humankind. These approaches are relevant because they prevent Christians from thinking too graphically or simplistically about sexuality, instead inviting an approach that calls for consideration of the limits of human thinking and categorizing.

Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley, one of the representatives of this approach, asserts that a theological quest for the Christian God, the Trinitarian God, needs to consider the "necessary and *intrinsic* entanglement of human sexuality and spirituality".[278] Questions about Trinity are, according to Coakley, inextricably linked with questions about sexuality, including pressing questions about its

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[277] Matthew 22:37–39.
[278] Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2013), 1–2.

destructive and disordered forms. According to Coakley, the right contemplation of God, right speech about God and right ordering of desire are related in Christian belief in the Triune God and the baptized Christian person's renewed and transformed relationship with God. The transformation of the Christian is a transformation and re-ordering of desire no less than it is a transformation of how we pray to God, confess faith in God, or worship God. She finds different theologies in early Christian sources, such as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, or Augustine, which intertwine an emergent articulation of the Trinity, human desire for God, and sexual desire at a human level. These early Christian theologies largely rely on a Platonic idea of desire, namely in terms of a longing or striving for absolute beauty, approximated through gradual and purified ascension towards a divine realm of beauty in its absolute and full revelation. Coakley is obviously aware of the immediate questions contemporary thought on human-God relations will have to approaches along this line, especially as concerns the presumption of a link between sexual desire and desire pertaining to the divine. Two points are important in her initial indication of why they need not entail a spiritualization and sublimation of sexual and bodily desire, nor a disembodiment and de-materialization of desire for the divine. First, the point of departure is that, in desire, God is basic or primary. Ontologically, desire belongs primarily to God, and only derivatively to human beings as created in the image of God.[279] But in God, desire signifies a "plenitude of longing love that God has for God's own creation and for its full and ecstatic participation in the divine, trinitarian, life."[280] Desire starts in the desire that is God's, in terms of God's fullness of love for creation, and so human desire is a

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[279] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 10.
[280] Ibid.

mere reflection, however bleak, of human life's source in God.[281] Desire is not fundamentally a quality in terms of which the human being works their way to God, but a way in which God connects human beings to God and invites them into Trinitarian love. Second, the fact that desire is thereby set within the human-God relation as its primary context and designation, and only secondarily within the human reality of sexuality – does not, according to Coakley, mean that sexuality and erotic desire is thereby spiritualized, or that its purification in terms of celibacy and sexual abstinence becomes the more commendable form of life. But it does mean that sexuality and erotic desire it become relative and no longer absolute. It entails a profound criticism of capitalist and libertarian forms of instrumentalization, as well as of moral evaluation solely in terms of orientation and gender. The Christian's reordering of desire is primarily about reordering desire in relation to God and participation in the Trinitarian God, not about orientation, gender and sexual desire.[282] This again shows the link between considering human sexuality, with desire as its core component, and the relation between the Triune God and the human being.

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[281] Elizabeth Stuart, "Dancing in the Spirit" in Timothy Bradshaw (ed.), *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 1997/2003), 78–80. Similar ways of arguing human desire, including erotic desire, as having its source in God and pointing towards, but also enabling participation in love as the ground of existence, have also been made within philosophy of religion, cf. e.g. Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Eros and/as Desire – a Theological Affirmation: Paul Tillich Read in the Light of Jean-Luc Marion's *The Erotic phenomenon*" in *Modern Theology* 26(2) (2010), 220–242.
[282] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 11, 52.

# 4.3 Theological reflections on sexuality

Theological reflection on sexuality in church communities often has a strongly ethical and practical focus. Put at its most basic: what are Christians permitted to do, with whom, when, how and why? And how should churches respond, pastorally, liturgically, and in their church order and discipline, to the various forms of sexual activity and relationship that Christian people do engage in?

Yet as we have seen in the previous subchapter, there are other questions to ask about sexuality that have primarily to do with theological anthropology and not yet with ethics and church practice (though the questions about theological anthropology are, of course, interrelated with the ethical and practical questions, as we shall see). These are questions about the meaning(s) attached to sexuality in human life and experience, and the place of sexuality in a Christian theological understanding of humankind in relation to God.

As was made clear in chapter 2, for Protestants the answers to both sets of questions – the questions of theological anthropology and those concerned with ethics and church practice – will first and foremost be shaped in some way by Scripture as *norma normans*. However, the witness of Scripture will be understood through its interactions with the other aspects of the Quadrilateral: tradition, reason, and experience. Christian tradition has a long history of reflecting on (what we call) sexuality in the light of Scripture. As we have seen in the previous subchapter and will see again below, the history of Christian reflection on sex matches Alasdair MacIntyre's description of a tradition as "an historically extended, socially

embodied argument".[283] It is a diverse history that has on occasion taken some radical turns; consider, for example, Luther's revaluation of sexual love in marriage and rejection of the superiority of celibacy over marriage.

At the same time, the insights of reason in the form of the theoretical perspectives surveyed in 4.1 encourage a certain critical perspective on this history of the tradition. 'Critical' does not, of course, mean rejection or dismissal of insights from tradition, simply a lively awareness of how Christian reflection on sexuality in different places and times was profoundly shaped by the diverse historical and social contexts in which that reflection took place, in turn profoundly shaping those contexts. In trying to make theological and ethical sense of a human phenomenon as fascinating, complex, varied and perplexing as sexuality, the theoretical perspectives discussed earlier in the chapter may have an invaluable role to play in helping us receive and understand the witness of Scripture as fully and clearly as possible for our times and places. Finally, there is the voice of experience. The human experience of sexuality is, of course, both universal and irreducibly diverse. In reflecting theologically and ethically on sexuality it is essential to maintain a critical self-awareness of how our own and others' experience influences (and perhaps sometimes distorts) our reading of Scripture. The biblical summons to love and act justly also calls us to pay particular attention to the experience of those whose voices are most marginalized and least heard in Christian communities.

With these considerations in mind, what range of understandings, statements and practice might be located within a "Protestant corridor" of theological reflection on sexuality?

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[283] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* 2nd ed., (London: Duckworth, 1985), 222.

## 4.3.1 Sexuality and relationality

As described in 4.2, a strong strand of reflection in theological anthropology understands sexuality as a central aspect of human relationality in the image of God, enabling relationships of self-giving love, trust, gratitude and joy. Protestants have good reasons to endorse this view and even celebrate the gift of sexuality, so understood, more than Christian tradition has sometimes managed to do in the past. Luther's shift towards a positive affirmation of sexual love in marriage, and the Puritans' equally positive affirmation of it – radical in their time – offer two early examples of moves towards such a view.

Does this mean that the image of God should be understood paradigmatically in terms of male-female complementarity and relationship, as argued by Robert Jenson and others (4.2)? Privileging the male-female relation as an expression of the *imago Dei* is complicated considerably by our growing understanding of the diversity of sex and gender, outlined in chapter 3, as well as the insights from the "Theories" section of the present chapter about the diversity of sexual expression and experience. Of course, those who wish to defend this view could argue that the diversity of sexual expression is nothing new, and that this view provides a theological criterion for distinguishing between the forms of sexual expression that are ethically acceptable and those that are not. But insofar as such arguments presume a male-female binary as given, it is becoming increasingly clear that they are not simply observing, but already *interpreting* reality. And if that interpretation is guided by biblical texts such as Genesis 1:27, it is reliant on one particular reading of texts that can also be read in other ways (see 3.3).

## 4.3.2 Sexuality, sin, and transformation

4.2 drew attention to the corruption of human relationality and sexuality by sin, with reference to Bonhoeffer's account of how the sexual relations of fallen human beings become "a sign of division and hostility, with each individual viewing his or her own being over and against the other".[284] This account of how sexuality and sexual relationships are affected by sin resonates with – and may perhaps be illuminated by – the evolutionary and neuropsychological insights into the separation of sex and affection, and the propensity of sexual relations to be characterized by fear, aggression and domination, surveyed in 4.1. Yet it might be asked whether these features of human sexuality can be considered aspects of sin if they are part of our evolutionary inheritance, products of the structure of our brains and aspects of the way human minds work.

The Christian doctrine of sin is not only concerned with voluntary actions. It reflects more fundamental features of our human condition in relation to God, one another and the world. In some respects, the condition that we find ourselves in as members of the human species is not the way it is meant to be in God's good and loving creative purposes. If sin is understood in this way, then perhaps it should not surprise us if some aspects of the way our neurobiology has been shaped by our evolutionary history confer certain characteristic forms of weakness on us: a propensity to sin in certain ways, for example in sexual relations characterized by fear, aggression and domination.[285] As emphasized in 3.1 and 4.1, insights from evolutionary psychology and neuroscience should be used critically rather than uncritically in theological reflection. But if these

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[284] Brain, "Sexuality and community", 76.
[285] Cf. Neil Messer, *Selfish Genes and Christian Ethics: Theological and Ethical Reflections on Evolutionary Biology* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 193—5.

insights prove sound, they could help to fill out our understanding of some of the forms of sin to which many human sexual relationships are prone, as well as forms of human finitude and limitation that may become sources of pain and frustration to us in our sinful human condition. As such, understood in a theological frame of reference, they serve as further reminders of our need for the transformation of our human nature in Christ.

That transformation, in all its fullness, is an eschatological hope. In the present age we remain prone to these (and many other) forms of sin, and this condition does not instantly change when people put their faith in Christ: we are *simul justus et peccator.*[286] Yet many New Testament texts exhort their readers to resist sin and speak of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in believers' lives – a theme taken up in one particular way in John Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection. If scientific insights into human neurobiology and psychology suggest ways in which the destructive tendencies of human sexuality can be more effectively resisted, those insights need not be seen as substitutes for the transforming work of Christ or the empowerment of the Spirit, but as gracious gifts of God to restrain evil and assist with care for the world as it awaits its transformation in Christ.[287]

There are, of course, various other ways in which Protestant traditions can think and speak of sin and transformation in relation to sexuality. Some ways of making these connections, however, should most probably be abandoned. The affirmation of sexual love as a key aspect of human relationality, evident (as we have seen) quite early in the history of Protestant traditions, should discourage Protestants from entertaining any general suspicion that sexuality as

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[286] Simultaneously righteous and sinful.
[287] Cf. Neil Messer, *Theological Neuroethics: Christian Ethics Meets the Science of the Human Brain* (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 100-2.

such is inherently sinful, or more liable to be infected by sin that any other aspect of creaturely human nature. More specifically, Augustine's belief that sexual procreation is the means by which original sin is transmitted from generation to generation is regarded as unconvincing even by defenders of his doctrine of sin.[288] And it should hardly need saying that the tendency – by no means unknown in Christian history – to stigmatize women as sources of sexual temptation to men, and people of colour as, for instance, particularly exotic or promiscuous, cannot be defended. Christian churches today still need to be watchful for the continuing legacy of such stigmatization in their faith and practice and actively work towards undoing the harm done in both the past and the present.[289]

## 4.3.3 Sexuality, nature and identity

Appeals to nature or the natural are sometimes used to ground normative claims about legitimate forms of sexual activity, as when same-sex acts or relationships are condemned as 'unnatural' or 'against nature'. Sometimes (as we shall see) these appeals are based on sophisticated forms of natural law reasoning, but some such arguments are at least in part an attempt to read moral norms off empirical observations or intuitions about what actually happens in nature. To the extent that moral arguments about sexuality rely on intuitions about what is 'natural' in this latter sense, they are already complicated by the biological and anthropological theories surveyed in 4.1. For example, it is clear that in both the non-human and the human world there is a great diversity of sexual behaviour, including plenty of sexual activity between individuals of the same

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[288] Jesse Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2013), 42-5.
[289] Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman" in Jacqueline Bobo, Cynthia Hudley, and Claudine Michel (eds), *The Black Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 433-446.

sex. Genetic, neuroscientific and other studies of sexual orientation in humans raise questions about whether and how same-sex desire or activity can be said to be unnatural for (all) humans. And what is also clear is how much about patterns of human sexual activity and relationship is socially and culturally constructed.

But in any case, in Protestant traditions this kind of simplistic appeal to nature is already ruled out on theological grounds. It is widely agreed in Protestant traditions that human sin distorts our moral understanding and limits our (natural) ability to know about good and evil. It is also widely agreed that nature itself, as we experience it empirically, is theologically and morally ambiguous: created good by God, yet distorted by the presence of evil and in need of transformation in Christ (cf. Rom. 8:19-23). Some Protestant traditions and theologians are therefore suspicious of any form of natural law reasoning, that is, any attempt to reason from claims about nature to moral norms. Others, as we saw in chapter 2 (2.3.3), are more open to natural law thinking. But any serious Christian natural law theory (Protestant, Catholic or other) is based not on an attempt to read moral norms off nature, but on theological reasoning *about* nature. 'Nature' in a morally relevant sense is always a theological category and a matter of theological interpretation. Claims about natural or unnatural forms of sexual activity will always, whether explicitly or implicitly, be theological claims.

Attempts have often been made to defend homosexuality or trans identity as naturalistic facts in a similarly robust way. However, the discussion of queer theory in 4.1 calls for a more differentiated view of sexual identity. It has at times been important for lesbian women, gay men and bisexual people to claim their sexualities as identities, deeply rooted aspects of who they are, in order to resist discrimination and call for justice and equality in society. Within the

churches, sexual identities have likewise been claimed and theologized, for example in lesbian and gay theologies often framed as theologies of liberation.[290] Yet as we have seen, queer theory is critical of identity categories, arguing that identities such as straight, gay, or lesbian are social constructs whose creation inevitably involves some exercise of power. Correspondingly, queer theologians such as Elizabeth Stuart have also become critical of identity-based gay and lesbian theologies, arguing that all our identities are made relative and destabilized in the light of Christian faith. For Stuart, our only truly stable identity is the new identity we are given in baptism.[291] This does not mean that our other identities are erased, but they cease to be of ultimate importance in defining who we truly are. This is how she reads Galatians 3:28– in Christ "[t]here is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female".

While Stuart develops this argument from the perspective of the Catholic tradition, Protestants also have good reason to recognize that the identity of ultimate significance in defining who we are in relation to God, one another and the world is our membership of the community of the baptized. Of course, we have all kinds of other identities, connected not only to our sexuality, gender, marital status and family relationships but also to our social class, ethnicity, nationality, occupation, and many other things. All these aspects of identity interact to shape our and others' sense of who we are and our place in the world – not to say the church. And all of them are socially constructed in various ways, and require critical attention to the processes of power at work in the ways they have been shaped. But their significance becomes relative in the light of the gospel.

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[290] Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), ch. 2-4.
[291] Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies*, ch. 5-8. Stuart is explicit that among the gay and lesbian theologies she is critiquing her own earlier work.

Borrowing Dietrich Bonhoeffer's language, we can say that they are of *penultimate* importance, and the identity that ultimately defines us is our incorporation into the body of Christ. Some possible pitfalls in this line of thinking are set out in 3.3.2.

# 4.3.4 Sexuality and moral principles

2.3.5 emphasized the importance of essential ethical principles, singling out four main Protestant principles: freedom, love, responsibility and justice. They are given a specific character depending on whether they concern questions of individual conduct of life or questions of social and political ethics.[292] These ethical principles have been taken up many times in recent works on sexual ethics. It is noteworthy that often just one principle at a time is declared to be a central norm for sexual ethical questions. Here we argue that a responsible Christian sexual ethic is never based on one principle alone. Instead, it combines several principles at the same time, enabling an ongoing dialogue between different essential principles.

## 4.3.4.1 Freedom

Let us begin with freedom. When related to human sexuality, we might understand freedom as the invitation to explore the erotic potential of our created existence, just as we explore other aspects of what is means to be human. While sexuality has long been discussed mostly in repressed terms, the concept of freedom helps us to liberate ourselves from perspectives on sexuality that see it as a trap, an uncontrollable force that leads us into temptation. Philosophers such as Audre Lorde and theologians like Marcella Althaus-Reid, Carter Heyward and Lisa Isherwood invite us

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[292] Cf. *Protestant in Europe*.

(especially women) to cultivate a positive attitude towards the erotic and recognize it as a creative power to be trusted and embraced.[293] At the same time, as became clear from 1.3.2, social changes promoting sexual freedom, such as the sexual revolution that took place in many Western countries, eventually turned out to be potentially harmful for women when the concept of freedom was the sole guiding principle. It is therefore good to further explore this freedom from a Christian perspective, as Lorde, Althaus-Reid and Heyward do.

Christians are free in principle. In Christ, we are set free from the yoke of sin, both in terms of personal wrongdoing and trusting that oppressive structures need no longer have a definitive hold on us. Even though we live in a world with many restraints and imperfections, we can train ourselves to already live in the world as it is to come, a world in which the reign of Christ will be a reality for all. At the same time, this freedom is not a goal in itself: it is a means to reach deeper values such as love and justice. 1 Corinthians 10 states. "'I have the right to do anything, you say' — but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything'— but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others." We are free so that we may do good. Also in relation to sexuality, we may start from the question of what is really good (helpful, joy-giving, safe, beneficial) for the other, even if we may not understand or even condone their preferences and desires. What we may not do is harm the other, for instance by disrespecting boundaries of consent and integrity, or by (co-)creating an environment where these boundaries are not valued.

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[293] Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology. Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* ( London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Carter Heyward, *Touching our strength: The erotic as power and the love of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); Audre Lorde,"Uses of the Erotic". *Sister outsider* (1984), 53, 59.

## 4.3.4.2 Love

Secondly, for many Christian ethicists, love is the guiding principle in questions of sexual ethics.[294] The New Testament domestic tables call people in partnership to love, in Ephesians 5:25, 28, 33 to the love of men towards women, but in Titus 2:4 also to the love of women towards men. In this respect, the development of couple relationships in modern times corresponds to a basic Christian impulse.

Love alone, however, is not able to create clarity in all questions. Above all, the shocks caused by experiences of sexualized violence, also in the Protestant churches, have challenged us to rethink. For a long time, the church condemned abuse as an individual sin of the perpetrators against divine commandments. Far too little attention was paid to the fact that these crimes were not only committed against morality. Instead, people were deeply violated in their sexual autonomy. In older forms of sexual ethics, there was no such thing as sexual agency. In this respect, it was not even possible to say which central good was violated in sexual assaults or abuse. More recent approaches follow from these experiences that sexual ethics must derive its essential norms from the right to decide for oneself. Gerhard Schreiber argues for the central importance of consensuality for sexual ethics.[295] Love is therefore in need of other principles, such as responsibility and justice.

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[294] Cf. Wilfried Härle: "Both from the Christian image of humankind and from the description of the phenomenon of sexuality, the term 'love' virtually imposes itself as the guiding concept of sexual ethics." („Sowohl vom christlichen Menschenbild her als auch von der Beschreibung des Phänomens der Sexualität her drängt sich der Begriff ‚Liebe' geradezu als der sexualethische Leitbegriff auf.") Wilfried Härle; *Ethik* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2011), 328. Cf. also: Ola Sigurdson, "Desire and Love" In Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender* (Oxford U. P., 2017), 523-537.
[295] Gerhard Schreiber, *Im Dunkel der Sexualität. Sexualität und Gewalt aus sexualethischer Perspektive* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 265-288.

### 4.3.4.3 Responsibility

In light of the above, responsibility can be defined in a very general sense as *relational responsibility*. Sexuality in terms of sexual engagement and relationships needs to start from respect for the bodily and spiritual integrity of others. People are responsible for each other's safety and well-being when it comes to sexuality, too.

Second, it could be argued that Christians are invited to practice a form of *intellectual responsibility*. This means, first, that in defining or illustrating a sexual ethic, Christians have the responsibility to carefully weigh up all available sources, including scientific knowledge and people's experience. Arguments based on natural law should take account of insights from biology, for instance.

Responsibility as one of the four core principles also informs the way Christians should deal with Scripture, aspiring to the highest possible level of *hermeneutical responsibility*. In 2.2.1 we stated that, from a Protestant perspective, Scripture remains the *norma normans*: it is of ultimate normative significance. This means that here, too, or perhaps especially here, responsibility is crucial in our reading, interpreting and applying of Scripture. In dealing with the question of same-sex relationships, for instance, which has come up many times in this chapter, it is necessary to be very precise on how Scripture is viewed and interpreted.

Certain well-known biblical texts (e.g. Lev 18:22, Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9-10) condemn same-sex sexual activity and have often been used as the basis of a Christian sexual ethic that rejects all same-sex activity and relationships as contrary to God's revealed will. The exegesis and interpretation of these texts has been exhaustively argued over.

In biblical exegesis today there is a very broad consensus that "there is a vast gulf between our own time and conceptuality, and the

conceptualities of the diverse times and cultures given expression in biblical literature".[296] In ancient times, sexuality was not a question of sexual orientation. At the time of the New Testament, there is not a single author known to us with whom a comparable assessment could be found. "There is no evidence that any of the Jewish writers actually believed that there were people with a natural sexual orientation towards people of their own sex."[297]

Where biblical texts are critical of same-sex sexuality, they deal with different ethical norms from today. Behaviour that constitutes an eminent breach of the right of hospitality is condemned (Gen 19; Judges 19). Practices that do not involve procreation are criticized (Lev 18 and 20). Sexual practices are considered unnatural and shameful where they represent a break with widespread gender concepts. They are perceived as shameful because men take on the role of women, which according to ancient gender norms is to be understood as a violation of their marriage and so as a disgrace. Nowhere in the biblical texts is same-sex sexuality in the context of exclusive love relationships in view. This is the situation for the vast majority of historical researchers. Sexual practice is rather a question of social status. Not sexual orientation but gender is the decisive factor. Same-sex behaviour is not a question of sex, but of gender.[298] It is a form of hermeneutical responsibility to take into account the historicity of ethical frameworks, and the categories the authors of ancient texts had at their disposal.

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[296] Theodore W. Jennings, "Same-Sex Relations in the Biblical World" in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender* (Oxford U. P., 2017), 206-221, 220.

[297] William Loader, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 146.

[298] Cf. Johanna Körner, *Sexualität und Geschlecht bei Paulus. Die Spannung zwischen Inklusivität und Exklusivität des paulinischen Ethos am Beispiel der Sexual- und Geschlechterrollenethik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

## 4.3.4.4 Justice

The fourth and final ethical principle with direct relevance to questions of sexual ethics is that of justice.[299] In her book "Just Love", Margaret Farley argued for the central importance of *justice*. [300] Particularly with regard to the couple relationship of a man and a woman, it has become increasingly clear that traditional gender orders have taken men's domination and privileges for granted, contrary to egalitarian impulses also found in the New Testament (Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 7 and 11). As the impetus from social movements such as #metoo has shown, it is indisputable that the relationships of men and women today can no longer be ordered in terms of greater authority and duty to obey. Sexual relationships can only be recognized as ethically acceptable where they recognize and protect the equal dignity and rights of all involved. Farley unfolds the idea of justice in seven ways:[301] 1. do no unjust harm; 2. free consent of partners; 3. mutuality; 4. equality; 5. commitment; 6. fruitfulness; 7. social justice.

This norm is also affected by the topic of same-sex sexuality. The principle of equality requires that equal things be treated equally and unequal things unequally. Some are convinced that therefore a same-sex partnership could not be treated in the same way as a heterosexual relationship. They advocate giving priority to the relationship of a man and a woman because this usually makes it easier to procreate and form a family than is included in the case of

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[299] Margaret Farley, *Verdammter Sex. Für eine neue christliche Sexualmoral* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2014); Pamela Cooper-White, "Violence and Justice" in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2017), 487-504.

[300] Farley, *Verdammter Sex*; Margaret Farley, *Just Love, A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 215-231.

[301] Cf. Adrian Thatcher, *God, Sex, and Gender. An Introduction* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 87.

same-sex partnerships. Others, however, believe that all people should be treated equally, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. The recognition of same-sex partnerships is very much a question of justice.

In relation to what defines the corridor, it is necessary to include, as Jenson does, the body and the senses in theologies of sexuality, taking seriously the corporeal dimension of human life. Sexuality indeed is not merely a romantic poem, although very connected to touch, smell, sight, sound, and taste. However, Jenson's understanding of sexuality as based in the gender binary, to the exclusion of all other forms of sexuality, leads to an unnecessarily harsh and disrespectful dismissal of same-sex desire. Within a Protestant corridor this kind of argument can hardly be used to warrant the standpoint that *only* heterosexual relationships can be genuine expressions of human relationality in the image of God. The crucial question therefore is whether it falls outside the Protestant corridor or not.

## 4.3.4.5 Principles in dialogue

These approaches each emphasize one principle in a particular way, and to some extent this is understandable since different principles prove central to different questions. When the focus is on the repression of the sexuality of women and/or LGBTQI+ people, it is logical that the answer is initially sought in the principle of freedom. When homosexuality is approached as a sinful or even despicable act, it is logical that gay and lesbian people and their advocates emphasize the love that is present in same-sex relationships. At the same time, it becomes clear that the main principle does not stand alone. Freedom without responsibility, love, and justice can easily become a new tool of oppression.

An emphasis on love risks romanticizing and idealizing same-sex relationships and can obscure the fact that acceptance and inclusion are also matters of justice and responsibility. Sexual ethics should not be determined by one key principle alone. A cluster of principles is preferable to one claimed to be absolutely right. Whether it be an uninformed appeal to nature, or a one-sided emphasis on personal freedom, singling out one principle at the expense of others more often than not pushes viewpoints to the edges of the corridor.

The interplay between the four principles helps Christians not to get entrenched, and always to ask the other question. "It is responsible. But is it loving, just, and does it allow people to be free?" Asking the other question and allowing oneself to be challenged in this respect, resembles the ethical strategies Jesus employed. Often he would tell a parable that would put 'the other question' on the table. A parable that would drive the personal dimension of the ethical question home. A parable that does not offer simple answers and final conclusions, but invites hearers to participate in further reflection.

## 4.4 Study questions

How does your church/congregation engage with topics related to sexuality? Are there topics or perspectives that you miss in your church's/congregation's ways of dealing with sexuality?

Which insights from scientific theories other than theology do you find particularly interesting or relevant for churches in their engagement with sexuality?

This study guide suggests love, freedom, responsibility and justice as foundational in a Protestant theological ethic. How do you think difficult or controversial questions concerning sexuality could be

reflected on in light of those ideals? It might help to think of a specific question or topic.

Relationality is central to contemporary Protestant theological understanding of sexuality. What do you find helpful and what do you think might be a problem with understanding sexuality and its meaning in terms of relationality?

# 5  Marriage

Marriage is a pact or a civil contract between the spouses and it is present in different cultures. In Europe, since the end of the 18th century, it has been changing in the direction of affinity and love instead of the arranged marriages of the past. Being a civil contract, dissolution of marriage through divorce and separation became possible even if in southern Europe (Italy and Spain) legislation on its dissolution was introduced only in the second half of the 20th century.

Marriage is a central theme of Christian social ethics, church order and liturgical practice. At the same time, it has been interpreted and appropriated again and again in church history, be it as a sacrament, be it as a divine foundation and worldly thing. Today, tensions are associated with this theme in many societies and churches. We will first look at such tensions with regard to the different legal forms of marriage, as can be seen, for example, in Poland and Germany. Then sociological and anthropological research will shed light on the significance and at the same time the changeability of this way of life. From a theological perspective, it becomes clear how Protestant marriage is conceived as a blessing of two partners, be it registered in civil society, or in church, or in both.

The historical retrospective shows how strongly the theological understanding of marriage is interwoven with historical and cultural developments of marriage. Biblical and Christian ideas have influenced and accompanied the course of history in equal measure. In the end, the reflections discern a Protestant corridor, which appreciates a variety of positions and, at the same time, also makes clear which developments do not do justice to the history of a Protestant theology of marriage.

# 5.1 Theories of marriage

## 5.1.1 Legal framework and constitutional preclusions

Marriage is a legal construct defined in any given country. As most of the European legal systems are derived from the Roman law and influenced by the Napoleonic Code, a first important point is that it is basically treated as a special form of a civil contract between two consenting parties. The peculiarity of marriage is, however, that it pertains to crucial social realities – from the establishment of kinship relationships and the rights that follow them to purely financial aspects, e.g. the joint ownership of property and inheritance. In that regard, marriage is one of the most basic institutions that govern our daily lives and, as such, is one of the most heavily regulated.

Second, we should mention the close connection with the Christian religion and the history of the church and its law – canon law being the closest successor to Roman law. It has to be stressed that – although canon law is in no way, shape or form binding in the Protestant context – its role still influences the way marriage in conceived in some countries, while preserving the basic tenets of Roman law. This cannot be overstated, because we should also remember that we are not referring to the present form of the Western Catholic system.

The most important point in the case of marriage laws is the notion of the mutual consent which, in the case of later secular systems, is treated as the acknowledgement and subjugation to the rights, duties and responsibilities of a married person as defined by law.

This description, as such, in no way precludes any two consenting adults from being married. However, the prevalence of the traditional model, influenced by the churches' and societal norms, can hardly be overstated. Most of the modern legal systems prescribe marriage to be between a woman and a man, or more specifically two persons of the opposite legal sex. At the time of writing (June 2023), there are 34 countries worldwide that recognize and allow same-sex marriages while some also recognize same-sex civil unions. This is a quite recent phenomenon – the first country to do so was the Netherlands in 2001.[302] In 34 countries it is clearly stated that a marriage is formed by a couple of opposite sex according to constitutional law, which most jurists consider to be a living body not to be interpreted literally but in the light of societal change. Every legal text is open to interpretation, not unlike the biblical one, the only difference being the methods used. And as in case of the biblical text, the tradition of interpretation can influence the outcome.

Examples are the discussions around the inclusion of same-sex marriages in the Polish Constitution of 1997 (Art. 18 KRP) and in family law under the German Constitution, the Basic Law (Art. 6 GG).

Article 18 of the Polish Constitution states that:

"Marriage, being a union of a man and a woman, as well as the family, motherhood and parenthood, shall be placed under the protection and care of the Republic of Poland."[303] The Constitution of the Republic of Poland seems to word the article on marriage in full respect of doctrine, while stating that this is not a provision of protection but rather the definition of marriage under Polish law.

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[302] https://www.hrc.org/resources/marriage-equality-around-the-world.(accessed April 2022).
[303] https://www.senat.gov.pl/en/about-the-senate/konstytucja/chapter-i/ (accessed 22.04.22).

This doctrinal position is even visible in the official translation; the original text[304] could be translated as "Marriage *as* a union of a man and a woman", which would then mean a provision of particular protection and care of the state for the marriages fulfilling the condition, but not preventing other forms of marriage from existing.

Article 6 [Marriage – Family – Children] of the German Basic Law states:

(1) Marriage and the family shall enjoy the special protection of the state.

(2) The care and upbringing of children is the natural right of parents and a duty primarily incumbent upon them. The state shall watch over them in the performance of this duty.[305]

In 2017, Article 6 of the German Basic Law was one of the points of concern in the discussion preceding the changes allowing for same-sex marriages. The first two paragraphs link marriage to the care and upbringing of children and this was interpreted by the opponents of the new law as an exclusion clause insofar as it implied that parenthood was an intrinsic part of the definition of marriage under German law. The interpretation that prevailed, however, was that it just lays down the provision of protection and care by the state without excluding the possibility of same-sex marriages.

## 5.1.1.1 The common models

Possible constitutional preclusions can impede the introduction of models that would allow more diverse forms of marriage, according

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[304] "Małżeństwo jako związek kobiety i mężczyzny, rodzina, macierzyństwo i rodzicielstwo znajdują się pod ochroną i opieką Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej." https://www.sejm.gov.pl/prawo/konst/polski/kon1.htm (accessed 22.04.22).
[305] https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html#p0038 (accessed 22.04.22).

to different interpretations. However, the marriage-for-all model is not the only possibility, the other being a hybrid model of a well-defined marriage and legally recognized and registered partnerships, also called civil unions.

There is one additional observation to be made, especially after the 2018 ruling of the European Court of Justice concerning the freedom of movement of the citizens of the European Union and their spouses – the marriage legally recognized in one country might not be recognized as such in another. Its effects, nonetheless, are to be recognized. One example would be the cases of Polish same-sex couples being married abroad and enjoying the benefits in their daily lives in their home country. In a way, it is a similar situation to the well-known case of very restrictive marriage laws in Israel[306] that get routinely circumvented by the civil marriage of mixed couples in Cyprus, the effects of which are legally recognized.

The three basic models, commonly found in statutory family law in European countries, are as follows:

1. <u>Marriage for all</u>: Marriage as a civil contract is open to all consenting adult parties, regardless of their legal sex. This model is currently implemented in 18 countries in Europe.[307] As there is no legal distinction between opposite-sex and same-sex marriages, the rights and obligations of spouses are naturally equal.

2. <u>Opposite-sex marriage with recognized civil unions</u>: This model is slightly more complicated, as the detailed legal solutions may vary between countries and jurisdictions. The basic premise is to provide an alternative to the traditional opposite-sex marriage

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[306] Israeli law does not have any form of civil marriage; the only option provided is the religious one.
[307] https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/fact-sheet/gay-marriage-around-the-world/.

open for all, mostly as registered partnerships with limited rights and obligations, typically not requiring a divorce to dissolve. The additional layer of complication arises in the interaction with the marriage legislation, the registered partnerships may coexist with any solution concerning the accessibility of the marriage, as is the case in France with the PACS (*pacte civil de solidarité*), which is in itself a special case of conjugal status. While France adopted the marriage-for-all model following the 2013 change of legislation, the PACS has been retained as one of the possibilities. A similar situation took place in Germany in 2017 with the introduction of same-sex marriages, which in turn led to the ban on registering new civil unions while retaining the existing ones. Civil unions are recognized in 20 European countries.

3. <u>Opposite-sex marriage only</u>: Marriage is a legal institution recognized in all 27 EU countries and this traditional form of marriage legislation is prevalent mostly in eastern and southern Europe. The marriage is accessible only to parties of opposite legal sexes, which means that same-sex couples have no access to the benefits of a legally recognized union.[308]

All the models mentioned above may or may not contain provisions for adoption or bans thereon, depending on the type of union and the parties involved. The spectrum of solutions runs from full adoption rights through limited adoption rights (e.g. in case of the spouse's children) to no adoption options for unmarried or same-sex couples.

## 5.1.1.2 Dissolution of marriage/civil union

It is not only same-sex marriage that is regulated differently today. For much longer there have been different legal ways of dealing with

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[308] The *de facto* joint ownership of property is still possible through a private legal contract.

marriage issues, e.g. divorce and remarriage. Divorce was introduced in recent history between the 18th and the 20th century: in France it was reintroduced in 1884, after a short period from 1789 to 1816; in the United Kingdom in 1857 while Spain, Italy, Portugal and Ireland dissolution of marriage was possible only in the second half of 20th century. Divorce then came to be chosen by both partners in a consensual way, which was a new model allowing the couple highlight private life vs state regulations. After Italy and Spain, the latest countries have been Ireland in 1997 and Malta in 2011. According to Italian law, for example, legal separation can be followed, after three years, by divorce, which can be consensual or judicial, or by reconciliation.[309] 17 EU countries have adopted a single set of rules to determine which law should apply to cross-border divorces.[310]

One of the most important differences between marriage and civil unions is the mode of dissolution and the question of authority that might dissolve the union as such. The concept of state protection in the case of marriage means that, although the contract can be voluntarily entered into by any parties that have the right to do so, the power to dissolve it lies in the authority of the state and the judiciary. Typically, the legal systems in Europe contain the option to file for divorce with the alimentary and custody rights of one or both parties, called alimony. The typical marriage without a prenuptial agreement establishes the joint ownership of property from the time of the marriage onwards, which leads to the necessity of estate partition in the case of divorce. Civil unions, on the other hand, are for the most part treated as normal civil contracts and may be more

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[309] Monica Santoro, *Conoscere la famiglia e i suoi cambiamenti* [Getting to know the family and its changes].
[310] https://europa.eu/youreurope/citizens/family/couple/divorce-separation/index_en.htm.

easily dissolved as they lack the protection of the state, which may or may not involve court proceedings, unless otherwise regulated.

As a consequence of a divorce, two different families are created with the change in living arrangements. The worst living conditions are experienced by single parents, especially single mothers who do not have a job and rely only on the ex-spouse for child support. When talking about divorce, we can focus on separation and loss but also on the new family life, stressing both continuity and changes, transformation and reconstituted or blended families.[311]

## 5.1.2 Marriage and civil unions in sociological theories

Current characteristics, but also differences in various legal systems, have their roots in a long cultural-historical development of marriage. Together with other unions, marriage is one of the socio-cultural foundations of society and it has undergone social changes in time and space, across different cultures. The shift from an authoritarian and traditional family to a democratic and egalitarian one, with regard to the 'companionate marriage' – as historian Lawrence Stone puts it – has influenced the relationship between the spouses in terms of intimacy, friendship and solidarity affecting also the child-rearing techniques/attachment models. In a patriarchal context, as still exists today in some societies, men and women could also love each other but romantic love was not the first choice for selecting a partner – other social, economic and political

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[311] Irène Théry, "Les temps des recompositions" [Time for recompositions], in F. J. Dortier (ed), *Familles. Permanence et metamorphoses. Histoire, recomposition, parenté, transmission* (Paris: Editions Sciences Humaines, 2002) , 55-61.

factors were more important when it came to forming an alliance between families.[312]

Civil marriage was introduced at the turn of the 19th century when companionate marriage was coming to replace arranged marriages, and it became a contract. In other words, there has been a shift from hierarchy to solidarity with increasing emotional demands, especially for women who, particularly in urban settings, are expected to be good wives and mothers while pursuing their professional careers. In some European countries, a more traditional role model prevails, where women stay at home with children and men are the breadwinners, or when women are compelled to work part-time. In East Germany (the German Democratic Republic) both men and women were employed with a more egalitarian participation in gender roles. Even today, we have a complex picture of life-work balance, because some women do not regard this multi-tasking as satisfying and prefer to adopt a complementarity of gender roles.

In the 1930s widowhood was the first cause for remarriage, due to the high mortality rate, especially for men, who were economically more independent, whereas women with children encountered more difficulties at this regard if they did not have economic resources. By contrast, in the 1940s and 1950s marriage was the most important social step into adult life; it was highly valued and widely practised throughout people's entire lives in southwest Europe. These are general transformations of marriage and intimacy in modern societies, as sociology has pointed out. From the late 1960s, individual needs became more important within a married couple, with new dynamics in relational terms leading to their valuing individual choice and negotiation. These new and more

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[312] Monica Santoro, *Conoscere la famiglia e i suoi cambiamenti*.

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equalitarian relationships have only partially caused a decline in marriage, with other forms of cohabitation also being possible, such as partnerships and civil unions, which are more flexible.[313]

## 5.1.2.1 Change and continuity in the conjugal relationship

Why do some couples decide not to marry but live for durable and considerable lengths of time together in a partnership? Is this trend to be considered a decline of this institution? Family life is a complex phenomenon and it is made of physical, relational, and symbolic space. Marriage has therefore a different meaning in the process that is changing the representation and the social and cultural dimension of the conjugal relationship. Marriage is a relationship that is increasingly socially defined and regulated whilst "life's defining events and processes are translated into individual experience".[314] This also means that communication between the spouses is increasingly important to elaborate common expectations and interpret views on reality and its different codes from non-verbal affective bonds to the spoken word, also in overcoming relational difficulties within the couple. Communication allows for close bonds of intimacy and it is considered a way to express mutual love and support, also independently from the conjugal status or

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[313] Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1992); Chiara Saraceno, Manuela Naldini, *Sociologia della famiglia* (Bologna: iI Mulino, 2007); Irene Théry, "Transformations de la famille et «solidarités familiales»: questions sur un concept" [Transformations in the family and 'family solidarity': questions about a concept] in Serge Paugam (ed.), *Repenser la solidarité: L'apport des sciences sociale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007), 149-168. https://doi.org/10.3917/puf.pauga.2007.02.0149

[314] Manuela Naldini, "The Sociology of Families" in *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociology*, ch. 28 (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2017), 297.

even when the spouses are living at a distance, due to work or for other reasons.[315]

The conjugal relationship in marriage is also not only redefined by individualism, which could be considered as a force of change. It has been reconceived by the fact that in some European countries same-sex marriages have become possible. Equality is a strong value fostering transformation in a couple, whether they are married or not, and it also represents an important revolution in kinship relations, helping to overcome prejudices and stereotypes. Marriage for all represents not only the idea of equal rights for LGBTQ+ people – it calls into question the marriage order based on the complementarity of male and female bodies, gender roles and filiation.[316]

Sociological theory deals with both change and continuity. According to family sociologist Andrew Cherlin, the introduction of the marriage-for-all model is responsible for the process of deinstitutionalizing marriage, defined as a weakening of social norms and an increasing complexity of cohabiting unions with respect to traditional marriage, which asked for clear role models and responsibilities in the transition from institutional to companionate marriage. On the other hand, it is also recognized that same-sex couples are just one sign of this social and symbolic transformation that has given importance to personal choice and self-development. Therefore, they are not to be considered the sole cause of such deinstitutionalization. Rather, they participate in a

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[315] Ulrich Beck and Beck-Gernsjeim Elizabeth, *Das ganz normale Chaos der Liebe*; Irene Théry, *Le démariage. Justice et vie privée* [Demarriage. Justice and private life] (Paris: Odile Jacobs, 1993); Monica Santoro, *Conoscere la famiglia e i suoi cambiamenti*.

[316] Irène Théry, *Mariage et filiation pour tous. Une métamorphose inachevée* [Marriage and filiation for all. An unfinished metamorphosis], (Paris: Coédition Seuil – La République des idées, 2016).

more general symbolic shift focusing on the idea, common to many young couples, that sexuality and reproduction are separated, while love is at the centre of family life. The results of these various processes at the practical level have not necessarily diminished the symbolic significance of marriage, which has for some become a marker of prestige and personal achievement. [317] As historian Stephanie Coontz has underlined, the transformation of marriage has always taken place and what seems new in family life is actually quite traditional in the sense that history has already experienced different forms of cohabitation, out-of-wedlock births, etc.[318]

## 5.1.2.2 Diversity in marriage life

As mentioned in the chapter on sexuality, common human nature does not mean universal customs and behaviours or values. Diversity comes into play regarding differences in marriage life. These are: cultural or religious differences of the spouses, especially among migrants and in mixed or interreligious marriages and it may vary along gender lines; social and work/professional experiences that have an impact on family life; organizational dimensions of gender roles in the couple – both heterosexual or homosexual – as well as other responsibilities, especially in patchwork families, after a divorce, or when the same-sex couples has children from previous relationships. There are differences in the life cycle of the couple, when the couple is childless, when children are possibly born and grow up, and when they leave, as will be made clearer in the family chapter. For homosexual and lesbian couples, the issue of becoming parents is framed differently from heterosexual couples. But research shows that children who have grown up in a rainbow family

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[317] Andrew J. Cherlin, "The deinstitutionalization of American marriage" in *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66(4) (2004), 848-861.
[318] Stephanie Coontz, "The World Historical Transformation of Marriage" in *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66(4) (2004) 974-979.

experience similar developmental issues to other children. Further research is needed to discover more about the ways in which same-sex couples, especially lesbians, cope with challenges and discrimination; very few studies explore their quest to become parents, due to the moral stigma associated with surrogacy or adoption. These couples help researchers to work on prejudices and find ways of overcoming them.[319]

## 5.1.3 Marriage and civil unions in anthropology theories

Social boundaries, cultural differences, symbolic meanings are important in anthropological theories and they show the complexity of marriage, unions and cohabitations.[320] Over time and across space, humanity has given different interpretations to gender roles and kinship relations in the life cycle. In so doing, anthropology shares with other human and social sciences the task to document the variety of marriage and other partnerships or unions in plural terms, including same-sex marriages. In brief, differences on marriage across the globe concern: polygamy vs monogamy; the level of agreement for the female partner; laws and customary practices for initiating marriage; relationships with the family of origin; belonging and education of the children; sexual life and freedom; divorce and empowerment of single women; the status of widowed women. In the past or in other cultures, the economic, political and social function of marriage was more important, whereas in contemporary societies individual values of freedom and equality have introduced the parity of the spouses in marriage and

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[319] Federico Ferrari, *La famiglia inattesa. I genitori omosessuali e i loro figli* [The unexpected family. Homosexual parents and their children], (Milan: Mimesis, 2015).
[320] David M. Schneider, *American Kinship. A Cultural Account* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

other unions based on mutual love and affection. The personal realization of both partners has a major impact on the couple, much more than previous family or societal expectations of allegiance, as sociological theory has also shown.[321]

The chapter on families makes clear that being a couple is not universal and relationships are formed in a great variety of ways. Therefore, anthropological theories see marriage for both heterosexual and same-sex couples as one option, but not the only legitimate one when they consider cohabitation and living together.[322] In sum, marriage in different societies has been shaped by cultural transformations. In addition, being a same-sex couple living in mutual and long-lasting love involves joyful moments but also difficulties because social recognition may be lacking or has to be negotiated from time to time, both in private homes and in public. Sometimes such couples stay hidden, or are discriminated against, even when same-sex civil unions are recognized by law, as not all countries in Europe have a law against gender discrimination and homo-lesbo-transphobia.

## 5.1.3.1 Traditional and modern societies reconsidered

The dichotomy between 'traditional' (a better word than primitive which is not used any longer) and 'modern' is to be analysed because

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[321] Lawrence Stone, *Road to divorce. England: 1530-1987* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1990); Irene Théry, *Le démariage. Justice et vie privée* (Paris: Odile Jacobs, 1993); Marzio Barbaglio, *Provando e riprovando. Matrimonio, famiglia e divorzio in Italia e in altri paesi occidentali* [Trying and trying again. Marriage, family and divorce in Italy and in other Western countries] (Bologna: il Mulino, 1990); Marzio Barbagli and David I. Kertzer, *Family Life in the Long Nineteenth Century. 1789-1913* (Yale: Yale U. P., 2001); Marzio Barbagli and David I. Kertzer, *Family Life in the Twentieth Century* (Yale: Yale U. P., 2003).
[322] Chiara Saraceno, *Coppie e famiglie. Non è questione di natura* [Couples and families. It is not a question of nature], (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2012).

it is a framework for other classifications such as community vs society (Ferdinand Tönnies), closed societies vs open societies (Karl Popper), cold societies vs hot societies (Claude Lévi-Strauss). The term 'modern' comes from Latin *modo* which means 'now' or 'in this moment' and it refers in its etymology to constant change by contrast with what seeks to remain stable, if not the same, in 'pre-modern' or 'traditional' societies. The pace of change in 'post-modernity' is double: first, it refers to a different society and, second, it differentiates itself through rapid change. In other terms, what is defined as 'cold' depicts institutions that tend to preserve stability and continuity while eliminating the impact of historical factors. What is defined as 'hot', on the contrary, is indebted to a need for change. But these are poles of a *continuum* and they are not supposed to lead to a polarized positioning because each society has both continuity and change. Here, anthropology helps us to reconsider ethnocentrism or Eurocentrism and transforms it into the acceptance of cultural diversity.

Marriage is a good example of gendered constructs to be analysed in relation to other social institutions, which are the result of both individual and collective choice and social constraints. [323] The question is whether marriage is universal and central for the perpetuation of the human species or if different cultures have found different solutions to the problem of loneliness, of satisfying basic needs and of reproduction. When considering the traditional family, we often hear people say that it is based on marriage between a man and a woman and that is natural. In saying this, people consider other forms of love unnatural, or second-class formations. Those who insist on the universality of the monogamous, heterosexual couple as the nucleus of a family do not

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[323] Sylvia J. Yanagisako and Carol Delaney, *Naturalized Power. Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

consider that in other cultures there is polygamy (a man with many women) while in our Western societies, where divorce is admitted, a man can marry more than one woman in the course of his life, and vice versa. Moreover, the monogamous marriage is not only a prerogative of Western and other societies, it is present among groups of hunters and gatherers.

## 5.1.3.2 The variety of marriage institutions

The quest for universality, around 1950s, was accompanied by the fact that anthropologists started talking about the 'nuclear family' as the smallest structural unit and the best functional organization but soon realized that it was by no means the one and only way of living together.[324] In fact, for many years well-known anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and Jack Goody had insisted on the prototypical character of marriage based on a nuclear couple: Jack Goody distinguished between African societies with gifts from the husband's family to the spouse (bridewealth) while Euro-Asian societies were based on gifts given from the woman's family to the spouse (dowry). Françoise Heritier in early 1990s also stressed structural aspects of marriage, based on biology and on personal experience. In *La pensée de la difference*, she showed how the "differential valence of genders, her great discovery, establishes a universal hierarchy, the origin of which is lost in the mists of time".[325] The power of men over women, which happens in most societies, was situated by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the structure of kinship systems where goods are exchanged for women, something which, at the time of writing, he took for granted.

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[324] George Peter Murdock, *Social Structure* (New York: Macmillan, 1949); Jack Goody and S.J. Tambiah, *Bridewealth and Dowry* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1973); Francesco Remotti, *Contro natura. Una lettera al papa* [Against Nature. A letter to the Pope] (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2008).

[325] Gérald Gaillard, *Françoise Héritier* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2022), XI.

Years afterwards, when the debate on gender and kinship became heated at the turn of the century, he underlined how the exchange theory was intended in abstract terms and not necessarily related to sexual difference. In France and elsewhere, the debate on the symbolic order, based on a man and a woman having a child, has produced an ongoing reflection on the norms and rules that are necessary for the new-born baby to become a citizen and develop a sense of reality and cultural intelligibility. As Fernando Savater puts it, education is better understood as the cultural preparation of citizens for the next generation. Culture is therefore the processual outcome of inter-subjective bonds and sharing through social and vital relations.[326]

The social pressure upon marriage is strong in many societies, especially for women: in different languages we likewise find distinctive terms to identify unmarried men and women. The feminine 'spinster' is always pejorative, although it has lost its original strength, according to the Cambridge Dictionary. As feminist anthropology has pointed out, the distinction between different exchange systems and the symbolic order goes together with other transformations in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres, thus marriage is not universal.

### 5.1.3.3 The critique of feminist anthropology

Feminist anthropology is indebted to women's, gender and queer studies for their interdisciplinary approach in the study of homosexual and heterosexual marriage or civil unions. Sylvia Yanagisako first noted that previous assumptions about the nuclear family were taken for granted and were never explained in terms of

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[326] Fernando Savater, *Education and Citizenship in the Global Era*, Lecture at the IDB Cultural Center, 48 (October 2003). See also Fernando Savater, *El valor de educar* [The value of educating], (Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 1997).

cultural significance, hitherto considered to be natural or universal. When, instead, anthropology turned to highlight cultural diversity, the nuclear unit was regarded as a matter of choice, depending upon the context and with a different emphasis in time and space. Moreover, the idea of 'domestic group' was introduced to highlight the residential aspect and the social dimension related to intimacy, collaboration and solidarity networks.[327]

As anthropologists now recognize, in many societies the family unit is considered to be a complex social formation, governed and regulated by the state.[328] And even George Peter Murdock, at the end of his career, acknowledged cultural diversity in marriage. The inability of structuralism to consider kinship relations other than marriage has been highlighted by anthropologists such as David Schneider, Clifford Geertz, Sylvia Yanagisako and Marilyn Strathern, who pointed to other exchange systems relevant on a symbolic level as well as in practice. They also underlined that the universality of exogamy (marrying outside the community or clan) is not viable in the cultural diversity of humankind and that the incest taboo is not the only basis for cultural reproduction.

Further, it is now recognized that a group's cultural identity is better pursued through *métissage* and diversity than ideas of purity and heterosexual norm. When observing kinship strategies, anthropologists found a great variety in the practice of relatedness, which is a key concept in cultural anthropology. Relational subjects are persons in relation with others and this is constitutive of their

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[327] Sylvia J. Yanagisako, "Family and Household: The Analysis of Domestic Groups" in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, VII, 1979, 161-205.
[328] Jane F. Collier, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, Sylvia J. Yanagisako, "Is There A Family? New Anthropological Views" in Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela di Leonardo (eds), *The Gender/Sexuality Reader. Culture, History, Political Economy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 71-81.

self. [329] New kinship relations may suggest fresh reflections on marriage and civil unions, as is the case with same-sex couples and their children, opening to the role of kinship and relatedness as stable relationships that go beyond the family and/or blood ties, and reach into the community.

Judith Butler underlines a dilemma. On one hand, for those who live as outsiders and do not conform to the norm, there is suffering and dependence where mental, material and cultural factors are intertwined; on the other, their need of recognition, also in the cultural and public/political sphere, might lead to new forms of social hierarchy and exclusion, empowering the state and not the individual, in the absence of a worldview that is critical towards uniformity and does not value diversity. But diversity is a value in a post-modern world. Moreover, overt debates regarding marriage and (homosexual or heterosexual) registered unions or de facto partnerships influence parliamentary debates and welfare policies, thus allowing for societal transformations as state norms change over time. They should always protect the most vulnerable people, however, and always allow vital and loving relations. [330]

Rosi Braidotti considers multiplicity as the basis of action since the dynamic of transformation is the result of different tensions, both conscious and unconscious, that occupy the body according to various technological and economic forces. Sexual difference is therefore a synonym of plurality and diversity – and not of unitary dual prescriptive difference – while at the same time allowing for new possibilities to arise even in times of forced transnational

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[329] Janet Carsten, *Cultures of Relatedness. New Approaches to the Study of Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2000); Janet Carsten, *After Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2004).

[330] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004); Stefano Rodotà, *Diritto d'amore* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2015).

migration, and technological and rapid change. Moreover, heterosexual practice and norms are not the same thing: what is contested is not heterosexual erotic practice but imposing the heterosexual norm on everyone.[331]

In conclusion, anthropological theory suggests that marriage is not exclusively a heterosexual institution and that same-sex partnerships can also contribute to stable human societies. Marriage is an agent of transformation that connects theory and practice, ideas and actions, norms and critique, worldviews and social policies.[332] Marriage can also be studied as a global phenomenon. Yet, equality and freedom for women and LGBTQ+ persons do not mean the same thing everywhere, because patriarchy and male oppression are linked to other inequalities, as is the inequality of power between the spouses. Women's rights are human rights and they have tackled an ongoing struggle against prejudice and stereotypes, in marriage and intimate relationships, since the early times of feminism. By contrast, current feminist critique highlights the relationship between two partners as a social, economic, domestic, sexual and interpersonal rapport in terms of participatory engagement, with or without children. It thereby adds the concept of generativity (caring for other generations), which can be done in the community.[333]

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[331] Rosi Braidotti, *Post-human Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2022).
[332] https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/695285
[333] Florence Rochefort, *Histoire mondiale de feminisms* (Paris: Que sais-je?/Humensis, 2018).

# 5.2 Theologies and marriage

The church and theology are always situated in the context of the cultural development of humanity. People develop symbolic interpretations and ritually recognized orders of life with which they react to cultural developments or stimulate such developments themselves. This mutual stimulation process can be observed both in the Bible and in church history.

## 5.2.1 Marriage in the Bible and the traditional understanding of sacramental marriage

At first glance, there is a bewildering variety of family models in the Bible. Throughout the Old Testament, polygamy is presumed to be common, both in many narrative texts of the Bible (Gen 29; 1 Sam 1; 2 Sam 3:1-5) and in the commandments of the Torah (Ex 21:10; Deut 21:15). On the other hand, there is the assignment of one woman and one man in the creation narrative of Adam and Eve (Gen 2). In the New Testament, the cohabitation of one man and one woman appears to be the rule.

The protection of marriage is strongly emphasized, especially in the Old Testament. The Ten Commandments demand care for the parental couple of father and mother and forbid the breaking of marriage, even the coveting of another woman (Ex 20:12, 14, 17). On the other hand, marriage and family are clearly seen in a broader perspective in the New Testament. Jesus and Paul renounce marriage for the sake of the expectation of the Kingdom of God (Mt 1:12; 1 Cor 7:7; 25-31). The community of Jesus' followers appears as a new family (Mk 3:31-35). The relationship with God is that of bride and bridegroom (Mt 9:15; Jn 3:29; Rev 22:17). Marriage is

counted among the things of this world's time that will no longer have a future in the Kingdom of God (Mt 22:30).

Despite all the diversity, there are a number of consistent motifs in the Old and New Testaments.[334] Marriage appears as a covenant between a man and a woman (Mal 2:14) that is legally binding and socially respected. Connected to this are many rights and duties concerning property and ownership. The creation narrative describes this union as originally a community of equals (Gen 2:18-25), in tension with social practice in Israel and its environment but also with many regulations in the law in which women are subordinate and subservient to their husbands (Deut 24:1-4; Esth 1). Mutual love is not a prerequisite for marriage but plays a major role in the ideal of happy marriage (1 Sam 1:5.8). Faithfulness and commitment are expected (Mal 2:15). With this logic of love and faithfulness, marriage is often used as an image for the covenant of God and humankind, in both the Old and New Testament. Turning away from God and unfaithfulness in marriage are often paralleled (Hos 1-3; Ezek 16; 2 Cor 11:1-3). Besides the character as a covenant, emphasis is laid on openness to procreation. This link is very close in the creation mandate (Gen 1:28).

In the New Testament, there is a decoupling of these two aspects. In basic statements of Jesus and Paul, procreation and families are not mentioned as aspects that make a marriage valid or complete in the first place (Mt 19:1-12; 1 Cor 7). If marriage was of relative importance in the Jesus movement and in early Christianity, a continuation of its high esteem is soon found in the New Testament (Eph 5:21-33, Col 3:18-4:1; 1 Pet 2:18-3:7).

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[334] William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

Early Christianity was influenced in many ways by the currents of the time.[335] An increasing appreciation of asceticism made sexuality as a whole appear problematic. Forms of celibacy appeared early on and still play a role in many currents of Christianity today. Marriage and a family were often subordinated to the celibate life.

Augustine's teaching on the purposes of marriage plays a paramount role in Christianity's understanding of marriage.[336] Unlike in the New Testament, marriage and procreation were now closely linked. The reason for this is not least that for Augustine, sexual desire was considered even more sinful in itself than it was by the early Church Fathers and therefore also required theological justification in marriage. This is what the goods of marriage provided: the possibility of procreation, marital fidelity and the sacramental character of marriage. The natural orientation towards producing children made sexuality something that could not be recognized as good, but at least it was permissible in the context of a sexual encounter that was open to children.

Regarding marriage as a sacrament had momentous effects. At the latest from the 12th century, marriage was understood not as a part of family private law but as a part of the church's legal and dispositional power. The church could decree or prohibit the admission to marriage. The power of the church was strengthened by the fact that marriage was no longer subject to the private law of families. This also led to a strengthening of individuals. The church

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[335] Arnold Angenend, *Ehe, Liebe und Sexualität im Christentum. Von den Anfängen bis heute* (Münster: Aschendorf Verlag, 2015); Peter Brown, *Body and Society. Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2008).

[336] Christian Volkmar Witt, *Martin Luthers Reformation der Ehe. Sein theologisches Eheverständnis vor dessen augustinisch-mittelalterlichen Hintergrund* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 35-66; Matthew Kuefler, "Desire and the Body in the Patristic Period" in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2017), 241-25.

played a decisive role in ensuring that women, in particular, could no longer simply be married against their will. Voluntariness was regarded as the main characteristic. Also, the indissolubility of marriage was now linked to its character as a sacrament.

# 5.2.2 Theology of marriage in the history of Protestantism

## 5.2.2.1 Rejection of the sacramental understanding of marriage in the Reformation

The Protestant Reformers not only brought about changes in theology and the church. The reforming of the church was also an epochal turning point for the understanding of marriage. All Reformers dealt with questions of marriage in detail. The Reformation territories saw drastic changes in the law, which became necessary because the Reformers turned away from sacramental marriage. The following changes can be noted in all Reformation currents:[337]

- Secularization of marriage law. Marriage was regulated by state law, no longer by canon law.
- The subordination of marriage to chastity was rejected. Celibacy was no longer recognized as superior to life in the family, unlike in tradition. Monasteries and convents were closed.
- Divorce was made possible in the case of culpable destruction of marriage. Remarriage was offered to the innocent party in a dissolved marriage.

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[337] Christian Volkmar Witt, *Reformation der Ehe*; John Witte Jr.,"Sex and Marriage in the Protestant Tradition, 1500-1900" in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2017), 304-320.

- Marriage and a family were generally common for pastors and preachers.

All these changes have their theological causes in the departure from the Catholic Church's sacramental view of marriage. On the one hand, marriage was now seen as founded in God's creation. A man and a woman helpfully complemented each other. Marriage was understood as a remedy against loneliness and fornication. On the other hand, the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman reflected God's faithfulness in the divine covenant with humankind. The new view of marriage had far-reaching cultural consequences. The Lutheran designation of marriage as a "worldly thing" must not be confused with a secular understanding. Marriage remained for Luther and the following generations a divine order. The detailed arrangement of marriage law and marriage ceremonies was declared a matter for the secular authorities. At the same time, it was clear: the natural life received greater recognition. Mutual love and also physical pleasure of love were reaffirmed. The appreciation of marriage was linked to a new fundamental affirmation of the world as creation. Marriage and family are seen as important for society, especially in procreation and in the upbringing of children. It should not be overlooked that this also meant the disappearance of free spaces for many women. In monasteries, women had access to education and responsible leadership positions that were not open to them in Protestantism for a long time.

The Reformation innovations in the understanding of marriage had an impact for centuries to come. However, there were also further developments. Starting from the Reformation, we will focus on the development in Germany, after 1945 especially on the history of West Germany.

## 5.2.2.2 Marriage as Covenant

In the Reformation period, it was clear that marriage was not just a matter of two people, but concerned families in each case. The consent of the fathers is considered a necessary condition for any marriage. In Lutheran countries, marriage was sometimes compulsory. The man was considered the head of the family by his wife, his children and everybody in his house.

The Reformed tradition relied heavily on the covenant motif. The idea of a covenant between two people grew stronger in the 18th century, in particular, now more in the sense of a mutual contract. This contractual logic determined the conception of marriage in the Enlightenment.[338] In the early modern period, Pietism advocated a stronger spiritual character for the whole of everyday life. This strengthened the equality of women and men, or at least the subject status of women.[339] Dynastic and economic motives for marriage became less important. From the end of the 18th century onward, love became the decisive motive for marriage, primarily due to the influence of Romanticism. Marriage was no longer understood primarily as an arrangement for legal offspring, but above all from the mutual and holistic love of two people.[340]This development can be observed equally in society and in Protestant theology.

## 5.2.2.3 Marriage as civil union

The Reformers had indeed distinguished the spiritual and secular side of marriage. Nevertheless, under the conditions of a state

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[338] Witte,"Sex and Marriage", 308-318.
[339] Ulrike Gleixner, "Zwischen göttlicher und weltlicher Ordnung: Die Ehe im lutherischen Pietismus" in *Pietismus und Neuzeit*. Ein Jahrbuch zur Geschichte des neueren Protestantismus 28 (2002), 147-184.
[340] Rüdiger Peuckert, *Familienformen im sozialen Wandel*, 9th edition (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019).

church or comparable orders, the church was the authoritative place of marriage. Church marriage ordinances contained many impediments to marriage. People who belonged to a free church rather than to the mainline church, couples who belonged to different denominations and individuals who were considered adulterers could not marry under the conditions of church regulation of marriage. Poverty and lack of education were also often the criteria for refusing to conduct a marriage. As a result, a significant proportion of the population often remained unmarried in the 19th century.

Following the French Revolution, marriage in church and under state law diverged in the 19th century. In Germany, state marriage was introduced in 1874. Originally, the churches were sceptical about civil marriage. Eventually they accepted the new logic, acknowledging that the state recognized marriage in a way that was very close to the church's understanding of marriage and family. After the abolition of marriage barriers and the enforcement of civil marriage, there was a long upswing in marriage in the following period. In Germany, especially in West Germany, the peak was reached in the first 25 years after World War II, when – for the overwhelming majority of the population – marriage and a family became the undisputed ideal of living together.[341]

## 5.2.2.4 Equal partnership of men and women in marriage

After the Second World War, the increasing social recognition of the equality of men and women led to the changed understanding of

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[341] Barbara Willenbacher,"Zerrüttung und Bewährung der Nachkriegs-Familie" in Martin Broszat, Klaus-Dietmar Henke, Hans Woller (eds), *Von Stalingrad zur Währungsreform. Zur Sozialgeschichte des Umbruchs in Deutschland* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1988), 595-618.

marriage again becoming a central challenge for the churches.[342] In West German law, there was the tension that the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany (1949) stipulated equal rights for men and women, but the older civil code still contained many regulations that assumed the dominance of the man in the family. In the 1950s, the hierarchical or equal character of marriage was debated for many years. The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) agreed in principle with the principle of equal rights for men and women in society. At first, however, it opposed efforts to regulate the relationship between the man and the woman in marriage in the civil code. Marriage was very strongly emphasized as a divine foundation, which as such was a pre-state order in whose essence the state was not allowed to intervene. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, equal partnership became increasingly accepted, not only in society but also in Protestantism's understanding of marriage. Liturgical phrases emphasizing the subordination of women to men were no longer used.

Increasingly, feminist theology began to assert itself in the Protestant churches. People no longer pretended that they had always stood up for the equality of men and women in Christianity. The extent to which previous theologies and church orders contradicted this was also recognized. The EKD Synod declared in 1990: "The demand for the subordination of women to men in marriage and the family was justified by biblical tradition. We are convinced that this was not justified. A partnership between man

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[342] Hanna Lausen, *Ordnung der Trauung. Eine Diskursanalyse des Wandels von Kultur und Recht der Eheschließung seit den 1950er Jahren* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 43-139.

and woman based on justice corresponds - as we recognize today - to the biblical testimony."[343]

## 5.2.2.5 Renewal of the divorce law

In many European countries, traditional divorce laws were reformed. In Germany, plans to change the divorce law in the 1960s led to a renewed intense discussion of marriage. Traditionally, a marriage could only be dissolved according to the principle of fault, i.e., the dissolution of a marriage was linked to a court judgment as to who was primarily to blame for the breakdown of the marital union. Due to the many difficulties of this practice, it became obvious that the question of guilt cannot always be clearly clarified in law. The replacement of this principle of guilt by the principle of breakdown (*Zerrüttung*) was discussed. In this case, the conflict touched on a matter that was addressed in the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church. If it is clearly established that one partner has cheated on the other with adultery, they hold at the same time that the innocent partner may remarry.[344] Nevertheless, the EKD supported the legal reform in principle. In 1969, the EKD declared its fundamental support for this change in the law.[345] In Germany, the law was revised in 1977 and the principle of guilt was replaced by

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[343] "Die Forderung zur Unterordnung der Frau unter den Mann in Ehe und Familie wurde gerade auch mit der biblischen Überlieferung begründet. Das geschah nach unserer Überzeugung nicht zu Recht. Eine auf Gerechtigkeit angelegte Partnerschaft zwischen Mann und Frau entspricht – so erkennen wir heute – dem biblischen Zeugnis." *Die Gemeinschaft von Frauen und Männern in der Kirche*. Kundgebung der Synode der EKD (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1990), 15.

[344] Cf. Tractatus de potestate et primatu papae In *Unser Glaube: Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*. Ausgabe für die Gemeinde (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2000), 525.

[345] "Zur Reform des Ehescheidungsrechts in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Denkschrift der Familienrechtskommission der EKD", 1969, in *Ehe, Familie, Sexualität, Jugend. Denkschriften der EKD*, 3 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1981), 23-44.

the principle of breakdown. The EKD accompanied this development in principle with approval, but at the same time critically. The social change was perceived as a threat to marriage as an institution. In principle, they maintained that marriage by its very nature was indissoluble and could only be dissolved when a marriage had hopelessly broken down. Over time, however, the realization that divorce is one of the contingent possibilities of human life, and must be accompanied pastorally, has also gained ground in the church and in theology.

## 5.2.2.6 Pluralization of partnership forms

In the last 50 years, marriage has remained the guiding principle of the majority, while a number of relationships are taking their place alongside it. Premarital cohabitation has long been the rule rather than the exception. In the vast majority of cases, marriage takes place after the couple has lived together for some time, often close to the birth of their first child. In addition, the proportion of non-marital cohabiting couples, patchwork families and single parents is increasing. In the 21st century, the introduction of same-sex partnerships and 'marriage for all' has become a central challenge for many European societies and ultimately for the churches.

Until the 21st century, Protestant churches generally defended marriage as the only desirable institution for living together in community. A theological change has emerged only recently. Two trends can be observed.

For some, these developments are problematic signs of an increasing devaluing of marriage. The defence of the fundamental importance of marriage as a Christian order and social institution is understood as a challenge to the church. It is necessary to hold on to the unchanging essential characteristics of marriage and, at the same time, to accept the historical changes in the course of time.

Marriage therefore requires a constantly new understanding, in which its enduring characteristics such as lifelong duration, fidelity and exclusivity are combined with new values such as equality, mutual love, care and responsibility.

For others, the diverse forms partnership is a sign that the institution as such is no longer followed as binding. Rather, the personal freedom of both partners, especially of women, along with love and commitment, have taken on central importance as the very substance of partner relations. These values are currently leading to other forms of partnership being recognized as relationships with equal rights alongside the previous form of marriage.

# 5.2.3 Protestant understanding of same-sex marriage

## 5.2.3.1 Societal influences

Debates about homosexuality have dominated many Protestant churches for decades. Many communities of churches in North America have split because of disagreements on this issue. Not so in Europe. But both on the national and international level there are sometimes hardened fronts and many disputes (as can be seen in the case studies, ch. 8). As an example of the disputes and the diversity of positions, let us look at the development in the EKD.

The changes in the legal situation in Europe and also in Germany since the 1960s have gradually led to a re-evaluation of homosexual relationships in the churches, too. In Germany, the EKD's 1971 memorandum on questions of sexual ethics stated: "The widespread unreflective condemnation of homosexuality as unnatural culpable

behaviour must not be maintained." [346] With the intention of opposing any moral discrediting and criminalization, the memorandum refers to the state of research in psychotherapy at the time. "The Protestant church understands homosexuality as a sexual deformity and rejects its idealization."[347] But this assessment does not result in punishment, rather in aid. Today, there are "new possibilities for pastoral and therapeutic assistance for these people".[348]

A few years later such a medical or psychological assessment was no longer up to date. In 1973 homosexuality was removed from the US Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). This judgement became accepted worldwide as a consensus of the professional societies. There was no conclusive diagnosis of what the disorder consisted of, no aetiology for the development of a deviation nor any uniform therapy with a chance of success. Many attempts at (religious) therapeutic healing brought only temporary change, if any and in some cases caused considerable harm to those affected. The WHO removed homosexuality from the list of mental disorders in 1992 at the end of a long discussion.

In the church debate, this discourse was conducted for much longer. The 1990s and 2000s were the heyday of the therapeutic paradigm in conservative and evangelical churches and movements. But in recent years even conservative groups have distanced themselves from the idea that homosexuality is a disorder that could be cured by therapy.

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[346] EKD, *Denkschrift zu Fragen der Sexualethik* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1971), 39.
[347] Ibid., 40.
[348] Ibid.

## 5.2.3.2 Church discussions on blessing and marriage in Germany

In many churches, especially since the 1990s, there has been intensive discussion about whether to recognize same-sex relationships, and if so, how. The EKD document on living with tensions[349] sought to combine different positions. The EKD formed an ad hoc commission for this text, which was staffed to reflect the spectrum of opinion within the member churches. The aim was to enable the churches to position themselves as far as possible together.

Consensus was reached in two directions: a) Criminalizing and persecuting homosexuals was to be rejected. The churches were guilty of never having spoken out against this discrimination. b) Homosexuality must be evaluated in accordance with Scripture, without ignoring humanistic, legal or political perspectives but also without depending on them.

The EKD document expressed the contemporary consensus of biblical scholarship that the biblical texts did not report anything like a homosexual orientation. Rather, they speak exclusively of acts of same-sex sexuality. These are judged negatively throughout. On this basis, the text concluded that the marriage of a man and a woman is the guiding principle of the church. Celibacy was ideally recommended for those attracted to the same sex. On the other hand, it was acknowledged that not everyone is able to remain celibate. Since there is no specific biblical judgment for this case, this situation must be assessed on the basis of the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself. Same-sex partnerships that follow the

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[349] EKD, *Mit Spannungen leben: eine Orientierungshilfe des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) zum Thema "Homosexualität und Kirche", EKD-Texte 57, https://www.ekd.de/spannungen_1996_homo.html*, 1996.

commandment of love were acceptable, even if they could not be equated with marriage. The possibility of a blessing of same-sex couples was denied.

In subsequent years, this compromise proved untenable. To the extent that the legislator introduced the Civil Partnership Act (2001), the EKD had to take a stand on it. The growing recognition of the reality of same-sex couples can be seen in two documents from 2000 and 2002.[350] After the adoption of the law on life partnerships in Germany, the EKD conceded that a new debate within the church was necessary in view of the previous arguments.[351] The further development was disputed at the level of the member churches. The German churches took different paths. Some were early advocates of recognising same-sex partnerships, including the possibility of a blessing.[352] Others rejected any public recognition of same-sex partnerships. Many churches made an analogous differentiation according to the distinction of opposite-sex marriage with recognized civil unions. They distinguished between two different official acts, marriage and blessing.[353]

After the introduction of 'marriage for all' in Germany, more and more churches abolished the distinction between blessing and marriage. For some churches, such a distinction is still helpful in finding a compromise between different convictions in the congregations.

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[350] EKD, *Verläßlichkeit und Verantwortung stärken.*
https://www.ekd.de/lebensgemeinschaft_2000.html
[351] https://www.ekd.de/empfehlungen_gleichgeschlechtliche_partnerschaften_2002.html
[352] This is especially true for the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland (2000) and the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (2002).
[353] https://trauung.bayern-evangelisch.de/downloads/Handreichung_Segnungen_Version_27_November_2019(1).pdf

This spectrum of positions can be found throughout Europe. Some churches have achieved or are planning to achieve full equality.[354] Other churches recognize same-sex partnerships, but explicitly do not equate them with marriage between men and women. Still other churches have so far refused any recognition.[355]

For many conservatives or evangelicals, the question of same-sex love is not an isolated issue. It is a conviction from creation theology and anthropology that sexuality may have its place only in the marriage of a man and a woman. They see classical marriage increasingly challenged by the cultural change in many societies. Adherence to the classical view of marriage is for them an important characteristic of faithfulness to the authority of the Bible. For them, the polarity of man and woman is part of the essence of marriage. Only in this order do they see a sustainable development of society as possible. They see the emphasis on the classical marriage of a man and a woman as ensuring protection and support for families with children.[356]

More liberal positions fundamentally question such an anthropological definition of male and female polarity. An EKD guide (Between Autonomy and Dependence) explicitly mentions anthropology as a key question: "One of the strengths of the Protestant view of humanity is that it does not reduce people to

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[354] https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/our-views/same-sex-marriage

[355] Cf. the 2004 statement of the Reformed Church of Hungary: "The Reformed Church cannot accept homosexual relationships and their blessing is not possible." Krisztián Kovács, "Eh(r)e für alle? Die Akzeptanz der Homosexualität aus südosteuropäischer Perspektive" in ZEE 63 (2019), 148-153, 152. http://regi.reformatus.hu/mutat/6221/

[356] For a conservative Christian view of marriage and family, see Andrew Goddard and Don Horrocks, *Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality* (United Kingdom: British Evangelical Alliance, 2012). Groups within CPCE member churches are also connected to the evangelical alliances in their countries.

biological characteristics, but describes their identity and coexistence in a variety of ways."[357] The study is based on the broad consensus of exegesis that the biblical texts do not have contemporary same-sex partnerships in mind and accordingly make no definitive statements about the possibility of same-sex marriages. From this point of view, the decisive question is not only one of sexual ethics. Essentially, the question is whether discrimination against social minorities can continue to be supported by the churches. The distinction between blessing and marriage is also considered a form of discrimination based on sexual orientation. In the future, churches must learn to acknowledge the experiences of same-sex couples as a source of knowledge.[358]

## 5.2.4 CPCE churches and liturgies

According to the survey, 21 member churches (nearly 40 percent) have a liturgy for same-sex weddings or blessings, whereas two church organizations state that all their member churches have such a liturgy, and one organization that some of its members do.[359] Eight member churches (15 percent) do not have such a liturgy whereas eight answer that, although they do not have a formally authorized liturgy, some of its congregations do allow weddings/blessings of same-sex partnerships. Four member churches (8 percent) have taken a decision that same-sex marriages or blessings must not be celebrated in the church.

As regards church discipline, 50 percent of the responding member churches ordain persons living openly in same-sex partnerships for

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[357] EKD, *Zwischen Autonomie und Angewiesenheit* (2013), 67.
[358] Clare Herbert, *Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Marriage. Squaring the Circle* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publisher, 2021).
[359] The survey did not distinguish between the two, as the point was not the legal status but the liturgy as an ecclesial practice.

pastoral ministry, and 52 percent accept persons living openly in same-sex partnerships as employees other than pastors. 15 percent of the responding members do not ordain persons living openly in same-sex partnerships for pastoral ministry and 8 percent do not accept persons living openly in same-sex partnerships for any salaried position in the church. 15 percent of members indicate that they have taken no decision on the matter.

Five member churches/organizations (10 percent) indicate that they have a liturgy for divorce.

# 5.3 Theological reflections on marriage

At first glance there seems to be a clear opposition in today's disputes. Many speak out in favour of strengthening classical marriage. It has always been advocated in the tradition of the church and can be traced back to the Bible. By contrast, others emphasize more recent experiences with marriage and different forms of relationships. Traditional orders were experienced as having oppressed and excluded many people. Reason, as reflected in the modern sciences, shows that forms of relationships have always been changeable.

Different interpretations of the situations have emerged in the Protestant churches. They range from a strong emphasis on the traditional order of marriage to the integration of today's changes in the practice of church marriage and accompanying alternatives.

## 5.3.1 Marriage as a binding institution and basis of society

As already seen in 1.2, there is currently a growing recognition of individuality and diversity. At the same time, however, there is also a trend to return to tradition, with a longing for cultural stability and institutional security. The classical view of marriage as a binding status has been emphasized to this day. Such a clear preference for marriage as the basis of the social order provides orientation for people. Entering into marriage appears to be a goal that introduces a broader horizon in dealing with love and sexuality, and prevents people from inflicting injuries on others and themselves in the search for pleasure. For married couples, the institution is linked to the certainty that they can rely on each other throughout their lives – in good times and bad, even in the event of health problems, and emotional or financial hardship. Finally, marriage is the basis for a family with children who can rely on the care of father and mother.[360]

## 5.3.2 Marriage as a historical expression of human relationships

Not all theologians see the increasing institutional scepticism in many Western societies as a sign of crisis. After all, the classical order was often perceived as repressive, disadvantaging women and encouraging them to hold on to unhappy relationships. It also justified discrimination against people who, for various reasons, could not marry someone of a different sex. Today, there are also approaches in theology that understand this decoupling of love

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[360] For a detailed ethical account see Eilert Herms, *Systematische Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 1852-1976.

relationship and marriage. They hold fast to love as the highest value of modern forms of relationship. The institution of marriage is no longer considered a social norm which, as an institution, precedes the human desire for partnership.[361] Rather, they argue, we must view it the other way round: the moral criteria of a good partnership such as voluntariness, respect, justice and fidelity are the essential yardsticks. Marriage can be recognized insofar as it realizes these criteria. Therefore, recent EKD statements (such as the pastor's service law and the EKD's guide to marriage and the family have rightly "made a change in perspective from a primarily institution-based to a primarily criterion-based understanding of ways of life".[362]

Therefore, the legal institution of marriage is no longer prioritized over human relationships, especially when its regulations restrict human agency. Procreation is an option that is no longer necessary and is considered fundamentally separate from the concept of marriage. Marriage is complete in itself even without children.

## 5.3.3 False opposites

The classical sources of Christian orientation – Scripture and tradition, experience and reason – must be related to each other again and again. It is undeniable that Christian tradition has unanimously strongly emphasized the institution of marriage. This

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[361] This was still the view in the EKD document *Gottes Gabe und persönliche Verantwortung* (1998) on God's gift and personal responsibility: "Bis heute geht die evangelische Ehe-Ethik davon aus, dass die Ehe ein dem Willen der Ehepartner vorgegebene Institution ist" [To this day, Protestant marriage ethics assume that marriage is an institution predetermined by the will of the spouses], 27.

[362] Referring to *Zwischen Autonomie und Angewiesenheit* (2013) and quoted from Peter Dabrock et al. in *Unverschämt schön* (2015): "eine Perspektiwänderung von einem primär institutionsbasierten zu einem primär kriteriengeleiteten Verständnis der Lebensformen," 66.

tradition has always referred to the Bible and shown with much biblical evidence that the high esteem of marriage is justified. At the same time, historical retrospection has shown that tradition is by no means uniform and unchanging. Cultural developments have repeatedly led to changes in the theological understanding of marriage and the church's approach to it. Sociological and anthropological research today shows in impressive breadth that the biblical texts and church practice cannot be separated from the development of human society as a whole. Biblical texts are shaped by their environment and have exerted great influence at the same time.

Forms of marriage are already presupposed in the biblical texts, even though there are, of course, major differences with a modern understanding of marriage. Concepts of marriage are older than God's history with the people of Israel. Obviously, they already existed when the creation narratives of the Bible were written. These narratives see the partnership of a man and a woman as founded in the will of God at the beginning of creation. At the same time, the creation texts of the Bible do not reveal any comprehensive standardization or definition of marriage.

The Reformation opened our eyes to the fact that marriage is part of human cultural history. The modern transformation of marriage in the 20th century does not simply replace a period of unchanging uniformity. Marriage has always been in flux. The transition from polygamy to monogamy occurred in biblical times (1 Tim 3:2); then and in early Christianity, marriage was a private legal matter of families. Later it increasingly became a matter administered and ordered by the church as a sacrament. In the territories where the Protestant churches were spreading, the process of sacramentalizing marriage ended with the Reformation. This turning-point initiated a development that allowed the modern state

to become the decisive authority on marriage. Marriage proved to be a guarantor of stability and at the same time an order undergoing historical change. Christianity has always tried to do both: to celebrate marriage as a gift from God and at the same time to continually reshape its form.

From this perspective, it is also important to address what is sometimes called the modern crisis of marriage. As we have seen, until the mid-20th century, marriage gained a recognition and popularity in the West that had never existed before. In recent decades, transformations have occurred that have supposedly fundamentally challenged this supreme esteem. First, a transition from institutional marriage to companionate marriage can be observed. [363] The order of marriage itself is no longer taken for granted. Modern values such as equality have replaced the classical structure of marriage, which was strongly characterized by different, prescribed roles for women and men. This shift away from an institution-oriented understanding of marriage has accelerated in the recent past. Individual needs are becoming more important, traditional guidelines and ways of life are becoming the exception, especially in the cities. This can be described as a positive development. Marriage is increasingly ceasing to be a domestic and bodily community characterized by relations of subordination and is becoming a world of personal affection characterized by love. [364] At the same time, the developments can also be described more critically. New authors also see love as a romantic ideal itself in crisis. If love was not necessary to enter into marriage in earlier times, it is

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[363] Thomas Knieps-Port Le Roi, "Wives and Husbands" in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender* (Oxford U. P., 2017), 573-589, 574.

[364] Stephanie Coontz, *In schlechten wie in guten Tagen. Die Ehe – eine Liebesgeschichte* (Bergisch-Gladbach: Gustav-Lübbe-Verlag, 2006). / *Marriage, a History. How Love Conquered Marriage*. (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005).

not uncommon today to see it as no longer necessary for sexual contacts. The hopes of love have all too often proved to be deceptive. In view of this development, some speak of an end to love as the dominant guiding idea of today's forms of relationship.[365] In fact, sexual and long-term partnerships are more diverse and flexible than traditional expectations of marriage and love.

## 5.3.4 Marriage as a gift of God that is historically flexible and capable of renewal

Besides the strong emphasis on the traditional form of marriage as an institution, on the one hand, and the scepticism towards the institution in favour of substantive criteria for good relationships, on the other, there is also a third approach. To this way of thinking, the exclusive opposition of institutional order and orientation towards ethical criteria for forms of relationships does not seem plausible. After all, marriage has proven to be flexible and capable of development over the past centuries. That marriage can also gain in attractiveness has been shown in recent times. In many countries, LGBT+ movements and feminist groups fundamentally criticized marriage in the 1960s and 1970s, rejecting it as a patriarchal institution. Over time, a more differentiated assessment was reached. For many same-sex couples, the possibility of marriage increasingly became a desirable symbol, both for social recognition and for affirming their own relationship.

Theologian Isolde Karle explicitly acknowledges the positive sense of marriage as a changeable order: "As empirical data show, marriage

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[365] Sven Hillenkamp, *Das Ende der Liebe. Gefühle im Zeitalter unendlicher Freiheit* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2009); Illouz, Eva, *The End of Love. A Sociology of Negative Relations* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2019).

has by no means outlived its usefulness; on the contrary, it is desired by the vast majority of the population. Marriage has modernized and proven its ability to change, it has largely shed its patriarchal and asymmetrical gender roles. [...] The emotional household of a couple grows not only from the inside out, but also from the outside in. Feelings are not only expressed in a marriage, but addressing them as a married couple simultaneously confirms, strengthens and inspires them."[366]

In this sense, it is possible to overcome the alternative of ethical criteria and institutional order and to articulate points of view that connect these two sides. The following aspects are emphasized in such an integrative view.

## 5.3.4.1 Community of love

The Christian guideline that everything should be done in love (1 Cor 16:14) naturally also applies to marriage. As a public covenant, marriage is a confession of love, an expression of love and the shaping of life together as a form of loving life. Marriage can be understood as a gift because it has proved to be a social way of life that makes love permanent. What is special about it is that it makes love appear not only as a given, but also as an art that must be learned throughout life. In the New Testament, the love of God or the giving of Jesus Christ becomes the measure of how spouses should also treat each other in love and care (Eph 5:25; Tit 2:4).

The expectation of love as a prerequisite for marriage is an achievement of Romanticism that cannot be found in this way in the Bible and most of church history. But the central importance of Christian love as a norm for cohabitation is by no means at odds with

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[366] Isolde Karle, *Liebe in der Moderne. Körperlichkeit, Sexualität und Ehe*, (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014), 240.

this. Rather, modern love marriage can be judged as a positive development and appreciated as an expression of a Christian understanding of marriage.

## 5.3.4.2 Community of fidelity

Among the classical purposes of marriage, the Reformers stressed, above all, the characteristic of fidelity, mutual help and support, following the biblical emphasis on fidelity (Ex 20:14; 1 Thess 4:3-4) It is an act of freedom of the spouses that they mutually bind themselves to each other in marriage. Precisely this aspect is visible in the institutional order. Institutional marriage creates legal security. Isolde Karle emphasizes: "Marriage, as an institution, relieves us from a laborious permanent reflection and the constant search for self-definition in a relationship. [...] Marriage signals that the search for a partner is over and marks clear boundaries to the outside world. At the same time, it communicates certainty of expectations and obligations internally. This promotes the sustainability of a relationship. The supra-individual interconnectedness of marriage has both a stabilizing and relieving function."[367]

Such an approach does not have to criticize premarital cohabitation or partnerships that want to renounce the form of marriage. But the special legal form of marriage offers protection precisely for the (economically) less well-off member of the couple, which can be affirmed for inner reasons of love.

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[367] "Die Ehe entlastet als Institution von einer strapaziösen Dauerreflexion und der ständigen Suche nach Selbstdefinition in einer Beziehung. [...] Der Eheschluss signalisiert, dass die Partnersuche beendet ist und markiert klare Grenzen nach außen. Zugleich kommuniziert er Erwartungssicherheiten und Verbindlichkeiten nach innen. Das fördert die Tragfähigkeit einer Beziehung. Der überindividuelle Verflechtungszusammenhang der Ehe hat eine sowohl stabilisierende als auch entlastende Funktion." Karle, *Liebe in der Moderne*, 217.

Fidelity today can no longer mean that marriage is defined in a formalistic sense as the only place of sexuality. Fidelity is a reciprocal relationship of reliability and commitment. Today, more than ever, it is the responsibility of couples to clarify and define for themselves the expectations they associate with it.

## 5.3.4.3 Justice

Justice has traditionally been a component of marriage in that it has always been linked to social norms as expressed in the domestic tables in the New Testament. Today, justice must be considered a new key value. Modern marriage differs fundamentally from patriarchal marriage in that it no longer understands the relationship of the spouses as a complementary relationship of leadership and obedience, activity and passivity. The Old Testament prophets criticized a social order that excluded and oppressed. When invoking God's justice, they were referring to the equality of all people before God and speaking up for the marginalized. In some places in Paul's letters it is clear that the equality of women and men in Christ leads to an equal emphasis on the rights of both in marriage (1 Cor 7:2-3; 11:11-12).[368] The characteristics of justice according to Margaret Farley, mentioned in 4.3.4 in the context of sexual ethics, also apply to married life. The aspects of mutuality and equality and the pursuit of social justice today have consequences that are critically different from traditional role patterns. The equality of man and woman in marriage also proves itself in the fact that both equally need the freedom to develop professionally in a way that corresponds to their gifts and inclinations. Social justice is reflected not least in the fact

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[368] We should not overlook the ambivalence of biblical statements that could also support traditionally patriarchal assignments of the roles of husband and wife, as in 1 Corinthians 11:8-9.

that activities traditionally assigned to women, such as caring for children or aging parents, are now the responsibility of both.

It is especially this aspect of today's understanding of marriage that has consequences for dealing with same-sex couples. In the CPCE member churches, as has been seen, there are different solutions at present. For some, the introduction of marriage for all is a step creating greater justice. Others are concerned not to expose the classical understanding of marriage even more to a development that detracts from marriage as a binding order.

Any discriminatory approach to same-sex love opposed to the biblical principle of justice is questionable.[369] Changes in the understanding of marriage have repeatedly shown that they need not harm marriage as an institution and can contribute to its renewal.

## 5.3.4.4 Procreation

Fertility as openness to the transmission of life was long considered a necessary aspect of a Christian marriage. Until the present day, most people have regarded starting a family as a very desirable goal. For many contemporaries, marriage is explicitly linked to the desire to have or adopt children and live together as a family. With Paul in the New Testament (1 Cor 7), Protestantism does not see the goal of bodily reproduction as a necessary aspect of marriage. Marriage is not only valid through procreation. The connection to the aspect of procreation can also be understood as openness to family in a broader sense or other forms of responsibility and care for others.

When Jesus' family questions his way of life, Jesus says those who ask about God's will are his family members (Mk 3:31-35). John's

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[369] Luca Baschera and Frank Mathwig, *Zankapfel Ehe. Ehe und Trauung für alle aus evangelisch-reformierter Sicht* (Bern: EKS Publikation, 2020), 17.

Gospel describes how Jesus establishes a relationship of motherhood and sonship between Mary and John (John 19:26-27). In the early Jesus movement, some disciples left their family for the sake of the kingdom of God and to serve other people. (Lk 9:57-62). Luke also mentions by name some women who not only followed Jesus but supported him materially in a reversal of traditional orders (Luke 8:2-3). All this shows that the community of believers transcends the boundaries of the traditional family, at the same time realizing essential parts of family life.

## 5.3.5 Conclusion

The emphasis on the institutional order of marriage and its rules and the emphasis on moral criteria do not have to be understood as being in opposition to each other. There is a broad and legitimate spectrum of how churches can prioritize one or the other in their specific and cultural situation. It is part of the Protestant corridor that there cannot, and need not, be a unanimous ruling on all issues. The influence of the respective society is always already given. There are equally legitimate reasons for laying emphasis on marriage as a binding institution, subject to evaluation and partial qualification, or to renewal with the help of ethical criteria. Issues arise when the institution and the ethical criteria are detached from each other. Valuing marriage can be problematic when it becomes a rigid norm, a reward for the steadfast rather than a place of blessing and mutual companionship. The modern quest for justice would lose something if it could no longer appreciate the protective and stabilizing importance of marriage as an institution.

These ethical criteria apply to every form of marriage, regardless of the sex of the spouses or whether, and how, they have children or live as a family. The emergence of the modern ideal of marriage with its special emphasis on the dignity of both partners and the central

importance of love could easily be interpreted as a social consequence of Christian values in the modern age. This is not so easy to say for today's reduction of marriage to one form of relationship among many others. The gospel as the unifying centre of church communion[370] gives a clear criterion from which to discuss contentious issues even with different cultural backgrounds and insights. The Christian understanding of marriage as a divine mandate can ideally do two things: it can give expression to a couple's loving union which, through its celebration, appears equally as an expression of joy and as an opportunity for social recognition of this union in public. At the same time, Christian marriage shows that we all depend on recognition, support and, biblically speaking, blessing. The reference to God's unconditional love points to a support and consolation in difficult times, which is also available to a partnership as a resource of common strengthening. From both angles, marriage can be understood as a gift of God.

## 5.4 Study questions

What changes in the understanding and practice of marriage led to tensions and disputes in your church in earlier times?

What has proven helpful in perceiving and discussing different developments with one another?

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[370] Cf. The Lutheran World Federation, *Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality Proposed Guidelines and Processes for Respectful Dialogue* (2007): "Matters of family, marriage and human sexuality are not what constitute the Gospel or make us able to receive it. (…) Throughout history, the Church has had different views on how to order these matters. That has not restricted its ability to preach the Gospel and to witness to the works of Christ as the basis for our salvation," 5. https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Exhibit%2010%20Report%20Task%20Force%20English.pdf

What challenges are currently affecting your own church? What measures are being taken to bring different positions into conversation?

# 6 Family

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, families in Europe underwent significant transitions. Changing ideas about divorce, changes in the organization of welfare states and the introduction of birth control are only a few of the major social, political and medical-technological changes that impacted on family life and family structures. What will become clear from this chapter is that the word 'family' can be interpreted differently and there is no single model for forming a family. In order to grasp the depth and complexity of family transitions we need an interdisciplinary perspective. In this chapter, the theoretical section offers an exploration of the changes in the understanding, organization and formation of families from the perspectives of sociology, anthropology, psychology and queer theory. Then another subchapter goes into thinking about families theologically, paying attention to the way the families have been understood in Protestant traditions, while also discussing the perspective of feminist and queer theology. The final paragraph reflects on what a contemporary Protestant perspective on families might look like.

## 6.1 Theories of family

### 6.1.1 Sociological perspectives on families

From a social science perspective, questions are asked about the structural changes that families have undergone in the recent past: what makes a family a family, who are its members, what do these

members do? How does the family relate to the smaller level of the individual and the larger level of society as a whole?[371]

From a sociological (and historical) perspective, a major shift in family life can be detected after the industrial revolution with the emergence of the urban modern nuclear family, with the partial loss of its productive aspects that were so characteristic of agricultural family structures. Reduced birth-rates appeared, as living conditions improved literacy and education became a goal for sons and (later) for daughters. The 'baby boom' in the 1950 to 1970s was due to the prevailing model of the family based on romantic love and the social division of roles between husband and wife, with corresponding separation between public and private spheres, and between paid work and unpaid care. After the 1970s this started to change in all developed economies with the wider participation of women in the workforce and the spread of consumerism. Women's changing behaviours and expectations led to better childcare facilities and policies to improve the balance between work and family life, with different outcomes in European countries.[372]

Transitions in family formation are due to a number of factors. First, there is an interplay between prominent family ideologies and the dominant welfare state regime in a given European context. According to sociologists, in those cultures where ties are stronger, family members often interact on a daily basis, frequently offering moral and material support, services and exchange of goods, while other cultures value independence and autonomy. Where affective ties are stronger, families are more inclined to take care of needy persons (elderly, disabled, unemployed, poor), while in other

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[371] Jane F. Collier, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, Sylvia J. Yanagisako, "Is There a Family? New Anthropological Views".
[372] Chiara Saraceno, "The Italian family from the 1960s to the present" in *Modern Italy* 9(1) (2004), 47-57.

countries the modern welfare state provides public assistance. Even with demographic change, affective bonds in southern Europe remain patterned on solidarity. Significant differences across cultures are observed when young adults form a new household. In northern Europe they tend to leave home at around 20-25 years of age, while in other countries the departure age is around 30, even if women tend to leave earlier than men.[373]

Second, debates on issues such as adultery and divorce have shifted in various European societies, with divorce, separation and remarrying becoming legally and, increasingly, socially accepted in all European countries. The role of grandparents is important when divorce is at stake since they are a secure base for children and adults in times of disruption. This is not to be taken for granted, because different degrees of personal autonomy are present in various European countries, along with longer life expectancy and better economic and social conditions, or better welfare systems and family or child-care policies. [374]

Third, major changes in family formation as observed by sociologists are 'global families' or 'transnational families'. [375] Digital communication technologies have an impact on global migrants and their transnational family life, based on relatedness and relationality, thus allowing everyday contact at a distance. For example, when Filipino women and other eastern European, Latin American or African women are employed in European families as housekeepers, or to care for the elderly, they keep in touch with other family members who are still at home or have migrated to

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[373] Monica Santoro, *Conoscere la famiglia e i suoi cambiamenti*.

[374] Irène Théry, "Les temps des recompositions" in F. J. Dortier (ed.), *Familles. Permanence et metamorphoses. Histoire, recomposition, parenté, transmission* (Paris: Editions Sciences Humaines, 2002), 55-61.

[375] Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Fernliebe. Lebensformen im globalen Zeitalter* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2011).

other European countries. Qualitative research shows how personal relationships evolve through online platforms, in order to retain some of their cultural customs and sociability. Instead of writing letters, these women use smartphones to interact with their children every day, which adds a transnational mode to motherhood or parenting. In so doing, they create an integrated online sphere in order to mitigate physical separation and imagine an intimate world.[376] Global families are those families that live across different (national, religious, cultural, ethnic) boundaries and experience active trust towards the neighbour. The idea of the family as primarily also an independent economic unit has been maintained only in family firms, such as 'ethnic' restaurants and shops where family members are employed.

Fourth, since the acceptance of homosexuality has increased in many European countries, rainbow families are formed that do not comply with traditional family models. Due to the growing prevalence of these families, but also relatively new techniques such as in-vitro fertilization (IVF) and adoption (used by queer as well as opposite-gender parents), there is an increasing separation in many contexts between sexuality and procreation, and between parenthood and biological reproduction. [377] Importantly, transformation is not the only characteristic of family life in Europe, but continuity and traditions also matter, according to context. For instance, blood ties and affective bonds are still strong especially in cultures such as Spain, Italy, and the Balkans. In northern and central Europe they are considered to be weaker. Here, people are thought or expected to be more autonomous and less interdependent. A family with children is an important institution of society

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[376] Daniel Miller, "Digital Anthropology" in Felix Stein (ed.), *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Facsimile of the first edition in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (2018), 2023. http://doi.org/10.29164/18digital.
[377] Chiara Saraceno, *Coppie e famiglie*.

everywhere; what changes in different cultures is the way in which love and affective bonds are imagined, how they create social relations, cohabitation or residential proximity.

A fifth shift is related to gender. It concerns changing perceptions of maternity, paternity, and the role of grandparents. In Western societies, *maternity* has both a romantic aura and a devalued status. Feminist analysis has always considered maternity in relation to other domain of social life, such as political, religious and cultural systems and their effects on women and specifically on mothers. Often, mainstream debates argue that feminists have themselves devalued maternity as they do not put work-life/career and family life on the same level. Nowadays, feminist and womanist perspectives have brought maternity to the fore as an important source of reflection. What is criticized is the idealization of maternity, its representation in Hollywood films and TV series, and the distortions that lead to the oppression of women. Women's capacity to procreate, their attitudes towards raising and educating children are all important features in democratic societies, but they can be shared with husbands and male partners.[378]

*Paternity* has also undergone changes, as a consequence of the different roles of women and gender relations. The male breadwinner model has been transformed over the years with an increasing participation of husbands and fathers in paternity leave, domestic work and child care. Masculinity and men's studies have increasingly explored how gender, culture, politics and sexuality go together when the experience of being a man is analysed in contemporary societies, and not taken for granted. In particular, becoming a father and sharing the responsibility of being a parent, in everyday practice, has been thoroughly analysed by feminism to

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[378] Tina Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood. A Narrative Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2005).

challenge the conventional idea that fathers are only important in the major events of the lifecycle of children. Both gender roles are nowadays seen as shaped by choices and constraints in which their gendered lives develop.[379]

When looking at what is meaningful for parents and children, we should question blood ties, biogenetic substance, generative practices, social and economic reproduction. *Grandparents* are more present in family life of their children, especially in Italy, where the family is still the main institution for the formation and the inculturation of the person, and the welfare state is weak on child-care services. When considering reconstituted or patchwork families, or rainbow families, step-grandparents are helpful for a stronger sense of belonging, even if such emotional attachments cannot be idealized.

In conclusion, from a sociological perspective, the construction, function and even the definition of the family/families has undergone major changes which are related to broader social and political developments regarding the welfare state, migration, sexuality and gender. To the great majority of family sociologists, "there is nothing less 'natural' and more socially constructed than a family".[380]

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[379] Tina Miller, *Making Sense of Fatherhood. Gender, Caring and Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2011).
[380] Chiara Saraceno, "From the "Family" to "Families"", in *Reset Dialogues on Civilizations*, 11 January 2016. https://www.resetdoc.org/story/from-the-family-to-families/

# 6.1.2 Anthropological perspectives on families

Kinship in contemporary families in Europe is, at the same time, a private realm that touches the personal life and intimacy of people, characterized by diversity, and a public aspect that encompasses a juridical sphere which is also affected by political debate, thus generating a decision-making that impacts on family lives. Anthropological reflections stress that relatives are always a surprise: family forms, kinship ties and parental subjectivities are changing at a rapid pace. Demographic changes have an impact on gender and generational relationships, which are in turn influenced by new juridical and ethical stances, open to debate, requiring conscious, responsible and informed decisions, while variably articulating biological, juridical and affective dimensions. [381] Social transformations such as described above differ according to what is considered to be socially acceptable or legitimate, both from an individual and a collective perspective.

Complexity means being attentive to different ways of forming families, including cohabitation and reproduction without marriage, reconstituted families after divorces, same-sex marriages and rainbow families, mixed and interfaith migrant families. It also refers to the differentiation of family forms throughout the life cycle and other kind of transitions. [382] Regardless of the form a family takes, love and mutual care have become important pillars (caring for or caring about). The practice of care starts from the premise that as

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[381] Marylin Strathern, "Relatives Are Always A Surprise" in Marylin Strathern (ed.), *Kinship, Law and the Unexpected. Relatives Are Always A Surprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2005), 15-32.
[382] Chiara Saraceno, *L'equivoco della famiglia* [The family misunderstanding], (Bari-Roma:Laterza, 2017).

humans we are all interdependent, and when attention is given to practice and to differing aspects of care, we can trace different emotions that motivate care (such as love, compassion, generosity and good care). This affects different social dimensions: the private, the social and the political sphere,[383] which leads to a relational concept of the self, called 'relatedness' by anthropologists. It has given a new emphasis to the study of kinship, gender and families, even in those societies where the individualistic turn seemed to have superseded the family.[384] Emphasis is put on the social and cultural process and not on the structure, while parental and affective bonds are continuously reaffirmed during the life cycle. The term relatedness is more apt than kinship because it does not take for granted what is meaningful in social life, but explores how different cultures build significant relationships. This avoids being ethnocentric while describing family forms that are on the move.[385]

Relatedness can be a complex phenomenon, because different cultural meanings and practices are related to attachments and emotions, as is the case of 'milk siblings', who are babies breast-fed by the same woman, without being brothers and sisters by blood. To illustrate how relatedness operates in the living experience of different family arrangements, breast-feeding can be taken as an example. Breast-feeding is increasingly valued in biomedicine, public health and the media, and it has received attention because it protects from diseases. Only recently has ethnographic research

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[383] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1982); see also Carol Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); Elena Pulcini, "What Emotions Motivate Care?" in *Emotion* Review, 9, 1 (2017): 64-71; Elena Pulcini, *Care of the world: fear, responsibility and justice in the global age* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013). See also "Care" in Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1996).
[384] Janet Carsten, *Cultures of Relatedness*; Janet Carsten, *After Kinship*.
[385] Jane F. Collier, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, Sylvia J. Yanagisako, "Is There A Family? New Anthropological Views".

adopted an integrated view, uniting sociocultural, biological, and anthropological scholarship so that new insights on human lactation emerged, such as shared, sometimes gender-fluid or mixed feeding practices. Talking about chest-feeding is common among LGBTQI+ people. Symbolic and intimate mother-child communication can be dyadic – just the two of them – or shared with other members of the social group, but it is also linked to rapidly changing patterns of women's work, paternal leave, use of expressed milk, paid access to leave and political rhetoric.[386]

## 6.1.3 Psychological perspectives on families

Families' structural changes and relational transformations can also be viewed from a psychological perspective. A telling example is marriage and separation. In the old days, the average duration of marriage was nearly ten years, and in contemporary societies this is still the case. The difference in historical terms is the causes of separation. While in the past couples would split up due to the high mortality rate, especially of women who died in childbirth, separation nowadays is mainly due to divorce and the creation of a reconstituted or patchwork family. Psychologists underline that there is no ideal family form, but what is ideal is not to hurt each other while these different transitions take place.[387]

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[386] Cecilia Tomori, et al., *Breastfeeding New Anthropological* Approaches (New York and London: Routledge, 2018).

[387] Stefano Cirillo, *Le famiglie allargate. Separazioni, divorzi e nuove unioni* [Extended families. Separations, divorces and new unions] in Consiglio Nazionale dell'Ordine degli Psicologi (Roma: Gruppo editoriale Gedi, 2018); Roger Neuburger, *Nouveaux couples* (Paris: Editions Odile Jacobs, 2004). See also: https://robertneuburger.fr/2020/03/06/le-couple-a-quitte-la-famille/

One major trend being observed in clinical practice is also the separation between the couple and the family when there are children. In the past, family needs would prevail over individual needs. The couple was not envisaged as an independent unit, but it was seen within the family needs, and this meant that divorce would take place when children were grown up, if at all. When the focus shifts to the couple as a more autonomous unit, especially where women can afford to be fully employed, it becomes more common to divorce even when children are younger, because the couples' needs prevail over the family's needs.

Psychologists focus on separation because it is a process that reveals some degrees of change in terms of relatedness and interaction. Psychological theories investigate how they are formed, how they change and to what extent they become pathological or dysfunctional. [388] In current modern trends, influenced by social media and the digital transformation of society, psychologists stress change more than continuity, because the previous authoritarian/patriarchal structures of traditional families have been transformed. This highlights the trend towards fusional models between father and son or between mother and daughter, resulting in increased informal communication and affective bonds. Sharing free time together allows for identity fusion in a less hierarchical family organization. [389] Identity fusion explains the role of the personal self and familial ties when it emphasizes the sense of oneness with another person or a group of individual members that motivate pro-group behaviour. There are some negative aspects to

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[388] Paul Watzlawick, Janet Helmick Beavin, Don Jackson, Pragmatics of Human Communication. A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies and Paradoxes (New York: Norton and Company, 1967); Massimo Recalcati, The Telemachus complex. Parents and children after the decline of the father (London: Polity Press, 2019).
[389] Massimo Ammaniti, *La famiglia adolescente* [the adolescent family], (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2015).

it, that underline loss of agency and autonomy, but identity fusion in psychological terms can also highlight pro-group attitudes and action, especially when members of the same family share genes or core values, sometimes developing a sense of group-related invulnerability.[390] Sometimes they are referred to as a 'close family'.

In the 1950s psychologist Erik Erikson wrote his well-known book *Childhood and Society*, in which stages of psychological development were clear-cut and distinguishable, with rites of passage from one stage to the next.[391] In traditional non-Western cultures, rites of passage were even more formally ritualized. Today, things have changed in different parts of the world. Childhood has gained more importance at the social level, and adolescence is protracted for longer periods, also because individual life expectancy has increased. This can be detected by the informal dress code, by friendly behavioural patterns of interactions and intimacy, revealing the fear of time passing, of aging and death, while going into adult life. The emphasis on sharing abolishes distinctions, as existed in large families of the distant past where children would be a sort of separate world from adults, with mutual solidarity and peer-to-peer learning among youngsters. Parents were strict and had a strong sense of duty that would create clear-cut role models. When adult parents died, separation was easier due to a clear succession. Instead, family roles are more fluid and identity is more fusional in post-modernity.[392]

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[390] William B. Swann, Michael D. Buhrmester, "Identity Fusion" in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 24 (1), 2015: 52-57
https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721414551363
[391] Erik Erikson, *Childhood and society* (New York: Norton and Company, 1950).
[392] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love. On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (London: Polity Press, 2003).

## 6.1.4 Changes and transformations in family life

Nowadays, changes and transformations in family life occur at a different pace but overall life transitions are more ambivalent and blurred. This brings difficulties for both parties: on the side of parents and on the side of children. When adolescents seek independence, they do not accept their mother's or father's capacity to read and understand their own and other's mental states, thus comprehending their own and other's intentions and affects. This phenomenon is what psychologists call 'mentalization'. Knowledge about how the adolescent brain functions helps both parents and their children to find ways of bridging distance when necessary and distancing when it is needed. It is not easy to understand this 'grammar' of relationships and one common response is to develop an overprotective or anxious attitude, which entails a risk, namely that of building distrust instead of trust, which sheds light on parents' difficulty in accepting their son's or daughter's autonomy.[393]

Psychological and psychoanalytical theories can be helpful to understand conflict and harmony in family life. They have, however, also been critiqued from many perspectives, including cultural anthropology, because they are influenced by the European milieu in which they were conceived as universal and also because of their historical context. When strictly assigned roles define the traditional family, it seems there is a higher degree of stable relationships, while more freedom means a higher degree of reflexivity to cope with uncertainty and mutual recognition. British psychoanalyst Winnicott explains in his 'object relation theory' that there are two ways of

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[393] Massimo Ammaniti, *La famiglia adolescente*.

relating to others, either by using others, or by building a relationship while recognising the other's specific needs. In order for a family to function well, adults need only to be stronger than their children's projections or destructive fantasies, but they still have to cope with specific desires and needs.[394]

In brief, family life is affected by high expectations of marriage as long-term relationship based on loyalty and promise, because life expectancy is longer. This partly explains why so many couples face a marital crisis, some of them in early years of marriage, some others in the seventh year, which seems to be a symbolic threshold in popular culture, and yet others at later stages of their life cycles when children are grown up and establish their own households. When children become adults, the parental function of minors' upbringing ends, unless some other social crises keep the family united, such as unemployment, poverty, social disadvantage and displacement, which reinforce mutual needs and assistance. When the decision of divorce arrives, parents need to reflect on what consequences this separation might have on the relational life of their children, who will enter into a new way of life, that of a new, extended family. It will include new partners and their children, as well as their parents and relatives.

What is today more common than before is not the degree of separation but the relational aspects that are taken into account. In so doing, both partners can cope more effectively with their responsibility in the collapse of their long-term project of living and sharing life together, or in trying to continue a long-lasting relationship. A big difference is whether separation is mutually agreed or whether it is imposed by one partner: creating a context of mutual respect can communicate to both partners that life goes

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[394] Brendan Callaghan, "Contributions from Psychology" in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, 92-93.

on and it is still full of hope. Separation is not only aggression, rage or disappointments. What is most productive is an attitude that can recall what we have received from marriage or civil union in terms of love and trust, especially when children are small and still need to remember times full of love and mutual understanding. The dream of a perfect romantic marriage and family life is only to be found in the Hollywood films, commercials and TV series that inform our imageries and expectations.

## 6.1.5 LGBTQI+ people and family life

A final theoretical perspective explored here is that of LGBTQI+ people and queer theory. For people identifying as LGBTQI+, the common 'paths' of life that are marked by traditional heterosexual milestones such as marriage and the raising of children are not necessarily impossible, but they are less a matter of course.[395] An experience shared widely among people who at some point come out to their parents as gay or lesbian is that their parents' primary response expresses a major concern with reproduction: "Does this mean you won't have children?".[396] This well-known question conveys two common assumptions regarding families and queer people: that to identify as queer cuts a person off from family life (in terms of having "a family of one's own"), while identifying as heterosexual automatically grants you entrance to family life. As much queer theory on families has made clear, reality is more complex, with many queer people being part of (a form of) family life, sometimes also raising children, and many heterosexual-

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[395] Sara Ahmed, *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).
[396] Jonathan Silin, "What Makes a Queer Family Queer? A Response to Cristyn Davies and Kerry H. Robinson" in *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 14(1), 2013: 54-59.

identifying people not being part of a family, or not of the traditional, nuclear family. It is therefore very valuable to look not only at the realities of LGBTQ family life but also, as will happen further on in this chapter, to consider heterosexual families that do not live up to the normative standard of the nuclear family as a family unit consisting of two opposite-gender individuals and their biological offspring.

## 6.1.6 Chosen families

A very influential work in the development of queer thinking on families, and starting point in this paragraph, is Kate Weston's study *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*.[397] In this book, Weston shares the results of her research among lesbian and gay communities in San Francisco. She noticed that many of her respondents formed small, close-knit communities which they referred to in terms of family. As gays and lesbians were confronted with exclusion on the part of their original (biological) families and became 'exiles of kinship', they formed new, alternative families of their own. These were 'chosen families' of friends and lovers who were welcoming and affirming, and with whom they shared "love, effort and attention given to building and maintaining intimacies".[398] The chosen family, rather than the biological family with shared blood ties, became the primary unit for gays and lesbians in this context.

The concept of 'chosen family' came up from qualitative research, but has since become also a more theoretical notion for thinking

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[397] Kate Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
[398] Angela Ruth Wilson, "With friends like these: The liberalization of queer family policy" in *Critical Social Policy*, *27*(1), 2007: 50-76.

about queer families. Especially in this latter capacity, as a more academic concept, the chosen family has also received some critique, and suggestions were made for corrections to this model. Rikke Andreassen [399], for instance, has suggested that while the chosen family relies on a binary opposition between biology and choice, clearly preferring choice and 'banning' biology, recent technological developments have resulted in a come-back of biology in the lives of many queer people. Andreassen interviewed donor children, many of were whom children of same-sex parents and/or growing up in multiple parent families, where insemination is sometimes chosen as the method of conception. She noticed an increased interest among her interviewees to look for their biological half-siblings. It seemed that the idea of shared biology did come with all sorts of expectations regarding possible connections between the donor children.

Angela Wilson, moreover, suggested that the notion of choice, while resonating comfortably with liberal notions of agency and autonomy, also makes queer families potentially vulnerable.[400] This is, for instance, the case when they are faced with dismissive attitudes from those opposed to their chosen family form; they might argue that if their families are the product of choice, they could potentially also make other (more traditional) choices. Finally, it is good to point out that while a person may choose a family and be creative in how it takes shape, if this is done in a context where regulation of that family in terms of legal protection is impossible or only partly possible, the family will be vulnerable in a literal, material sense as well. It will need to function with limited protection, and constantly negotiate with institutions (e.g. schools, hospitals,

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[399] Rikke Andreassen, "From the families we choose to the families we find online: media technology and queer family making" in *Feminist Theory*, 24(1), 2022: 12-29.
[400] Angela Wilson, "With friends like these", 2007.

religious communities) whose structures were not designed for chosen families. A well-known example is the question of what happens when a member of the family is hospitalized and only 'next of kin' are allowed to visit or be involved in decision-making on treatment. Do hospital regulations allow for alternative definitions of who counts as next of kin?

## 6.1.7 Queering the family

 "Queering the family" is not only about the experiences of LGBTQI+ people who themselves identify as queer/LGBTI and who participate in family life. It is also raises questions about the concept of family as such: what is the definition of family, who gets to decide, how are power and normativity involved in contestations over the 'proper' definition of family? Who is included in the definition, who is left out? From a queer perspective, 'family' becomes problematic when it is defined in such a way that the definition favours some forms and rejects others, or regards them as only secondary. Fish and Russell argue that the dominant definition of the family as 'traditional' or 'nuclear', depends on three binaries: that of gender (proper male and proper female), of sexuality (natural heterosexually and unnatural homosexuality) and of family (genuine and pseudo families). Things become queer when people start constructing family lives outside of these three binaries.[401] Hammock, Frost and Hughes[402] have pointed out that besides these kinds of binaries other expectations, too, are involved in defining 'proper' family life, such as expectations about monogamy, the presence of romantic

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[401] Jessica N. Fish and Stephen T. Russell, "Queering methodologies to understand queer families" in *Family relations*, *67*(1), 2018: 13.
[402] Phillip L. Hammack, David M. Frost, Sam D. Hughes, "Queer intimacies: A new paradigm for the study of relationship diversity" in *The Journal of Sex Research*, *56*(4-5), 2019: 556-592.

love, and the number of partners or parents involved. Especially from this additional reflection it becomes clear that many people who identify as heterosexual, too, are excluded from the dominant norms of 'the family', and in that respect may also be referred to as in a sense 'queer'. These would include single parent families, couples who are childless or childfree, multiple parent families, polyamorous relationships, relationships between one or more asexual partners, and so on. Moreover, families may include family members who occupy positions that are often not recognized as 'official' family, such as "honorary kin (e.g., individuals unrelated by biology who assume labels such as 'uncle' and 'aunt'), workplace families, and friend networks"[403].

Perhaps it is helpful, as Weeks et al. suggest, to think less in terms of what families *are*, taking a definition as a point of departure, but rather to look at what people in families *do*. "It is less important whether we are in a family than whether we do family-type things [...] families are constructed through their enactment. We live family rather than dwell within it. This approach emphasizes human-self activity and agency: family is what we do"[404]. This approach, we suggest, is also more fruitful when considering the possibility of a queer *theology* of families, as presented in the next section.

## 6.2 Theologies and family

This chapter explores a variety of theological perspectives on families. First, it discusses several approaches to the family from various Protestant traditions. Here the family is understood, for instance, in terms of vocation, covenant or mandate. From a New

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[403] ibid., 580.
[404] Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy, Catherine Donovan, *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments* (London: Routledge, 2001), 38.

Testament perspective, in particular expressions of Jesus in the gospels, the notions of family and kinship have been given new meanings that challenge the necessity of their biological underpinnings. We then move to a discussion of feminist and queer theological interventions in thinking about families. Here families can be understood as places where oppressive patriarchal structures can be challenged and redefined, and as a form of 'sacred work' where sins of inequality and the abuse of hierarchical relations can be unmade. However, queer and feminist perspectives also stress that the family cannot be merely an abstract ideal. What is needed is a down-to-earth, embodied notion of the family. Families are messy, and this need not be covered up in (often harmful) romantic ideals.

## 6.2.1 Vocation and family life

The Protestant Reformers, in particular Martin Luther, radically reworked the idea of 'calling' or 'vocation'. In the late Middle Ages, the concept particularly referred to a calling to priestly or monastic life. Drawing on biblical texts such as 1 Cor. 7:20 ("Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called"), Luther rejected this understanding and insisted that vocation applies to everyone. All are called to serve God and love their neighbours in the particular 'estates' or 'stations' (*Stände*) in society in which they find themselves:

> How is it possible that you are not called? You have always been in some state or station; you have always been a husband or wife, or boy or girl, or servant. Picture before you the humblest estate. Are you a husband, and you think you have not enough to do in that sphere to govern your wife, children, domestics, and property so that all may be obedient to God and

you do no one any harm? Yea, if you had five heads and ten hands, even then you would be too weak for your task, so that you would never dare to think of making a pilgrimage or doing any kind of saintly work.[405]

This understanding of vocation is connected with some of the most central themes in Luther's thought, such as the distinction between law and gospel. As is well known, Luther identified two uses of the law. The 'civic' or 'political' use is to restrain evil, to guide and enforce right conduct, in order to serve God's purpose of sustaining the world. The 'theological' use is to convict us of our sin and lead us to receive salvation by putting our faith in God's grace revealed in Christ.[406] In Luther's understanding, vocation is associated with the earthly realm in which the first (civic) use of the law is relevant. By carrying out the duties appropriate to the states they find themselves in, human agents become means by which God sustains and provides for the world and for God's creatures. In Lutheran language, by living out their vocation and seeking their neighbours' good, humans can be "masks of God".[407]

Vocation in Lutheran thought has often been linked to natural law and the idea of the 'orders of creation': that God has structured and ordered the created world in a particular way, in order to enable the world and its inhabitants to flourish. All human creatures, whatever their faith commitment, are subject to that divine ordering of the creation and the requirements that it entails. This means that

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[405] Quoted by Marc Kolden, "Luther on Vocation", *Word & World* III/4, 382-390.
[406] Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535) [LW citation]. See Michael Bünker and Martin Friedrich (eds). *Law and Gospel (*Leuenberg Documents 10), 26, 170. Later Lutheran teaching added a third use of the law, to guide Christian conduct. While there are differences of emphasis between Lutheran, Reformed and Methodist understandings of the relationship between law and gospel, there is also much common ground: see *Law and Gospel*, ch. 4.
[407] Winston D. Persaud,"Luther on vocation, by Gustaf Wingren: A twenty-first-century theological-literary reading" in *Dialog* 57 (2018), 84-90 (86).

Christians exercising their vocations in the world will not be subject to different duties or obligations from those that apply to anyone occupying the same office or station. Lutherans have often been more ready than Reformed to understand these requirements in terms of natural law, defined by Philipp Melanchthon as "a common judgment to which all men [*sic*] alike assent, and therefore one which God has inscribed upon the soul of each man [*sic*]".[408] In other words, the gospel may not reveal anything new to Christians about how they should live out secular vocations. In the light of the gospel, however, they will be able to understand the requirements of those vocations not as burdens but as a divine gift.

As the earlier quotation from Luther makes clear, he saw marriage and family life as a vocation in this sense, which has had a lasting and powerful influence on Protestant thinking within and beyond the Lutheran tradition. Luther's own thinking shifted during his theological career, from an early emphasis on marriage as a remedy against lust to a more positive view of sexual love in marriage and the value of having and raising children.[409] He regarded family life as the chief good of marriage: "the greatest good in married life, that which makes all suffering and labour worthwhile, is that God grants offspring and commands that they be brought up to worship and serve him."[410] The drive to procreate was part of the natural law, an aspect of God's ordering of the world, but Christian parents were also called to bring their children up in the faith:

> Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them

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[408] Quoted in *Luther's Works*, vol 45, 127, 117.
[409] Jane E. Strohl, "Luther on Marriage, Sexuality, and Family Life" in Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel and Ľubomír Batka (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2014), 370-82.
[410] Martin Luther, "The Estate of Marriage", (1522) in *Luther's Works*, vol. 45 (Fortress Press, 1962), 11-49, 46.

acquainted with the gospel. In short, there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal.[411]

This responsibility of parents included having their children baptized as infants, bringing them up in the true faith, providing for their education, and helping them find suitable spouses.[412]

The understanding of vocation initiated by Luther made the great contribution of affirming the value of everyday life in the world as a sphere in which ordinary people could serve God by loving their neighbours, and thereby be instruments of God's blessing and care for others. In relation to marriage and family life in particular, it offered a way to affirm the value of sexual love, procreation, and the nurture of children as ways of serving God and loving one's neighbour.

However, as has often been observed, this account of vocation is not without its dangers. One is that identifying vocation with natural law and the orders of creation can easily become a way of claiming divine authority for the *status quo* and resisting change. As the Lutheran theologian Marc Kolden remarked, if the order of society comes to be associated in too static a way with natural law, "any movements for change are considered to be revolutions or 'chaos' and are judged to be against God rather than against unjust or anachronistic forms". [413] A second risk is an over-sharp separation between 'worldly' and 'spiritual' spheres of life, so that both sin and divine forgiveness come to be understood largely in terms of individual

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[411] Ibid.
[412] Strohl, "Luther on Marriage", 377.
[413] Kolden, "Luther on Vocation", 387.

morality and spirituality, playing no part in evaluating or critiquing social and political life.[414]

The first of these dangers has obvious relevance to Christian thinking about marriage and family. The quotation from Luther at the start of this section shows that while he celebrated marriage and family life as a vocation, his image of how that vocation was lived out was strikingly hierarchical and patriarchal – doubtless reflecting his own historical and social context. Christian thinking about marriage and family life as vocation has often been resistant to challenges and critiques of patriarchal and hierarchical ways of ordering marriage and the family.

More recent thinking within this tradition has been in part an attempt to address some of the problems associated with this approach to vocation, natural law, and the orders of creation. In the mid-20th century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer radically revised the doctrine of the orders of creation – partly in order to overcome the separation of reality into worldly and spiritual realms, which he called a "pseudo-Lutheran" misinterpretation of Luther's 'two-kingdoms' doctrine. [415] Influenced by Karl Barth, Bonhoeffer was resistant to any kind of natural law thinking that would grant 'autonomy' to the "orders of this world".[416] Therefore he re-worked the doctrine of the orders of creation into an account of "divine mandates", established by the command of God revealed in Scripture, and oriented to the salvation and fulfilment of the world

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[414] Ibid.

[415] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 56.

[416] Ibid. Bonhoeffer's context was of course the German 'church struggle' during National Socialism, and part of his motivation for re-working the doctrine of the orders of creation into the idea of divine mandates was to resist the co-option of orders-of-creation thinking by theologians sympathetic to National Socialist ideology.

in Christ. [417] According to Bonhoeffer, four divine mandates are named in Scripture: work, marriage and family life, government and church.

Bonhoeffer's idea of the divine mandates does have the potential to address some of the risks of Lutheran thinking about vocation noted earlier.[418] It must be acknowledged that Bonhoeffer's own account of the mandates remained somewhat static and hierarchical. He believed that God's command in the mandates always creates an authority structure with "an irrevocable above and below" – although this is "not identical with an earthly power relation", and those who are "above" and "below" are both subject to God's authority. [419] Though his discussion of the mandates in *Ethics* remains incomplete, other writings suggest that his view of marriage and family life was consistent with this hierarchical perspective: the wife should be subject to her husband; his role as head of the family includes ruling it, caring for it, protecting it, and representing it to the outside world; her 'life's work' is to build up the home as a sanctuary for her husband.[420] Even as sympathetic a reader as Karl Barth discerned a "suggestion of North German patriarchalism" in Bonhoeffer's account of the mandates.[421]

Nonetheless, more recent readers of Bonhoeffer have found resources in this account (along with other aspects of his thought) for thinking of the vocation of marriage and family life in less static and hierarchical ways. Theological ethicist Guido de Graaff, for

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[417] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 68-75, 388-408.

[418] The following discussion of Bonhoeffer, the mandates, and family life draws especially on Guido de Graaff. "Friends with a Mandate: Friendship and Family in Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology" in *Studies in Christian Ethics* 30.4 (2017): 389-406.

[419] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 391.

[420] See his sermon for the wedding of Eberhard Bethge to Renate Schleicher: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 41-47 (esp. 43-45); see also the discussion in de Graaff, "Friends with a Mandate", 391ff.

[421] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4, 22.

example, has argued that Bonhoeffer's remarks on friendship and his ecclesiology, alongside his account of the mandates, offer starting points for thinking more creatively and flexibly about the relationships between friendship, family life, and the life of the church community.[422] More generally, the long-standing Protestant understanding of family life as vocation remains a living and creative tradition of thought. Its core insight is that family life in all its diversity can be a sphere of life in which human creatures are called to serve and glorify God by loving and serving their neighbours.

## 6.2.2 Family as covenant

If the idea of family life as vocation has been particularly at home in the Lutheran tradition, the Reformed tradition has often been attracted to covenanting as a foundational concept for marriage and family life.[423] For John Calvin, God's covenant with the elect was a model for various derivative covenants in human society. He regarded the covenant of marriage as (in the words of Protestant ethicist Brent Waters) "a public and integral component of the overlapping covenants comprising civil society".[424] It had a threefold purpose: spouses' love and support for one another, the having and raising of children, and a remedy against sin.

This covenantal view of marriage and family life was developed more fully by later thinkers in the Reformed tradition, such as the Puritans of seventeenth century England and North America. Puritan authors produced an extensive literature on marriage and family life, including 'marriage guides' setting out their visions for marriage and

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[422] De Graaff, "Friends with a Mandate".

[423] The following account draws particularly on Brent Waters, *The Family in Christian Social and Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2007), 31-38.

[424] Waters, *The Family*, 31.

the family. One representative figure (if there can be a 'representative' figure of such an untidy, diverse, and hard-to-define movement) was Richard Baxter. In his *Christian Directory* of 1673, Baxter describes the family as:

- A society that belongs to God by virtue of God's creative and redemptive activity
- An instrument by which God governs the world
- A covenant community structured around the relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, and master and servants.[425]

For Baxter, God was the head of this covenant community. Unsurprisingly, he asserted the authority of men as 'governors' of their families, with authority over their wives, children, and servants (or employees). Yet he was careful to emphasize the limits of that authority, since they were themselves subject to God's authority:

> Your authority over your wife, is but such as is necessary to the order of your family, the safe and prudent management of your affairs, and your comfortable cohabitation. The power of love and complicated interest must do more than magisterial commands. Your authority over your children is much greater; but yet only such as conjunct with love, is needful to their good education and felicity. Your authority over your servants is to be measured by your contract with them (in these countries where there are no slaves) in order to your service, and the honour of God.[426]

Typically for Puritan writing about marriage, Baxter took a very positive view of the mutual love and affection (including sexual love)

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[425] Waters, *The Family*, 32, citing Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory, Or, A Body of Practical Divinity and Cases of Conscience,* part 2 (London, 1830).

[426] Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, part 2, 91, quoted by Waters, *The Family*, 33.

of husbands and wives. Parental love for children would include discipline, leading them to Christian faith, and directing them to some publicly useful calling. Masters were to love their servants (i.e. anyone who worked for them in any capacity) as "brethren and fellow-servants", treating them justly and caring for their physical and spiritual welfare. In Waters' words, Baxter saw "a well-ordered family [as] the bedrock of a properly ordered church and commonwealth".[427]

This idea of family as covenant community remains influential today. For Waters, for example, it is one of the theological themes (alongside others, including Bonhoeffer's account of the mandates) informing an understanding of the family as "a timely place of mutual belonging that bears witness to the historical and providential unfolding of God's vindicated creation". [428] In his account, a covenantal understanding helps to interpret the family's relation to, and importance for, both church and civil society.

## 6.2.3 The Church as family?

Alongside vocational and covenantal understandings of family – sometimes complementing them, sometimes in tension with them or critiquing them – there is a Christian tradition of understanding the church as family. This way of thinking may be traced back to numerous New Testament texts. In one famous example from the gospels, when Jesus is told that his mother and brothers are looking for them, he replies: "Who are my mother and my brothers? … Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother"' (Mark 3:33—35 and parallels). This is one of many sayings in the gospels that portray the community of

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[427] Waters, *The Family*, 33.
[428] Ibid., 250.

Jesus' disciples as a 'surrogate kinship group' and prioritize loyalty to God and this community over family ties in a way that would have seemed scandalous in an ancient Mediterranean context.[429] In his letters, Paul frequently uses the metaphor of kinship to describe relations within the Christian communities he addresses: the members are brothers and sisters in Christ who have God as their Father (though Paul also sometimes uses fatherhood as a metaphor for his own relationship with individual disciples or communities). The metaphor of kinship is often used rhetorically to persuade members of the community to give one another love, respect, care and material support.[430] The kinship metaphor continued to be widely used in early Christianity after New Testament times. In short, it has been argued that

> [f]rom first-century Palestine to third-century Carthage, the social matrix most central to early Christian conceptions of community was the surrogate kinship group of siblings who understood themselves to be the sons and daughters of God. For the early Christians, the church was a family.[431]

It is important to remember, however, that the family relations serving as a powerful metaphor for early Christian communities were not those of the modern nuclear family, but the kinship structures prevalent in the ancient Mediterranean.[432] If this is forgotten, it will be easy to misread the New Testament language of church as family.

What is the significance of these kinship metaphors, either for our understanding of early Christianity or for present-day Christian

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[429] Joseph H. Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 64-73.
[430] Ibid., 92-126.
[431] Ibid., 225.
[432] Ibid., 27-58.

practice? Regarding early Christianity, some readers of these texts are suspicious of their kinship language, arguing that it functioned as a rhetorical strategy for maintaining hierarchical relations of power and privilege in early Christian communities. [433] Others, however, maintain that, in the Pauline literature at any rate, the emphasis of kinship language and praxis was on equality, solidarity and care for the most powerless and vulnerable members of the community.[434]

As for reflection on present-day Christian life, the metaphor of the church as family might be used in support of family life, to present the Christian community as a supportive context and a model for familial relationships.[435] Alternatively, it may be used more critically, to unsettle the tendency in some Christian circles to claim biblical justification for the 'traditional' nuclear family and appreciate it as a cornerstone of Christian life and values. [436] It may also support a theological challenge to the importance of family ties, arguing that our most important and definitive relationships are not those of biological kinship but of the Christian community, which we enter in most churches through baptism.[437]

In present day church life in various parts of the world, it is common for church leaders and members to speak of the church as family.[438]

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[433] Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

[434] Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family*, 216-25.

[435] This seems to be Hellerman's perspective: see *The Ancient Church as Family*, XIV—XV.

[436] See Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Between Traditional and Modern Options.* Downers Grove: IVP, 1993, 27-47, and Stephen C. Barton,'Biblical Hermeneutics and the Family' in Stephen C. Barton (ed.), *The Family in Theological Perspective* (London: SPCK, 1996), 3-23 (10-16).

[437] *Before I Formed You in the Womb…*, 46-7; see also Michael Banner, *The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2014), 41-7.

[438] See e.g. Sonya Sharma, " 'The church is ... my family': Exploring the Interrelationship between Familial and Religious Practices and Spaces" in

Of course, understandings of what it means for the church to be family are likely to be informed by ideas of the family prevalent in the surrounding culture: those in the West, for example, may be projecting modern Western ideas of the nuclear family onto the church in a way that would not be warranted by New Testament uses of the family metaphor. For church leaders, the use of family language may in part be intended to encourage particular forms of behaviour and life together in their communities (as indeed it was for Paul). For church members, to speak of the church as family may express the benefit they experience, or wish to experience, from membership of their church communities.

The experience of church as family is often a positive one. For many, 'church as family' language may signify many kinds of spiritual, affective and practical support and care that their church communities provide even when biological families do not. The 'church family' may also support its members' family lives in various ways. [439] There may however be more ambivalent or negative aspects of the experience of church as family. For example, churches can be highly gendered spaces in which women may be excluded from certain roles or positions, and there may be spoken or unspoken messages about those who do not belong in certain church families because of their race, class, sexuality or other characteristics.[440] To this day, it happens again and again that people are excluded from their congregation because the majority cannot accept people who remarry after a divorce, who stand by their same-

*Environment and Planning* A 44 (2012), 816-31; Tobias Brandner, "The Church as Family: Strengths and Dangers of the Family Paradigm of Christianity in Chinese Contexts" in *Theology Today* 76.3 (2019), 217–23.
[439] Sharma, "The church is ...my family".
[440] Ibid.

sex orientation or go through a transition as part of their transgender identity.

Some theologians are also critical of the church-as-family metaphor on other grounds. Brent Waters, for example, has argued that the family and the church should be theologically understood as having distinct and different roles to play. The family is called to bear witness to "the providential unfolding of a vindicated creation",[441] while the church bears an "eschatological witness" to the promised future transformation of creation.[442] While family and church are interrelated – so that "[t]he family to be the family needs the church to be the church"[443] – it is a mistake to identify them with one another. To claim that the church is a family (or, for that matter, that the family is a church) confuses their distinct roles and risks losing the distinctive eschatological witness of the church.

## 6.2.4 Feminist theological perspectives on families

Over the past decades, feminist theologians have been exploring the connections between Christian doctrines and practices, and the family. How to deal with the fact that the biblical text, on which also present-day Christian families are modelled, are written, redacted and interpreted in contexts where patriarchy, the dominance of men and their needs and perspectives on women, was the normal way to organize societies? How to position oneself in a tradition that bases itself on starkly gendered God-talk and that envisions as one of its central doctrines the relation between a Father (God) and a Son (Jesus Christ), a relation in which female imagery does not at all

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[441] Waters, *The Family in Christian Social and Political Thought*, 243.
[442] Ibid., 230 ff.
[443] Ibid., 244.

figure? Hence feminist theology has been challenging notions of the family that have been centring on patriarchal presumptions, with far-reaching consequences for how the family in envisioned, which roles family members may take on, and which hierarchies are believed to define family life.

## 6.2.4.1 Christianity and its patriarchal roots

Western feminist criticism of the subordinate position of women (and children) in Christian doctrine and communities was first publicly voiced back in the 19th century, for instance by Elisabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible*, first published in 1895. It was the first commentary written completely from the perspective of women. The peak of feminist theological interest in the family seems have been in the 1990s, however, and coincides with the great influence of two Roman Catholic feminist theologians: Rosemary Radford Ruether (who sadly passed away in May 2022) and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Both offer substantial criticism of the patriarchal foundations of the biblical text, with an emphasis on the Hebrew Bible. Here, Radford Ruether notes, the development toward monotheism went at the expense of other models of the divine that also included female gods, while the development from a nomadic lifestyle toward an agricultural society led to the dominion of men over their land, their family and their livestock.[444]

Schüssler Fiorenza has argued that the Jesus movement pursued a more egalitarian organization of the first Christian communities, adopting a model of house churches where men and women could

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[444] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature" in *Feminist Theology* 3(9) (1995), 35-50.

meet as equals.[445] Yet the subversive potential of this new model was negated by the deferred coming of Christ, and the subsequent further institutionalization of Christianity allowed for Greek and Roman patriarchal ideas to seep into Christianity.[446] While this is a popular presentation of affairs, one may wonder whether this is not too schematic a description. It is questionable whether, for instance, there has ever been a 'pure' Christianity devoid of patriarchy, and likewise, whether Greek, Roman and Jewish culture are as squarely patriarchal as is suggested here and are thus solely to blame for the church's development into an institution that legitimizes inequality.

Feminist theology has, moreover, provided a critique of the teachings of the church fathers on matters of gender and sexuality. Basing himself on the creation story in Genesis, for instance, Tertullian taught that women, like Eve, were dangerous, the ones who were tempted to eat the forbidden fruit and therefore to blame for the Fall and indirectly for the death of Christ.[447] Within this line of feminist theological thought, there is deep suspicion towards the blending of conceptions of gender as 'natural' and as part of the created order. It was Eve's presumed closeness to nature, much more so than the male Adam, that was presumed to explain her flaws. Radford Ruether argued that for the church fathers, only three options seemed to be available for women: virgin, whore and wife.[448] For women who did not opt for a life in prostitution or in the

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[445] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her, A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983).

[446] Katsuhiro Kohara, "Women in the World of Christianity: From the Religious Right to Feminist Theology" in *Journal of Oriental Studies* 13 (2003), 80-93, 82.

[447] Marsha Hewitt, "Woman, Nature and Power: Emancipatory Themes in Critical Theory and Feminist Theology" in Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses, 20(3) (1991), 267-279, 271.

[448] Rosemary Radford Ruether (ed.), *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1988), 164.

convent, having children and choosing family life was the only viable alternative. And the family was, once again, organized around patriarchal principles, which led to the ideal of women bearing children and staying at home in the private sphere, while men sought their fulfilment outside of the home, in the public sphere.[449] Radford Ruether summarized this, aptly, in the notion of the 'colonization of the womb' by patriarchal thought.[450] The legacy of the patristic tradition on women has long-lasting consequences, influencing women's lives to this day.

A certain form of feminist critique of families has been resisted, not least by black women. Audre Lorde[451] pointed out that feminists cannot simply speak for women when the realities of black or lesbian women's lives are often not in view. For many of them, the family is not a place of oppression, but of mutual solidarity in the face of racial violence. Katie Cannon[452] also brought the experiences of black communities into the debate around the family. Feminist theology has not only been deconstructing or critiquing Christian perspectives on the family (and the role of women and men in relation to it). As Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore argues, feminist theology is not necessarily "antifamily, anti-men or anti-children".[453] Rather, it has also sought to construct alternative models that allow different Christian ideas to come to the fore, leading to notions of the family where women (and children) are envisioned in more egalitarian terms. These perspectives include, for instance, an emphasis on complementarity, or taking women's perspectives and experiences

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[449] Hewitt (1991), 272.
[450] Lisa Isherwood,"Body Politics: A Theological Issue?" in *Feminist Theology*, 5(15) (1997), 73-81.
Isherwood (1997), 74.
[451] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984).
[452] Katie.G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1988).
[453] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Also a Mother: Beyond Family Values" in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 12(1) (1996), 133-150, 134.

(such as motherhood) as important sources for the very production of theological knowledge.

## 6.2.4.2 Complementarity

The first alternative, complementarity, has already been discussed elsewhere, such as 3.4.2. In this model men and women are seen as different but equal, complementing each other in their difference and ideally being in harmony. It is then understood as God's intention for living the good life, safeguarding the uniqueness of each partner in the (heterosexual) relationship. In this chapter we explore how the complementarity model relates to theological notions of the family in particular. Susan A. Ross starts from this model, and a consequent understanding of the family as a primarily historical and biological unit, when developing a sacramental theology.[454] She also points out that feminist critique of the family as necessarily oppressive or unbeneficial for women neglects the perspectives of Black and Latina women, for whom the family is often central to their self-understanding as women.[455]

On the other hand, the complementarity model is also criticized rather fiercely from the perspective of some feminist theologians. Hannah Chen, in her work on a feminist theological perspective on divorce, has pointed to the fact that while the complementarity model may sound promising in *theory*, in the context of Taiwan, from which she writes, *reality* is too far from this ideal to lend it credibility.[456] Lisa Isherwood, moreover, argues that while the model may seem equal at face value, underlying it are still unequal presumptions and ideals. She states: "Complementarity appears to

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[454] Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2001).
[455] Ross (2001), 128.
[456] Hannah Chen, "On Divorce: A Feminist Christian Perspective" in *Feminist Theology*, 11(2) (2003), 244-251, 248.

speak of both 'halves' as not whole without each other, but on closer inspection it is women who lose out. Men have declared that their 'half' is more in line with 'real humanness' than the woman's half of humanity: they are rational, objective and non-emotional, women are not. These qualities have taken on importance in the patriarchal world while the so-called qualities of women have been denigrated (Miles, 1989: 99)."[457] The model, finally, automatically presumes the heterosexuality of both partners, and presumes that there can only be two partners in the relationship.

While US-based feminist theologians from the 1990s were speaking back to their context of 'culture wars', the complementarity model still features prominently both in the United States and in the 'family values' discourse of conservative politics and organized Christianity in Europe. This poses a lasting challenge for feminist theology in the European context. How can it recognize the agency and legitimacy of women who themselves want to shape their relationships and family life according to this model, paying heed to women's specific geographical and cultural contexts, while at the same time allowing for a critique of the patriarchal notions that seem to be underlying it still, and detecting its possible negative effects on women's lives?

### 6.2.4.3 Women's experiences as theology

According to Bonnie Miller-McLemore, the distinction between pro-family and anti-family positions is not very useful for developing a fruitful feminist theological perspective on the family. Rather, she argues, we need to carefully distinguish *which* family values we adopt, and how, something which has not been feminist theology's strength.[458] Miller-McLemore suggests that in reflecting on these values theologically, the experience of motherhood should be

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[457] Isherwood (1997), 74.
[458] Miller-McLemore (1996), 134.

explored as a legitimate source of knowledge. She argues that in the past, taking motherhood as a model to think from (as is done, for instance, by Sally Purvis), has often resulted in the creation of an idealized model of motherhood that features untenable forms of love and circulates around a toxic ideal of self-sacrifice. The problem is that motherhood has thus been understood as an abstract ideal that is not grounded in the perils of daily life, while these should be at the centre of any motherhood-based theological reflection: "Love's failures and distractions in the midst of daily demands, I would argue, are a necessary part of love's practice rather than an exception to the rule of love. An adequate model of agape must incorporate the reality of maternal love as a dynamic, difficult, multidirectional process rather than as some static, one-way end-product."[459]

In fact, the experience of motherhood can become a ground for a broader critique of abstract, rationalized and isolated Christian ideals of love (*agape*) as such. This form of love simply cannot stand the test of the lived experience of motherhood: "While many theologians, working in abstraction from their own lives, have isolated some kind of pure agape, a mother with a child cannot pretend that this is so. Perhaps one of the most startling phenomena of maternal love is the rapidity and intensity with which one moves from angry hatred to heart-filled attraction."[460]

Motherhood as a lived experience, then, leads to more realistic perspectives on Christian love in which a central notion of sacrifice gives way to the realization of the 'give and take' that is necessarily involved in love: the hope that the love one gives is also returned.[461] It is probably good to emphasize that, while it is fruitful

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[459] Ibid., 145.
[460] Ibid.
[461] Ibid., 146.

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to show how the experience of motherhood as a lived reality challenges theological notions, it is only one example, and many others could (and perhaps should) be thought of.

## 6.2.5 Queer theology and families

Queer reflections on the family relate to both the experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals and to more conceptual reflections on the definition and form of 'the family' as such. This paragraph contains a brief overview of research on queer family experiences, followed by a queer questioning of the very concept of family. It then moves to the discussion of queer theological work on families.

As stated in the theories section, quite a lot of queer theological perspectives [462] on the family have been developed over recent years. Some of this theology has been framed in response to conservative public theology, where emancipatory legislation such as that on same-sex marriage is challenged from an explicitly Christian perspective. [463] Arguably, this theology tends to be primarily 'deconstructive'. Its purpose is to point out where theology becomes normative and exclusionary. It provides, so to speak, a problem analysis of heteronormative and cisnormative theology. Queer and liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, for instance, has argued that orthodox (as in conservative) Christianity seems to

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[462] For an introduction to queer theology, see Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology. Beyond Apologetics* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018); Chris Greenough, *Queer Theologies. The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2020); Andreas Krebs, *Gott queer gedacht* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2023).

[463] Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (Beacon Press, 2004); Sian M. Hawthorne, Ulrike Auga, "Homonationalism and the Challenge of Queer Theology" in Sian M. Hawthorne (ed.), *Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks: Gender and God* (Farmington Hills, 2017), 367-383.

have a "problem with plurality" as such.[464] This analysis is echoed by queer theologian Laurel Schneider, who opted for Christianity departing from the 'logic of the One', in which 'oneness' (of God, or nature) is favoured over multiplicity. This preference for oneness also has consequences for Christian perspectives on sexuality, love and family. [465] As Hawthorne and Auga interpret her work: "For Schneider, this logic enables processes of incorporation into sameness — *the absorption and transformation of difference by what is normative* — such as when heteronormativity incorporates some forms of LGBTQI life through homonormative frameworks."[466]

A shared feature of the problem analysis, then, is the presumed Christian preference for clarity and sameness: one model, one size fits all. Feminist theologians such as Carter Heyward pointed out that traditional theology thought far too strongly in terms of hierarchies and orders. In contrast, it is also biblically justified to think much more in terms of relationships, both the relationship between God and human person and the relationships within a family.[467]

The introduction of same-sex marriage could even be understood as a moment when this one model of family life stretches out to queer lives, incorporating them into the model instead of accepting a variety of models.

## 6.2.5.1 Difference and family: Karl Barth

Sometimes, within mainstream theology, there is a brief possibility of more diverse models of human relations and family. John Blevin,

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[464] Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 177. Cited in Hawthorne and Auga (2017), 379.
[465] Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London: Routledge, 2007).
[466] Hawthorne, Auga (2017), 380.
[467] Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1982).

in a discussion on Karl Barth's writings on marriage and the family (and Graham Ward's critique thereof), notices that Barth initially values difference quite positively. Barth believed that human beings experience God most deeply in God's difference to them (God as 'Wholly Other'). In relating to other human beings, humans can practice their relationship with God, loving one another despite the less radical difference. Obviously, difference and diversity are understood to be positive human conditions from this perspective, and prerequisites for relation and love. However, while Barth initially includes many forms of difference in his theological thinking[468] he eventually ends up with the 'logic of One' that Laurel Schneider so opposed. Marriage between a man and a woman for Barth signifies exceptionally well the relationship between human beings who overcome difference, and thereby also the ultimate reflection of love between human beings and God. This leads him to single out heterosexual marriage as the best model for human flourishing, and also leads him to construct a rather strong rejection of homosexuality.[469] As Graham Ward argued, it seems as though Barth was unable to theologically explore more fully his own appreciation for difference and diversity, which was all the more striking considering his complex (and extramarital) relationship to co-worker and housemate Charlotte von Kirschbaum.[470]

## 6.2.5.2 Alternative family models

While for Barth it seemed one step too far to abandon the model of heterosexual marriage and traditional families, obviously theological perspectives have been developed that do explore alternative options, often also finding a basis for embracing a more diverse

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[468] John Blevins, "Broadening the Family of God: Debating Same-Sex Marriage and Queer Families in America" in *Theology & Sexuality*, 12(1) (2005), 63-80.
[469] Blevins (2005), 74.
[470] Ibid., 73.

family life in Scripture. Mathias Wirth, for instance, points out that Jesus himself does not fit the traditional model very well. [471] According to the biblical stories, the 'holy family' of which he was a part does not consist of a biological father and mother, and he himself did not choose family life for himself, or at least the gospels do not mention him being married or having children.[472] In fact, as already pointed out, Jesus explicitly challenged biology as the basis for family life, stating that "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice" (Luke 8:21).

### 6.2.5.3 Reformed and queer families

Thinking further on this destabilizing of the biological family from a Reformed perspective, Wirth argues that Reformed and queer families actually have a lot in common. Taking into account the enormous variety of denominations on the Reformed 'family tree', it appears that 'Reformed identity' is about as hard to pin down as is queer identity. [473] Moreover, what characterizes Reformed Christianity (as well as queer thinking) is a constant movement of renewal and transformation: *ecclesia semper reformanda*. As Wirth argues: "tangibly putting this 'renew and transform' into practice requires courage and a freedom reminiscent of queer people who, in accordance with queer theory and even more so with queer practice, had to abandon the status quo, disobeying norms on sexual orientation or gender identity and following an individualistic kind of 'renew and reform'."[474] A third commonality Wirth acknowledges is that both queer theory and "certain varieties of Reformed theology" have an interest in human flourishing and share "a critique of

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[471] Mathias Wirth, "Queer Families: Effect and Effectivity of a Reformed Theology" in *Theology Today*, 78(2) (2021), 123-139.
[472] Ibid.
[473] Ibid., 128.
[474] Ibid., 127.

cultures (texts, metaphors, spaces, politics, etc.) that hamper an individual's ability to flourish".[475]

## 6.2.5.4 Queer families as sacred work

The common ground between Christian (Reformed) and queer identity and thinking raises the question of whether, from a Christian perspective, queer families could perhaps be more than 'accepted' or 'allowed', and take on a theological value of their own. We find suggestions to think in this direction in the work of Jennifer Harvey.[476] Writing from her own perspective as a lesbian, a mother and a Christian, situated in the United States, Harvey suggests that queer families can be seen as a form of 'sacred work'. Her argument starts from thinking about sin, as Harvey argues that one possible understanding of sin is that it manifests itself in when individuals choose the side of the powerful and cooperate in exclusion of others. Sin is about "postures that impede justice or the flourishing of all, postures that distort human relations."[477] Sacred work, then, is understood as those actions that aim at disrupting the normal there where it becomes exclusionary. The sacred work of queer families is to invest in "ways of being, living, and performing that disrupt the production of the normal, whether in the most subtle or magnificent manner, [which] might be described as godly performativity."[478] It is not Harvey's intention to romanticize the lived realities of queer families. What she does in her work is to suggest that these families, while disrupting many of the standard norms of family life, are living proof of human flourishing – it can and

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[475] Ibid., 130.
[476] Jennifer Harvey, "Disrupting the Normal: Queer Family Life as Sacred Work" in Kathleen T. Talvacchia et al. *Queer Christianities* (NYU Press, 2014), 103-114.
[477] Harvey, 106.
[478] Ibid., 107.

should be found outside of these norms, and these forms of family are therefore legitimate.

# 6.2.6 Children and children's perspectives

As mentioned previously, children are not exempt from thinking about queer families. For instance, many children grow up in queer families. Weeks et al. argue that there are three main narratives told about 'non-heterosexual parenting': the narrative in which non-heterosexual people are not expected to ever become parents ("does this mean you won't have children?"); the narrative in which they have children from a previous phase in their lives when they were in a heterosexual relationship, and the narrative in which lesbian or gay parents have children through reproductive technologies.[479] No matter what our expectations are, the reality is that many children grow up in the (foster) care of queer adults. Or, no matter in what kind of family they grown up, children may identify as queer themselves. Either way it is important to take their reality and perspective into account.

Jennifer Harvey, like feminist theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore in the previous chapter, places the lived reality of raising and living with children at the centre of her theological argument. We find it important to explicitly pay attention to this reality in this report, and by extension, also address the perspective of children in rethinking the family. Harvey points out that caring for her children has made her attentive to the sometimes rather abstract theories that provide for only two options: the queer family as necessarily subversive

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[479] Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan, *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments* (London: Routledge, 2001).

(challenging normativities), or as assimilationist ("buying into" the one model of the family).[480] Within these abstract considerations, she warns, the sometimes harsh reality of living as a queer family may get lost: "For many queer parents, having children in one's life means less choice about living in greater contact with institutions particularly invested in producing the "normal" (schools, medial establishments, play groups, adoption agencies, kids sports teams) than one might otherwise have." [481] At the same time, children provide their own, valuable perspectives, which may challenge those of the grown-ups in their surroundings. Harvey gives as an example a conversation she has with her three-year-old daughter, who is struggling to find a language to describe her mother as a rather masculine woman, and who comes up with the term 'boy-girl'. To Harvey, this shows how her daughter is creative enough to make a linguistic space for her mother where general language may fail her.[482]

Hanzline Davids, writing from the context of South Africa, points to the importance of further developing theological thinking on LGBTQI people and families from the perspective of Child Theology. [483] Importantly, this does not merely mean taking account of children's well-being, but also that children are taken seriously as having a (marginalized) hermeneutical position of their own, and that their way of believing and expressing themselves reveals important knowledge about God. Sexuality and gender, however, do not

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[480] Harvey, "Disrupting the Normal", 2014, 108.
[481] Ibid., 109.
[482] Ibid., 105 and 111.
[483] Hanzline R. Davids, "Reconceiving Child Theology from a Queer Theological Perspective: for LGBTQI+ Parented Families and Children" in Jan Grobbelaar and Chris Jones, *Childhood Vulnerabilities in South Africa,* (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2020), 97-115.

feature in Child Theology as of yet, and neither do they feature prominently in queer theology.[484]

How, then, can we think about children and queer families *theologically*? One way that has already been suggested is to take God's desire for human flourishing as the guiding principle from which to explore how people 'do family', and to constantly apply this principle to children's lived realities, asking: what makes *them* flourish? Another way is to stretch the notion of the family even further, as we have been doing throughout this chapter. Blevins argues that through the sacrament of baptism it is no longer the nuclear family, but rather the 'family' of the Christian community, that "is the institution that forms us as Christians." [485] Through baptism, people become children of God, rather than of their (biological) parents. Regardless of how fragile human families prove to be, they believe themselves unconditionally accepted for all time. Obviously, more reflection on this point is needed in future.

# 6.3 Theological reflections on family

What has become clear in this chapter is that over the past decades, if not the past century and a half, families in Europe have undergone tremendous transformations. Underlying these transformations are economic shifts (industrialization, women entering the labour market, changes in welfare state regimes), changes due to medical technology (IVF, contraception, abortion) and in society (the growing acceptance of divorce, migration, the introduction of same-sex partnerships and marriage), and what can be called ideological shifts

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[484] Davids (2020), 109.
[485] Blevins (2005), 79.

(the sexual revolution, feminist waves, LGBTQI+ activism). Often, of course, these shifts overlap in complex ways.

In many European countries the family has changed from a rather homogenous, self-sufficient economic unit to a much more diverse constellation of people, sometimes based on blood ties, but often also on other, non-biological relationships and formation. And not only has the composition and functioning of families changed: each individual family, too, undergoes a significant amount of change over the course of its members' lives. As people grow older, they transform from child into sibling into (step-)parent, aunt or uncle, into grandparent, great-aunt, great-uncle. They divorce or separate, they find a new partner and re-marry, they remain single. They lose family members and gain new ones. The family is always on the move.[486]

Transformation can be a painful process. Often it is accompanied by a sense of loss, of letting go of old securities and well-known forms, of stepping into the unknown. This goes for individuals as their lives take on new courses, but it applies just as well to societies as a whole. Old, familiar and sometimes dear concepts of the family make space for new concepts, and the change can feel like the loss of security and solid ground. Transformation can be understood as a form of destabilization.

However, while contemporary families seem to be primarily characterized by change and transformation, this is only part of the

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[486] This includes the increasing changes in social space due to the digital revolution, which also increasingly influences our idea of relationship and sexuality. Cf. Gemma Serrano and Alessandro de Cessaris, "Towards a Theological Anthropology of the Digital Age" in *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 7(1). The consequences of the digital revolution for intimate relationships are reflected in *Digital Freedom. The Ten Commandments in the Age of Digital Transformation*. A Memorandum of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD): https://www.ekd.de/en/digital-freedom-1559.htm, par. 2.7, 135-156.

story. The family is just as much characterized by continuity as it is by change. For one, families continue to be units of care. They are places where less vulnerable people offer care and vulnerable people (this applies to everyone in at least some stages of their lives) are taken care of by others. Families are places where material, emotional, intimate, and social needs are (ideally) met. While gendered ideas on how the burden of this care should be divided has shifted (with men taking up a more nurturing role and women more economic responsibilities[487]), families are still intended to be places where people are expected (or invited) to participate in a life-long project of mutual care and a commitment to the flourishing of the other(s).

Second, and building on the previous remark, families are places where sustainable relations are formed. Whether based on biology or chosen commitment, the objective is to invest in bonds that last. In order to be durable, families need to be places of failure and renewed commitment, perhaps accepting that the bonds may at some periods in life be stronger than others, trusting that closeness and intimacy are perhaps not possible all of the time, but will be possible some of the time. Next to care, then, lasting commitment and trust are constants.

Third, families continue to be seen as predominantly positive constellations, even if their repeated failures are recognized and their idealization is criticized – and rightly so. While the influence of individualization processes cannot be denied, people continue to live in a variety of family compositions, and keep investing in creating new compositions for themselves. When families work well (or as well as they can), they tend to be seen as a social form that is

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[487] According to a 2021 study by the European Institute for Gender Equality, this process is still "steady but fragile and far too slow", *Gender Inequalities in Care and Consequences for the Labour Market*, (2021), 9.

inherently good for its members, that can form a basis for their personal growth and useful participation in society.

This positive attitude towards families is reflected in a Christian perspective. Whether the family has been understood as a calling, a covenant or a mandate, as has been the case in various Protestant traditions, it has been understood as a social form that expresses God´s desire for human flourishing through mutual care and lasting commitment. So much so, in fact, that the kinship metaphor was introduced by Jesus and perpetuated in early Christian communities in order to refer to the church as a form of family. This metaphor enables a perspective on the family where blood ties become less relevant in favour of other characteristics, such as community building, discipleship and shared faith. On the other hand, the metaphor entails the risk that the hierarchical and patriarchal structures that have been significant for families (and sometimes still are) are perpetuated in congregation life and in representations of the church as a whole.

The challenge for a Christian or Protestant perspective on contemporary family life is to recognize the potential of families while being attentive to both Christianity's own 'family history' and the transformations actual families have undergone. In this respect it is helpful to think of the family in three ways: as an invitation, as transformative, and as a training ground for social justice.

To see the family as an *invitation* builds on previous work by Protestant theologians who, in various ways, placed the family within God's work of creation or even an order of creation. The family, in its variety of forms, has the capacity help people grow in their calling to live as human beings created in the image of God. The word 'invitation' emphasizes family life not as a normative framework or mould that people need to adapt to, but as a

hospitable invite to become part of a way of life that is essentially good for them and will bring them closer to God, other humans and themselves. From a Christian perspective it is not random biological ties or human effort and commitment that form the ultimate basis for family life, but God's invitation into the good life.

To see the family as *transformative* can be understood in two ways. First, as mentioned, the family itself is constantly changing as people live their lives, connect to new people or lose significant others to choices, circumstances or to the finiteness of life. Second, the family is thus a changing constellation of two or more people who, by the nature of their ties, transform one another. Being part of a family means change. The actions, words, failures and successes of each individual family member have an impact on all the other members, and vice versa. To be in a family is to be subject to transformation. Hopefully, it will be transformation into a person who has learned to accept care and take care of others, who has learned to remain committed to others in the face of hardship, and who has become someone whom others can depend on. In order to be transformed in this way, the family also needs to be stable. Underlying the family is a paradox: a family can be transformative only when it is consistent at the same time.

Finally, the family can be seen as a training ground for *participating in social justice*. This perspective of the family builds on the work of Jennifer Harvey, who suggested that queer families are a form of sacred work.[488] Queer families, merely by existing and continuing to be a family, challenge heteronormative and cisnormative definitions of the family, challenging those who participate in the sin of exclusion and keeping others from human flourishing. To see the family in this way, as a place where the power of the normal is

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[488] Jennifer Harvey,"Disrupting the Normal", 2014.

challenged and people find ways to relate to each other despite the pressure of 'the normal', is a radically Christian family practice that need not be confined to queer families. As mentioned in the section on the use of kinship metaphors in relation to discipleship, the statement of Jesus in which he started using the concept of 'family' for his friends and followers instead of those with whom he shared biological kinship, must have been a radical statement in his time. It may be expected to have been hurtful for his mother, brothers and sisters. In fact, it would probably be a quite radical statement for many today. Still, Jesus chose to set in motion this transformation of what it means to be a family, in order to come to a more inclusive way of forming lasting communities in significant ways. Following this step that Jesus took, it is not so hard to imagine how contemporary families can do the same. They can invite others into the family, or allow themselves to be invited to families that they perhaps never would have thought to become a part of. They can invent forms of belonging that do not yet exist, such as the honorary aunt or uncle, or the bonus sibling. They can be creative with language, with their shared practices and with their commitments in ways that truly do transform the members of the family as well as the limits of what a family might be.

# 6.4 Study questions

Which developments in family life are currently affecting many members of the church as a particular challenge?

Which guiding principles prove helpful in practice in order to find biblical or Christian orientation in dealing with new situations?

What can the church do in order to do justice to the biblical New Testament image of the congregation as the family of God, or to find help and orientation in this image for everyday life?

# Section III

# 7 Sexual abuse and misconduct in churches and congregations

A study like this cannot ignore the harsh realities and consequences of selfishness, destructiveness and violence for the topics it deals with. Clearly, such darker sides of human life and nature also show their face in connection with sexuality and gender, and in the contexts of married life and families. All these domains would merit attention with regard to oppressive, violent and destructive forces and mechanisms. Here, we have chosen to go deeper into one particular area, which concerns churches and congregations very directly, namely where sexual abuse or misconduct is committed in the context of church or congregation by someone in their capacity as entrusted pastor, employee or volunteer. In other words, where formal positions and appointments in church and congregation and the trust they generate, are misused for exerting sexual power and violence.

Before going into that, two reminders are in place. First, whereas the fundamental origin of such destructive features is human sinfulness, which encompasses human life and all its aspects equally, sinfulness is not more strongly associated with human sexuality and gender identity than with any other aspect of human life. Second, selfishness, destructiveness, violence and exploitation as 'fruits' of human sinfulness, are indeed not more strongly associated with homo- than heterosexuality, with non-binary than binary gender identities, or more with rainbow families than with other formations of family; if anything, they would be more strongly associated with the prevailing norms. The topic of violence and abuse is therefore not addressed here as an implicit claim that the formations and domains of human life we are considering are more prone to

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misconduct or violence, nor that sexuality and gender identity are areas particularly affected by or associated with sinfulness. It is because destructiveness and violence occur directly not only within, but also by taking advantage of formal ecclesial and congregational structures and offices, against people who participate in, contribute to or seek the help and assistance of the church and congregation.

It is widely documented that this is a structural, societal and global problem, with no societies and no domains of society – public or domestic – being exempt;[489] hence it also concerns churches – all churches. [490] Intertwined as they are with societies and cultures where sexual violence and abuse is widespread, churches and congregations are no less likely to be arenas for sexual violence, abuse and misconduct. In addition, churches and congregations have specific features: they are home to specific practices, practices of spiritual authority, trust and care – practices which also lend themselves to abuse of power, including sexual abuse.

# 7.1 What are we talking about?

The terminology of the field of sexuality and violence is broad and not universally consistent. Concepts such as sexual or sexualized violence, assault, abuse, harassment, misconduct and others, all figure in the field, and not always with the same references. Rather than attempting to provide clear-cut semantic definitions, the

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[489] Pamela Cooper-White, "Violence and Justice".
[490] Documented through a number of investigative reports from churches of various confessions, and from individuals; also expressed e.g. in the #churchtoo campaign, following directly after the launching of the #metoo campaign in 2017. Arnfridur Gudmundsdottir, "Let's Be Loud! God in the Context of Sexual Violence and Abuse of Power" in Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen (ed.), *The Alternative Luther: Lutheran Theology from the Subaltern* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Press, 2019), 215–216.

important thing here is to tease out what kind of phenomena these concepts try to cover.

Formally speaking, sexual/sexualized violence and abuse refers to any form of unwanted/non-consensual sexual activity, whether penetrative or non-penetrative (including therefore kissing, touching, rubbing, inside or outside clothes), contact or non-contact (e.g. using digital technologies to coerce or persuade someone to watch sexual activities or behave in sexual ways). Sexual harassment (primarily used in legal contexts) and misconduct tend to be used with a broader reference, including also inappropriate, sexually charged gestures, comments or language, or uninvited and unwelcome questions or propositions concerning sexual topics. Verbal harassment can in itself be experienced as intrusive and degrading, and a violation of one's integrity. But in addition, isolated comments might accumulate into a pattern experienced as abuse and violence, and fertilising a soil, for instance at a work-place, for more direct physical abuse. Making sexually loaded and inappropriate comments or propositions should therefore not be trivialized away as 'innocent', 'just for fun,' or the like. Whether or not behaviour, actions, comments etc. are in fact abusive must be the decision of the person(s) exposed to it.

Fundamentally, 'non-consensual' implies a shift of logic, where acceptable sexual activity is conditional upon the presence of consent, not just the absence of dissent.[491] The use or threat of use of physical or psychological force are obviously non-consensual, but 'non-consensual' also includes taking advantage of a person's inability to withhold consent. Intoxication or unconsciousness are examples, but it is especially important to note the likelihood of

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[491] Exemplifying the turn from "no means no" to "yes means yes", see e.g. Gerhard Schreiber, *Im Dunkel der Sexualität. Sexualität und Gewalt aus sexualethischer Perspektive* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 359–362.

dissociative mechanisms during assault,[492] such as states of tonic immobility, or 'freeze', an involuntary defence reaction to threat and fear and likely to occur during sexual assaults.[493] This is a "catatonic-like state with muscle hyper- or hypo-tonicity, tremor, lack of vocalization, analgesia and relative unresponsiveness to external stimuli."[494] The sexual assault itself is likely to induce a state which makes it impossible for the assaulted person to resist, physically or vocally. This is also why a requirement of explicit dissent and resistance is entirely insufficient. Inquiries about the victimized person's efforts to resist the assault are also made irrelevant as well as potentially adding to the harm already suffered, in terms of 'victim blame'. Several countries are now incorporating the requirement of consent into legislation. [495] Yet irrespective of national legislations, there can be no question that consent is a necessary criterion in terms of theological sexual ethics, as pointed out above (4.3.4).

Furthermore, consent implies that it is given freely. That is obviously no longer the case if it is the result of coercion or manipulation. 'Consent' emerging from some kind of manipulative coercion or deception is not consent at all. This might, for instance, be the case when sexual abuse is committed in a personal or professional context of what might have started as a relationship of friendship,

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[492] Fiona Mason and Zoe Lodrick, "Psychological Consequences of Sexual Assault" in *Best Practice and Research: Clinical Obstetrics & Gynaecology* 27(1) (2012), 27–37, 29–30.

[493] Anna Möller, Hans Peter Söndergaard and Lotti Helström, "Tonic Immobility during Sexual Assault – a Common Reaction predicting Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Severe Depression" in *Acta Obstreticia et Gynecologica Scandinavica* 96 (8) (2017); 932–938. The authors claim, on the basis of a Swedish large sample study, that significant tonic immobility occurred in 70 percent of the cases of sexual assault, and extreme immobility in 48 percent of cases.

[494] Möller, Söndergaard and Helström, "Tonic Immobility during Sexual Assault", 932–933.

[495] Schreiber, *Im Dunkel der Sexualität*, 359–362.

trust, care, therapy or the like – which makes this especially important for churches to be aware of, rich as they are with these kinds of relations (see below).

Finally, 'consent' as a necessary condition can only apply to sexual relations that are not illegitimate to begin with, according to legislation, basic human rights, or codes of conduct. Adults cannot justify sexual activities with children, adolescents, or persons without consensual competence, by referring to an alleged 'consent'. A youth pastor can never justifiably refer to an alleged 'consent' from a confirmand, to legitimize sexual activity between the two. The same goes for certain professional relations, where professional codes of conduct, and frequently also legislation, prohibit sexual relations and make disputes over consent immaterial to the question whether abuse has occurred. Psychiatrist/psychologist/doctor/therapist relations vis-à-vis a patient/client are obvious examples, entangled as they are with power dependence asymmetries incompatible with free consent to sexual activity or relations. Similar asymmetries also apply to pastor/counsellor/supervisor relations with a person confiding in them in ecclesial and congregational contexts of pastoral care, counselling and supervision (see below). Unfortunately, it varies to what extent churches, pastoral codes of conduct and legislation have recognized this by absolutely and explicitly banning pastors, counsellors or supervisors from engaging sexually with confidents or others entrusting them in pastoral care. Many have, but not all.

Researchers discuss whether to talk about *sexual* violence or *sexualized* violence.[496] These apparent semantic subtleties hide an

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[496] Gerhard Schreiber, "Begriffe vom Unbegreiflichen. Beobachtungen zur Rede von 'sexueller Gewalt' und 'sexualisierter Gewalt'", in Mathias Wirth, Isabelle Noth, Silvia Schroer (eds), *Sexual Violence in the Context of the Church. New*

important substantive point, namely recognizing how sexual violence, abuse or harassment from the outset belongs within a context of violence and abuse and is about exerting power in pursuit of domination and control. It is clearly also sexual, in the sense that it is a form of violence or abuse which centres around sexually fraught behaviour and gestures, genital organs or other body parts in ways associated with sexual actions, and possibly in pursuit of the abuser's sexual self-gratification. Importantly, however, it is not just a form of sexuality, as if an otherwise good and positive thing just went astray or span out of control. This is also why responses or excuses like 'he/she is probably just in love' are irrelevant as well as harmful, trivializing and minimizing the assault. Abusers might very well be 'in love' or erotically/ romantically obsessed with the abused, but the violent, abusive and harassing behaviour cannot be interpreted, let alone excused, as just a clumsy or passionate expression of love. Sexual violence and abuse is a case of violence and abuse of power, although clearly a sexual way of exerting violence and power.[497] It is sexuality instrumentalized and used for purposes of abusive power, control and dominance.[498]

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Interdisciplinary Perspectives (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 123–145; Cooper-White, "Violence and Justice".

[497] Cooper-White, "Violence and Justice". Schreiber, "Begriffe vom Unbegreiflichen", 138.

[498] Udo Rauchfleisch, "Psychologische Aspekte der sexualisierten Gewalt im kirchlichen Kontext und ihre Folgen" in Mathias Wirth, Isabelle Noth, Silvia Schroer (eds), Sexual Violence in the Context of the Church: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 148.

## 7.2 Why is it a problem?

It is well documented that victims of sexual assaults have a significantly heightened risk of suffering a broad range of harmful health consequences, affecting their somatic, psychological, and psycho-social health and well-being.

This includes higher risks of chronic pain, sleeping disorders, eating disorders, anxiety and depression, self-harm and suicidality, sexual functioning and reproductive issues, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[499] The latter, suggested to hit more than 50 percent of victims sometime after the assault, is described as "an extremely distressing and disabling condition"[500] which itself includes a range of painful and debilitating symptoms. Among them are re-experiencing the abusive assault or episodes through intrusive and involuntary flashbacks or nightmares, numbness and avoidance, hyper-alertness and easily startling – in short, a range of symptoms with considerably inhibiting effects on everyday life.[501] In addition to pathological consequences, assumptions about self and self-concept are also likely to be affected by sexual trauma, in terms of feelings of unworthiness and inferiority, self-disgust, perceptions of oneself as unlovable, and internalizations of victim blame.[502] These consequences for self-concept not only affect a person's self-

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[499] Emily Dworkin, Suvarna V. Menon, Jonathan Bystrynski and Nicole E. Allen, "Sexual assault victimization and psychopathology: A review and meta-analysis" in *Clinical Psychology Review* (2017), 56, 65–81. Ruxana Jina, Leena S. Thomas, "Health consequences of sexual violence against women" in *Best Practice & Research: Clinical Obstetrics & Gynaecology* 27 (1) (2013), 15–26. Fiona Mason & Zoe Lodrick, "Psychological consequences of sexual assault", 30–32.

[500] Fiona Mason & Zoe Lodrick, "Psychological consequences of sexual assault", 31.

[501] Thomas Jina, "Health consequences of sexual violence", 19; Fiona Mason & Zoe Lodrick, "Psychological consequences of sexual assault", 31.

[502] Hadar Keshet and Eva Gilboa-Schechtman, "Symptoms and Beyond: Self-Concept Among Sexually Assaulted Women" in *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 9(5) (2017), 545–552. 545.

relation, but also relations to others, in close and intimate relations, as well as more distant ones.

In addition to these general risks of consequences, additional risks of harmful consequences are associated with abuse and violence in the particular setting of churches and congregations, to be elucidated below (7.3).

In sum, there is no basis for trivializing or attempts at rendering sexual abuse and misconduct harmless. The risks of harmful and debilitating consequences are considerable and well-known.

# 7.3 Sexual abuse in churches and congregations

What has been said so far goes for sexual violence, abuse, and misconduct in general, relatively independent of context. But sexual abuse and misconduct are hardly unrelated to context. Abuse and abusers take advantage of and feed on specific features of given contexts, whether at universities, in the media industry, culture and arts world, sports, local communities and groups, political organizations – or in churches and congregations.

On one hand, churches and congregations resemble society and culture in general when it comes to sexual abuse, violence, and harassment. They do not constitute 'separate worlds', shielded from these phenomena.[503] Yet on the other, churches and congregations indeed do have some specific features when it comes to sexual

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[503] Mathias Wirth, Isabelle Noth, Silvia Schroer, "Sexualisierte Gewalt und das Problem kirchlicher Separatwelten" in Mathias Wirth, Isabelle Noth, Silvia Schroer (eds), *Sexual Violence in the Context of the Church. New Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 1–25.

violence, abuse, and harassment. Unfortunately, these are features which are more likely to increase the risk and harmful consequences of abuse, and decrease ability to detect and handle abuse, rather than the opposite.

Two types of features are particularly relevant in this regard. First, churches and congregations are home to some specific relations, whose nature and dynamics are often trust, care, spiritual or other forms of authority, often tangled up with power and dependence asymmetries. This is especially, but not only, the case in pastoral work and relations between pastor and congregant. Second, the self-perceptions and organizational structures of churches and congregations might be more or less accommodating of sexual abuse and misconduct. Prevailing and tacit assumptions that 'abuse does not happen here' risk fertilizing the soil for abuse, as people are unlikely to discover what they believe to be improbable and therefore in fact provide a shield for abuse. Churches and congregations where this assumption prevails might also be less well equipped to receive and handle cases of reported abuse adequately.

## 7.3.1 Relations of trust, care and power – and risks of abuse

Specific professional relationships of trust are known to be risk factors of abuse, which is why some professions have strict regulations against being sexually involved with clients, patients etc. (see above). Trust relations are also central to ecclesial practices and congregational life, in ways that represent a similar risk factor of sexual abuse and misconduct in churches and congregations.

Most obviously, of course, there is the relationship between pastor and the person confiding in them. But included are also relationships

between pastor and congregants more generally, between employer and employees, between leader and volunteers, and more. What makes these relationships places of risk, compared to ordinary human interactions, is that they are marked by structural asymmetries in power and dependence, asymmetries which can be exploited by the more powerful to take advantage of the more dependent in the relation. Needless to say, the majority of people in charge in churches and congregations wield these power asymmetries in responsible and mature ways, mindful and respectful of the integrity, autonomy and dignity of others. But where cases of sexual abuse and misconduct happen in churches, they have typically exploited and fed on these kinds of asymmetrical relationships of power and dependence as their 'enablers'. Although these asymmetries might shift and fluctuate over time, they typically (although not necessarily) follow formal and informal hierarchies in the church and congregation.

Power is a highly complex phenomenon in these patterns of asymmetry with dependence. As an ability to make someone do something they would not otherwise have done, for instance in terms of sexual activity, it operates and can be abused in many ways. A quite obvious and manifest form is, of course, very direct physical power, coercing someone into a sexual activity simply by applying physical force in the necessary measure. Another form is social or structural power, operating and effective in terms of a formal position, for instance of an employer, or a religious leader in a rather authoritarian religious tradition. Here power operates in terms of being able to get people to do things by invoking a formal authority within a hierarchy. The pastor or the leader of the church council might hint to the younger candidate about his or her willingness to prolong a contract, secure a promotion or provide another career-advancing opportunity, or put in a good word with the bishop, and

more or less discreetly connect it to favours of an intimate kind. This, like physical power, is a fairly direct and explicit use/abuse of power, lodged within the relation between, for example, pastor and candidate.

Some might assume that if this kind of formal power, for example to 'hire and fire', is distributed between more functions and offices rather than resting with one person, the risk of power abuse for sexual or other purposes is significantly reduced. Unfortunately, that is rarely the case. The reason is that power also operates in much more complex and concealed ways, for example through relationships of combined care and trust, rather than force and explicit coercion.

Churches and congregations ought to be, and often are, communities of care. Care, acting with regard to and out of concern for the other's wellbeing, is essential among Christian virtues and ideals. It is only right, appropriate and praiseworthy when churches and congregations embody relationships of care: the youth worker's or pastor's care for the confirmand with a difficult background, the care of one colleague for another, the parish leader's care for a staff member, or the pastor's care for a congregant, congregants' care for each other.

Yet care also has a downside. It risks creating and perpetuating patterns of dependence, where the 'cared-for' person becomes increasingly dependent on the support, provision and interventions of the care person, who gradually but subtly takes increased control of the cared-for person, little by little undercutting agency and autonomy. Diaconal research and practice have recognized this problematic aspect of care for a long time, as have the caring professions of welfare systems. But ecclesial and pastoral contexts have been much slower to recognize it, and therefore also less able

and willing to identify, name and reflect on the power that these care structures hide.[504]

And a profoundly problematic side is, of course, that these dynamics lend themselves to abuse of power and exploitation for purposes of sexual abuse. They do so through a complex architecture of manipulation and coercion, feeding on the initial relations of care and trust integral to pastoral practice.[505] Among the components of this architecture is, first of all, the fundamental trust which the abuser (pastor, leader, youth worker, teacher, trusted member of the congregation) has developed and enjoys, as an admired and respected authority in church or congregation.[506] Appearing as truly interested in and caring for the well-being of others, congregants, young people, volunteers etc. willingly share personal concerns and troubles with the abuser, receiving interest, care and support in return. The abuser's interventions of care and support might become more frequent, perhaps also along other channels or in other formats than those associated with the role,[507] at the same time perhaps increasingly difficult to keep at a distance and evade for the abused.[508] Gradually developing into sexual forms of contact,

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[504] Carolyn Holderread Heggen, "Sexual Abuse by Church Leaders and Healing for Victims" in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 89(1) (2015), 81–93. 84.

[505] Christoph Seibert, "Menschenführung als Kontext sexualisierter Gewalt" in Mathias Wirth, Isabelle Noth, Silvia Schroer (eds), *Sexual Violence in the Context of the Church. New Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).

[506] Seibert, Menschenführung als Kontext sexualisierter Gewalt," 348–349. Seibert here examines the nature and components of sexual abuse through manipulative power, with the help of a of a male pastor from 1970s Germany, revealed many years later. The victimized were young adults, but Seibert uses the case to outline thee more general structural features of manipulative coercion of sexual abuse. Cf. also Fischer, "Das Handwerk der Verführung", 194ff.

[507] Carolyn Holderread Heggen, "Sexual Abuse by Church Leaders", 83–84.

[508] Alexander Fischer, "Das Handwerk der Verführung. Manipulation, Sexualität und Glaube" in Mathias Wirth, Isabelle Noth, Silvia Schroer (eds), *Sexual Violence in the Context of the Church. New Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 194–199.

the abuser might offer a form of symbolic reward by expressing admiration and praise to the abused person for the importance she or he has for the abuser, tapping into common needs and desires to be of significance to others, and thus further cementing bonds of control and dependence.[509]

Manipulative power thus operates through a complex web of trust-based proximity and confidence, gradually blended with practices of secrecy, personal confessions and suggestions, rewards and anxieties, admiration, and praise, effectively tying the abused to the abuser and the abuse.[510] Speaking to the affective rather than rational levels of the mind it might be particularly difficult to decode and unmask, for others as well as for the abused person. And it works so efficiently because it disguises abuse as a form of care, hides the true nature of the relationship, and renames as care, trust and mutual help what is really abuse, thereby making it affectively appealing and creating confusion about the relation, the entrusted person and oneself.[511]

This form of manipulative power, wielded by the – apparently – caring, popular, and entrusted pastor, youth worker, leader, teacher etc. is no less a form of power, which makes others do something they would not otherwise have done, as a case of 'non-consensual sexual activity'. And the person coerced into sexual abuse through manipulative power is as little to blame for what has happened as the one physically coerced or pressurized into abuse.

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[509] Ibid.

[510] Ibid.

[511] Fischer, "Das Handwerk der Verführung", 194–199.

## 7.3.2 Ecclesial identities and structures – and abuse

The particular relationships of care and trust characteristic of some of the practices in churches and congregations, might not only heighten the risk of sexual abuse and misconduct, but also the harmful consequences such actions and behaviour might have, compared to other contexts.

This has to do, firstly, with how the abuser enjoys the trust and wields the authority he or she does, by formally or informally representing something larger than themselves: the congregation and its fellowship, the church, perhaps even God.[512] Abuse does not only lead to a sense of profound betrayal by the abuser. It might also profoundly disturb and disrupt these other dimensions which the abuser represents and embodies to the abused, and perhaps even explicitly invoke in the abuse. For example, the abused person might fear that it becomes impossible to participate in the fellowship if she or he tries to break away from an abusive relation with a person who is central to that fellowship. Furthermore, the abuse might undermine and corrupt valued and important dimensions of the abused person's life and faith as a Christian.[513] If the abuser invokes God in justifying the abusive action and relationship, it might obviously have profoundly negative effects on the abused person's trust and confidence in God. If practices central to Christian spiritual life are associated with continued abuse, for example with praying, or reading of Scripture, this is highly likely to contaminate these

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[512] Julie McFarlane, " The Anglican Church's Sexual Abuse Defence Playbook" in *Theology*, 124 (3) (2021), 182–189. 183.
[513] Rauchfleisch, "Psychologische Aspekte der sexualisierten Gewalt", 149–152. Rauchfleisch is here primarily addressing abuse within the framework of the Roman Catholic Church but some of his points translate into other churches as well.

practices for the abused person, and alienate her or him from them as a Christian.

A final set of reasons sexual abuse in congregations and churches is of a 'specific kind' has to do with how ecclesial identities and structures might in some sense actually be hospitable to abuse, and/or inhospitable to its interruption.

Constitutive to identities of Protestant churches and congregations is being communities which live from, and pass on, forgiveness of sins as the core of the gospel of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection. Speaking of forgiveness at all in connection with sexual abuse – and abuse in the midst of the congregation, at that – requires the very utmost theological and pastoral wisdom and maturity. Without that rare amount of wisdom and maturity, there is a considerable risk that words about forgiveness and reconciliation will not only be premature, ill-considered and unhelpful but also exacerbate harm to the abused by minimizing and trivializing the abuse.[514]

And finally, there are features which might make churches and congregations more hospitable to the strategies of secrecy which abusers are likely to employ for the abuse to go on. Ecclesial and congregational self-perception and identity might make it hard to believe that abuse can take place in its midst, thus being implicitly hospitable to the strategies of secrecy abusers are likely to employ. Self-perception as a communion and fellowship of those united in Christ, bound together by bonds of faith, love and hope, and serving God, each other, and the world, is difficult to reconcile with abuse occurring in one's midst. Structural features might make churches

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[514] Mathias Wirth, "Die Banalisierung sexualisierter Gewalt im Gestus ihrer Entschuldigung" in Mathias Wirth, Isabelle Noth, Silvia Schroer (eds), *Sexual Violence in the Context of the Church. New Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 355–377.

and congregations comparatively more hospitable to abuse, specifically lack of transparency and accountability, combined with access.[515]

Pastors especially, but to some extent also other church leaders or employees, have access to people's homes, to their secrets and vulnerabilities, their rooms in the nursing home, to their close and troubled relations, their deepest beliefs and concerns – and more. But this access is rarely coupled with a corresponding amount of checking, transparency, supervision, and accountability. The parish council does not necessarily know much about what the popular and sought-after youth leader actually does. Nor does the pastor necessarily have to share or seek supervision concerning his or her relations or interactions with congregants outside the seal of the confessional, just to mention examples. But organizational structures that do not prepare for transparency, openness and accountability are, all things considered, likely to be more hospitable to strategies of secrecy, and to enable abuse to go on in their midst.

## 7.3.3 Children and sexual abuse

Sexual abuse of minors (children/adolescents) are particularly serious in the sense that, added to the similar risks of harmful consequences which adults face, minors will also have risks of long-term harm of having been exposed to sexual activity with adults before being at all acquainted and familiar with adult sexuality. Furthermore, the way children and youths are dependent on adults for basic safety and survival in ways adults are not makes them even

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[515] Carolyn Holderread Heggen, "Sexual Abuse by Church Leaders," 87; Tormod Kleiven, *Intimitetsgrenser og tillitsmakt. Kirkesamfunns bruk av retningslinjer i møte med seksuelle krenkelser sett i lys av et diakonifaglig perspektiv.* PhD dissertation (Oslo: Det teologiske Menighetsfakultet, 2008), 251–256.

more vulnerable and open to an abuser's exploitation of their needs for things, care and safety, especially when they – the minors – sense these things might otherwise be jeopardized. Finally, their trust in an (apparent) person of care, whether a family member, or a person in a church, or elsewhere, might therefore also be more fundamental and unreserved, and the painful experience of a breach of trust all the more harmful and confusing, and with potentially profound long-term effects.

The patterns described above of manipulative power, might be exacerbated and intensified in the case of children and adolescents with a more purported mechanism of grooming. The child's/adolescent's fondness, trust and eventually dependence on the abuser, is actively cultivated and nourished, by providing the child/youth with goodies, attention, care and/or other things which he or she needs or longs for. Smaller or bigger material gifts, spending time with and listening to the child/teenager, nurturing a feeling of being special, selected, or loved, will sustain their trust in the adult.

Abusers are known to pursue in children and adolescents with particular vulnerabilities, whether suffering from neglectful parents, loneliness, coming from an abusive background or a background of social and emotional deprivation, and which are therefore more approachable targets of grooming. Providing a kind of safe haven, a place where the child/young person, maybe for the first time, not only receives rare material goods, but also experiences care and self-worth, will not only make them trust, admire and love the adult, but also fear losing the good things associated with the relationship.

Combined with the considerable shame and confusion involved in having been subjected to sexual abuse before being at all acquainted with adult sexuality, coupled with threats or pressure not to disclose

anything to others, captures the child/young person in a trap of secrecy and loyalty, making it more or less impossible to seek help or break loose of these ties. It is a particularly evil exploitation of vulnerable persons. And the mechanism of cover-up and secrecy is all the more likely to work as the abuser might be a generally respected, admired, popular and trusted person in the church or congregation.

## 7.3.4 CPCE churches and initiatives regarding sexual abuse and misconduct

What measures have our churches initiated to reduce the risk of sexual abuse and misconduct; what kind of procedures have they implemented for receiving and handling complaints of sexual abuse and misconduct; and to what extent do they provide support for people who have been subject to sexual abuse or misconduct within the church? These questions were put to the CPCE member churches in a survey.

One out of five CPCE members (20 percent, 11 responding members) have not taken any initiatives to prevent or safeguard against sexual abuse or misconduct within churches and parishes. One in three CPCE member churches lack procedures for receiving and handling complaints against clergy, leaders, employees or volunteers of sexual abuse or misconduct, and nearly as many (30 percent) have not developed procedures for how decision-making bodies should handle complaints of sexual abuse or misconduct committed by clergy or other church-leaders, employees or volunteers against congregants or others.

Nearly two out of three (64 percent, 34 responding members) have established such preventive initiatives at their highest organizational

level, and some churches or organizations at regional or mid-organizational levels. Almost the same (64 percent) have a process for receiving complaints against clergy, other church leaders or employees, or volunteers for sexual abuse or misconduct. Most of them have made this process accessible on their central webpages, but not the homepage. Of these, 67 percent, two in three, report that they have in fact received complaints.

58 percent of the respondents state that they provide some form of support (such as counselling, support groups etc) for people who have been subject to sexual abuse or misconduct within the church/church organization or any of its members. One in four, 26 percent, do not provide this kind of support.

It seems that about one third of CPCE members might lack procedures for receiving and handling complaints concerning sexual abuse by clergy etc. of their congregants, and this gives ground for concern. It is well documented how telling others about sexual abuse is a highly difficult and vulnerable thing to do. And telling church authorities that you have been victimized by a trusted person like your pastor, supervisor, or youth leader, is no exception, quite the contrary. In order to be a realistic possibility for victims of sexual abuse by clergy to report such abuse, procedures for submitting complaints should be well-known, visible and easily accessible, and procedures for how complaints are handled should be transparent and predictable. There is definitely much more to say regarding safeguarding, but such procedures ought at least to be in place.

It might be worth considering how experiences, practices, and knowledge of CPCE member churches which have worked more systematically with these issues, can be shared with and put to use by those which have engaged much less with this, if at all.

# 7.4 Study questions

What are the specific risk factors of sexual misconduct and abuse in churches and congregations?

Which measures or arrangements does your church/congregation have, in order to prevent, handle, and follow up on cases of sexual misconduct and abuse committed by pastors, church leaders and other employees?

In your opinion, are they adequate, too demanding or exaggerated, or too limited? How do you think they ought to be changed, and why?

# 8 Churches, ethical disagreement, and ethics of disagreement

As indicated in the introduction, the mandate also requested that the study address the question about ethical disagreement and church unity. How might disagreement on ethical topics, for example pertaining to sexuality and gender, cause tension with church unity or fellowship and potentially conflict with each other, and how can models or approaches to address such situations of tension be envisaged?

The study was asked to provide "three or four models from the CPCE's member churches with regard to how they handle differing standpoints on sexual ethics and gender issues in a way that allows continuing church fellowship without sweeping problems under the carpet". It should be noted from the start that there was a certain inconsistency and problem with this request. CPCE member churches are obviously not directly comparable to CPCE, which is a communion of churches. Especially ecclesiological and organizational structures and procedures for engaging with internal differences and conflicts are different. Member churches can therefore not serve as direct models for CPCE, but they might of course provide general experiences relevant for the CPCE context. That is what the study tries to do in the following.

We will now present four CPCE member churches and their engagement with questions pertaining to same-sex relations, including marriage and marriage liturgies for same-sex couples, as well as employment and ordination of persons living openly in same-sex relations. The churches represent different regions, different

Protestant traditions, and different positions within their countries (minority – majority) and traditions of church-state relations.

# 8.1 Case studies

## 8.1.1 Waldensian Church

The *Chiesa evangelica valdese* - Waldensian Evangelical Church (Union of Methodist and Waldensian Churches) started a general discussion in Italy on the blessing of same sex unions in 2010. During a five-year study process (2012-2017) a committee was charged with writing a new document on "families in the plural", to witness to the gospel in the congregations, to ecumenical partners and in society at large. Being interdisciplinary, the committee facilitated reflection in local congregations as an opportunity to grow in fraternity and sorority in Jesus Christ, while bearing witness to hope through God's love. Being Christians in a different way ("essere Cristiani altrimenti"), Waldensians and Methodists highlighted a concept of conjugal union differing from a sacramental marriage, that of a covenant based on mutual love. It introduced a third stance between Catholic values and secular positions, while nurturing dialogue with both.[516]

In Italy, the process of discussion was long, as moderator Eugenio Bernardini stated soon after the document on families was approved in 2017 by the Waldensian Synod (Synod of Methodist and

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[516] Ferrario Fulvio, "Cristologia e teologia interculturale" in *Protestantesimo. Rivista della Facoltà Valdese di Teologia* 71(1-3) (2016), 77-93. For documents on faith and homosexuality, see: https://chiesavaldese.org/documenti/#nogo For same-sex couples liturgies, see: https://chiesavaldese.org/documento/benedizione-di-unioni-di-coppie-dello-stesso-sesso/ For the document on families (in English), see: https://chiesavaldese.org/documento/families-marriages-couples-and-parenthood/

Waldensian Churches).[517] Contextualising this decision in a renewed ecumenical dialogue, after the visit of Pope Francis to the Waldensian church in Turin and the joint ecumenical project of humanitarian corridors for refugees, Bernardini explained: "Debate was not always easy, but the Waldensian Synod approved two documents: one on families in the plural, with liturgical blessing of same-sex couples, and the other on the end of life or assisted suicide and euthanasia. Borders and walls disturb us; both internally and externally, we share a culture that gives value to a critical spirit and listening, while we try to maintain strong principles embodying them in social, cultural and anthropological change. These are topics that directly question the community of believers and that are to be handled with care, without arrogance, because there are different sensitivities and deep sufferings." As for heterosexual partners, the same-sex blessing is granted "so long as in the couple there are principles of love, reciprocity and responsibility".[518] The theology of marriage/partnerships was explained to the representatives of international Protestant churches at the 2016 Synod.[519]

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[517] The new document on families was approved with resolution 31/2017, see: #Sinodovaldese: famiglie, un plurale da riconoscere, *Agenzia Notizie Evangeliche*, 21.08.17, https://www.nev.it/nev/2017/08/21/sinodovaldese-famiglie-un-plurale-riconoscere/; Valdesi, benedizione a unioni civili, *Ansa*, 25.08.17, https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2017/08/25/valdesi-benedizione-a-unioni-civili_9b54ac76-a4cd-41df-b8c3-d2f276329368.html; "Waldensian and Methodist Synod Families in the Plural approved an Historic Document" in *Middle East & Europa – Global Ministries*, 15.12.17, https://www.globalministries.org/waldensian_and_methodist_synod_families_in_the_plural_approved_an_historic_document/.
[518] Luca Kocci, "I valdesi: una comunità di frontiera, con le porte aperte al dialogo e al cambiamento" [The Waldensians: a border community, with doors open to dialogue and change] in *Il Manifesto*, 25.8.19, https://ilmanifesto.it/i-valdesi-una-comunita-di-frontiera-con-le-porte-aperte-al-dialogo-e-al-cambiamento
[519] Paola Schellenbaum, "La famiglia al plurale" in Riforma.it, 24.8.16, https://riforma.it/it/articolo/2016/08/24/la-famiglia-al-plurale-un-incontro-con-gli-ospiti-stranieri-presenti-al-sinodo

In summing up the experience so far in the Waldensian Church in Italy, pastor Gianni Genre publicly expressed his support to the blessing of same sex couples in a chapter of a recent book on synodality in the life and mission of the church from an interconfessional theological perspective.[520] In a dialogue on this issue, he affirmed that after five years since the approval of both the liturgies and the document, the long process of debate had allowed the congregations to frame the issue within contextual theology while witnessing to the Gospel. Moreover, the worries about high numbers of requests for blessing by non-believers have vanished because one partner has to be a member of a Waldensian or Methodist church. "Instead, homosexual couples feel they are accepted in our congregations whilst there is an official position by the Waldensian Synod, even if sometimes it is still a difficult and sensitive issue". He then added that "some homosexuals reject marriage in principle, while they accept registered civil unions, which is another requirement for the blessing of same-sex couples. We do not have marriage for all in Italy, but the official liturgies do not discriminate on the spiritual level, they only differ under civil law".

The Waldensian Church has been present in Rio de la Plata since mid-1850s when migrants from the Waldensian Valleys first reached South America. The *Iglesia Evangelica Valdense del Rio de la Plata* is part of the Waldensian Church but has an independent Synod. In this way, the Waldensian Synod has two sessions: a European one that takes place in August and a South American one that takes place in February each year. The newly elected moderator of the *Mesa Valdense*, Marcelo Nicolau, when asked about the decisional process about the blessing of same-sex couples, answered: "Actually, our

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[520] Riccardo Battocchio, Genre Gianni, Petrà Basilio, *Sentieri di sinodalità. Prospettive teologiche interconfessionali* [Paths of synodality. Interconfessional theological perspectives], (Milan: San Paolo Edizioni , 2022).

Waldensian Church in Rio de la Plata worked on the subject nearly ten years ago, especially in 2009 and 2010. There are Synod resolutions that acknowledge the reflections that local congregations, and especially the pastoral body, have gone through. Subsequently the process of reflexion continued in local congregations and in some of them the blessing of same-sex couples has taken place with no difficulties. This is still not general practice and some congregations, especially in rural areas, have rejected this possibility. And yet, we can say that the majority of local churches accept this practice."[521]

In the next pages, only the decisional process in Italy will be illustrated. The Waldensian Church is a member of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, founded in 1967, which in 2015, together with the Community of Saint Egidio, launched the humanitarian corridors project to provide safe passages for vulnerable refugees stranded in Lebanon, now also from Libya and Afghanistan. The Federation has also promoted gender parity since its foundation, through the Federation of Protestant Women in Italy. It recently signed the "No Women No Panel" memorandum of understanding, a campaign that RAI, the national radio, internet and television network, took up following a European Commission initiative.[522]

Gender and sexuality were increasingly present in public debate while historical issues brought about by feminism and women's studies were in dialogue with theology and spirituality. Giving voice

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[521] Synod resolutions are 11/SR/09, 12/SR/09, 15/SR/10 (email sent on 29 June 2022).

[522] At the European level: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/commissioners-support-no-women-no-panel-campaign; in Italy: https://www.nev.it/nev/2021/11/22/no-women-no-panel-senza-donne-non-se-ne-parla/

to women and LGBT+ [523] persons meant to discover emerging
cultural critique in studies of religion and lived practice. [524]
Moreover, the relationship between homosexuality and spirituality
has stressed diversity and plural characteristics for homosexuals as
well as for other human beings.[525]

A heated public debate took place during the 2006 and 2013 election
campaigns that addressed the topic of same-sex civil unions but with
different frames adopted by the political actors, as portrayed in the
print media. In brief, we can observe that "in 2006, many political
actors regarded the demands of same-sex couples as private
interests, not requiring regulation, and supported the Catholic
Church's arguments, while in 2013, LGBT+ claims had gained much
wider legitimacy and even many opponents of same-sex civil unions
relied on frames and arguments based on opportunity, without
denying that the matter was worth regulating. At the same time, the
Vatican's influence on this question significantly decreased, and
within the Church itself relevant dissenting voices were also
heard".[526] The law on civil unions finally passed in 2016 and it was to
improve the government's image in the light of modernity and
progress, Italy being among the last to approve a law legalizing same-

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[523] The acronym LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) with a plus means
awareness of other gender identities.
[524] Paola Schellenbaum and Tomassone Letizia (eds), "Sui Generis" in
*Protestantesimo* 68(3-4)(2013); Anna Stewart and Coleman Simon, "Contributions
from Anthropology" in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender*
(Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2017); Elisabeth Parmentier, Pierette Daviau, Lauriane Savoy
(eds), *Une bible des femmes: Vingt théologiennes relisent des textes controversés*
(Genève: Labor et Fides, 2018): preface of the Italian translation by Letizia
Tomassone; Letizia Tomassone (ed.), *Donne di Parola. Pastore, diacone e predicatrici
nel protestantesimo italiano* [Women of the Word. Pastors, deacons and preachers
in Italian Protestantism], (Florence: Nerbini Editore, 2020).
[525] Vittorio Lingiardi, *Men in love: Male homosexualities from Ganymede to Batman*
(New York: Open Court Publishing, 2002).
[526] Luca Ozzano, "The Debate about Same-Sex Marriages/Civil Unions in Italy's 2006
and 2013 Electoral Campaigns" in *Contemporary Italian Politics* (2015), 1-19.

sex partnerships, while at present there is no law against homophobia and transphobia.[527]

The parliamentary debate on marriage and civil unions needed to differentiate same sex unions from heterosexual marriage and opposed any kind of adoption for same sex couples. Based on the Constitution, it introduced a new definition for same sex cohabitation as *formazioni sociali* (social groups, article 2) while heterosexual marriage is defined as the basis of "the family as a natural society" (article 29). The meaning of natural society, as understood in 1946 when the republican constitution was written after twenty years of fascism, highlighted a historic debate. Nowadays, the traditional family – shaped around sacramental marriage or marriage between a man and a woman – is accompanied by other love bonds and considered a social group characterized by stability and humanity.[528] In fact, the new law approved in 2016 treated same-sex civil unions similarly to the institution of marriage with regard to property agreement, inheritance, reciprocal assistance and immigration. Significant differences remain in the way they are formed; in the language employed (civil unions are 'established', while marriage is 'celebrated'; 'parties' instead of 'spouses'; 'common life' instead of 'family life'); in the way sex is referred to (no requirement for consummation and no loyalty obligation in civil union); and in the denial of parenting rights. There

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[527] Law 76: "Regulation of same-sex civil unions and discipline of cohabitation" (21 May 2016). It was a step in a long process that would endorse a wider recognition of LGBT+ rights as human rights in wider sectors of society. The relationship between love and rights, whether they are compatible or belong to conflicting spheres, is also indebted, for example, to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which opposes any discrimination based on sexual orientation. Stefano Rodotà, *Diritto d'amore* (Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2016).

[528] Mariapaola Aimo, Manuela Consito, Stefania Gianoncelli, Jöelle Long, "Essere famiglia per il diritto: riflessioni interdisciplinary" [Being a family by right: interdisciplinary reflexions] in *Lavoro e diritto* 4 (2018), 697-726.

has been a shift from natural law to a framework based on human rights, still defending the traditional marriage as normative, but accepting other forms of conjugal union. Through the reinterpretation of the law regulating adoptions (law 184/1983) and its particular cases (article 44, letter d), the relationship with the social parent was enhanced, highlighting the interest of the minor.

The most striking feature in 2016 was a basic acceptance of LGBT+ rights as human rights shared by almost all actors involved, including the Vatican hierarchy, while opposing the position of conservative parties. This way, LGBT+ activists and ordinary people were able to speak their own minds in plural terms.[529]

When viewing the family from below, without imposing a single model but observing how people experience their affective bonds, family life appears in its diversity. Family experts speak of "geographies of families" when they refer to the social and legal changes that help reconsider the traditionally prudent approach to family law, for at least two reasons: the free movement of people within the European Union requires that family statuses be portable abroad, thus crossing the borders of national family laws. The variety of national regulation needs to take into account the right to family life combined with the principle of non-discrimination, as lovers' rights are tools for fully living affective bonds.[530] There is no single interpretation of family life, when we look at: a) close emotional ties, b) cohabitation and living together, c) collaboration and d) economic solidarity. Gender, based on sexual difference between a man and a woman, is no longer a prerequisite of interpersonal relations, even

[529] Luca Ozzano, "Last but not Least: how Italy Finally Legalized Same-Sex Unions" in *Contemporary Italian Politics* 12(1) (2020), 43-61.
[530] Manuela Naldini and Joëlle Long, "Geographies of Families in The European Union: A Legal and Social Policy Analysis" in *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 31 (2017), 94–113.

when raising children. Families in the plural have become a way to include different family models and relationships.[531]

The new document on families, approved by the Waldensian Synod in 2017, was aimed at enlarging the existing document on marriage, written in 1971.[532] What is still valid is the idea that marriage is a particular form of loving the neighbour and of the mutual covenant through God's grace, i.e. there is a Christian way of living marriage and love relationships: differences (culture, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, gender, age etc.) are means for coming together and experiencing grace, in fraternity and sorority: each person is a creature of unique interest and value, despite errors and mistakes. When discussing the new document in local congregations, three issues were proposed for general reflection: 1) Marriage and its transformations; new families, trust and hope for a new beginning; 2) Civil partnerships and blessing liturgies for unmarried couples; 3) Parenthood and faith transmission, with congregations playing an important role in sharing their faith with younger generations.

Dissent was at times present in congregations, especially in northern Italy where there are congregations with a migrant population, or in the Waldensian Valleys. The regional synods that addressed these issues in 2013 reported in the national Synod that the proposed document on "Families, marriage, couples" had been discussed in small groups. Although families in the plural were considered to be a divisive concept in society, Waldensians and Methodists believed that the gospel focuses on hope so that families can be open to transcendence and sociability in love of the neighbour, reminding our societies to live family transformations with courage. The

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[531] Chiara Saraceno, From the "family" to "families"; Chiara Saraceno, *Coppie e famiglie*; Gian Enrico Rusconi, *La teologia narrativa di Papa Francesco* [The narrative theology of Pope Francis], (Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2017).
[532] Waldensian Synod, Document on Marriage (RO.M 1971).

following year, the northern Italy regional Synod addressed the discussion with the aid of the intercultural project "Being Church Together" and it is reported that Rev. Professor Emmanuel Asante (former Methodist bishop in Ghana) facilitated a discussion in Brescia and other cities, explaining why the blessing of same-sex partnerships was not a problem for communities of faith. Members of the committee appointed in 2012 by the Waldensian Board also visited congregations in different places until 2017, sometimes organizing seminars open to the wider public and to activists in order to facilitate face-to-face dialogue, mutual understanding and the acceptance of different family models and LBGTQ+ persons. In the end, the final full-scale discussion in Synod took place in 2017 in three steps, when the document was again slightly amended and approved by a large majority.

Protestant thinking starts from the Bible and it can be useful to look at the history of the interpretation of Genesis 1-3, from androcentric to feminist exegesis.[533] "God is love" (1 John 4:8) is one of the biblical verses inspiring the new document. Proposing unity through difference and diversity also enriches the programme "Being Church Together" intended for those congregations with an immigrant population. Moreover, in the Reformed tradition marriage is not a sacrament: this means that it is intertwined with historical and socio-cultural transformation of society as marriage and families change over time. The new document was therefore designed to integrate the existing document on marriage with an inclusive purpose, in the spirit of the biblical verse: "Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back" (Isa 54:2). The new document on families responds to a call to witness to God's love in

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[533] Daniele Garrone, "Gen 2:23-24 Matrimonio come ordinamento della creazione? Alcune considerazioni esegetiche" [Marriage as an ordering of creation? Some exegetical considerations] in *Protestantesimo* 63(1) (2008), 29-49.

this world full of despair, where fragmentation and isolation can be bridged only by Jesus' words "Love your neighbour". This is also a call to encourage public debate on sexuality and gender, taking into account what the social sciences offer to theological reflection.

Human history and the Bible present an almost inexhaustible repertoire of different ways of forming a family and taking care of others. Deeply intertwined and multidimensional, love and mutual care are at the centre of a gendered ethic of care. While stressing the role of emotions in forming the person and their social bonds, the idea of difference as a gift is important in a global age. It can transform our vision for the next generations, as well as relationships with each other and with nature or the environment, both as critique and as creation, searching for vital relationships in couples and families.[534]

In brief, here is what emerged from the process:

- Synodality: since the 2010 Synod, when the blessing of same-sex couples was recognized as a possibility in those congregations who were ready to accept it, a study process initiated in 2012 led to the synodal approval of liturgies and the new document on families.
- Ongoing process: it is important to acknowledge that debate on gender, sexuality, couples and families in the plural is to be continued and will never be concluded. As we face further changes and transformations through the generations it is therefore an ongoing process.
- Gender and sexuality in public: these issues are increasingly present in public debate, both within congregations and in society

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[534] Elena Pulcini, *Care of the World: Fear, Responsibility and Justice in the Global Age* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013). Feminist ethics have been stressing the importance of care. See: "Care" in Letty M. Russell and Shannon J. Clarkson, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*.

at large, and this requires a process of discernment and inclusion, while recognizing that diversity is at times enriching for our biblical faith, especially when fraternal encounters lead to exegetical discussion and hermeneutics.

- Feminism and queer/women's studies in dialogue with theology: giving a voice to women and LGBT+ persons meant discovering emerging cultural critique in studies of religion and lived practice, as well as stressing plurality in humankind.

## 8.1.2 Church of Norway[535]

The Church of Norway (CoN) is a Lutheran church. Until 2012 it was organized as a state church, but in 2012 it became formally independent of the state. About 65 percent (approx. 3.5 million) of the population in Norway are members.

Until 1972, Norwegian law prohibited (male) homosexual acts and, up until that time, homosexuality also faced general public condemnation. The Church of Norway leaders, such as bishops, expressed general and more or less unequivocal condemnation of homosexuality as a sinful perversion.

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[535] The following presentation is based on these sources: "Homofile i kirken – 1992-2021" [Homosexuals in the church – 1992-2021], Kirkerådet [Church of Norway National Council], accessed 17.8.2022, https://www.kirken.no/nb-NO/om-kirken/diakoni-og-samfunnsansvar/lhbt-i-den-norske-kirke/historie/; *Homofile i kirken. En utredning fra Bispemøtets arbeidsgruppe om homofili [homosexuals in the church. A report from the Bishops' Conference's working group on homosexuality]* (Oslo: Kirkens informasjonstjeneste, 1995); Kirkerådet, *Skriftforståelse og skriftbruk med særlig henblikk på homofilisaken [Understanding and use of Scripture, with special regard to the question about homosexuality]* (Oslo: Kirkerådet, 2006):

## 8.1.2.1 1970s: Introducing the 'orientation' vs 'practice' distinction

In 1970s a few individual voices began to emerge within church and theology, more positive towards homosexuality and especially addressing the fact that homosexuals were also church members, and had to be recognized as such. In 1973, upon the 1972 decriminalization of homosexuality/homosexual acts, the bishops' conference commissioned a report to reconsider the general condemnation of homosexuality within church. The report, issued in 1977, suggested that the church revise its "traditional attitude", arguing that whereas the Bible evidently dismissed "self-chosen homosexual acts", it did not know or speak about the 'true' homosexual to whom only homosexual relations are a possibility due to orientation. The bishops' conference followed up by emphasizing the full dignity of homosexual persons, as well as their basic equality and place in religious and ethical life, and in the church, congregation and society. However, it stopped at its limited opening towards accepting homosexual relations, introducing a distinction between homosexual orientation, affirmed as fully compatible with a faithful Christian life, and homosexual practice, which could not be condoned.

Some considered this an important step away from the condemnation and pathologizing of homosexuality, towards recognizing equality of status and dignity as persons of Christian faith at the same level as heterosexuals. But the solution had obvious problems, first and foremost that the distinction between orientation and practice was perceived as untenable and untrue to homosexuals' sense of identity. Saying it was good and worthy to experience loving emotions and attraction, but wrong to act upon them in real embodied life was considered to impose an impossible

conflict on homosexuals between identity as Christians and identity as homosexuals.

## 8.1.2.2 1990s: disagreement intensifies

In 1992, one of the bishops therefore requested that the bishops' conference discuss this distinction anew, an initiative which led to another comprehensive study report in 1995. A majority of the study group recommended that the church accepted homosexual partnerships, also among its own employees. In the bishops' conference, a minority of three supported a possibility of hiring people living in same-sex relations even for ordained ministry, as well as offering intercessional prayer for homosexual partnerships. The majority decided against these possibilities.

The conference also stated unanimously, however, that the debate and disagreement between them had not weakened their mutual respect; that they would continue to stand together in communion and service as bishops; and share in an explicit wish that this case would not break up the church or obscure what fundamentally bound them together, namely being a witness to the crucified and resurrected Christ.

The same year, 1995, the National Synod decided clearly against employing people in same-sex relations and against intercessional prayer liturgies for such partnerships. When the topic reappeared on the bishops' conference agenda in 1997, the conference affirmed being divided on the question of employability of people in same-sex partnerships, and that in order to preserve unity within the church, it was important for individual bishops not to initiate individual arrangements. But it also reiterated that differing views of homosexual relations were not as such a threat to church unity, although some arguments or positions might conflict with the confessional basis of the church.

In the late 1990s two actual cases intensified the debate about church order implications of the matter. One pastor rejected the oversight of his bishop, who was among the minority who supported homosexual relations, including liturgies and access to ordained ministry, a case that was brought to the doctrinal commission. And another bishop re-installed a pastor to her ministry, after she had been on a forced leave of absence after entering into formal partnership while working as a pastor, against an explicit agreement with the bishop when she started. The bishops' conference was asked to clarify its position with regard to its earlier decision (i.e. not to establish individual arrangements in opposition to the majority) and its commitment to the national synod's firm decision (1995) to reject liturgies and ordination. It caused a stir when a minority of four bishops stated that, in their opinion, there was no basis in church law on which the bishops' conference or the national synod could bind an individual bishop in his or her execution of the office. The bishop's ultimate obligation was towards Scripture and the creed, as well as church order.

In sum, it seems fair to say that during these years of the 1990s and early 2000s, tensions were quite high between a minority among the bishops and the elected church bodies, where a clear majority strongly opposed opening up for liturgies, let alone the ordaining of homosexual partners.

## 8.1.2.3 2000s: differing views on homosexuality compatible with church unity

In 2005 the church's doctrinal commission, consisting of all bishops, appointed and elected theological experts, and elected lay people, discussed the understanding and use of Scripture with regard to the topic of homosexuality, especially oriented towards whether or not differences in ways of interpreting and using Scripture might be

detrimental to the unity of the church. A majority of 11 considered that accepting homosexual relations as morally approvable could in fact be justified from Scripture, whereas a minority of 10 rejected this, and claimed that Scripture provided no basis for approving homosexual relations. This was the first time a majority of one of the official, national bodies of the CoN supported homosexual relations, including the possibility of liturgies and ordination.

All agreed that Scripture is the ultimate norm for the church. They furthermore agreed on basic hermeneutical principles such as reading biblical texts in light of their historical context as well as broader biblical perspectives. But the commission disagreed with regard to the weight of specific texts, and about the relation between texts and broader perspectives, such as the understanding of creation, of marriage, the teachings and person of Jesus, or ideas for human life. The commission considered itself divided in the basic understanding of Scripture, including also fundamental interpretative practices. Holding this disagreement up against CA VII, they stated that whereas agreement on the understanding of Scripture is not as such necessary for true unity of the church, the doctrine of the gospel is. This comprises proclamation of law and gospel, and disagreement on homosexuality pertains to law. The disagreement on these grounds was regarded as profound and serious, and by no means to be trivialized, but still not divisive to the extent of preventing church unity – although such a consequence could not be precluded in the future. The statement also pointed out the potential impacts that disagreements could have on issues of liturgies and church order.

However, most importantly, it was read as meaning – all difficulties and potential future consequences aside – that church unity as defined in CA VII was not necessarily broken by having two views on

homosexual relations based in Scripture existing side by side in the church.

In 2007 the bishops' conference and the national council thus recommended that the national synod withdraw its decisions from the mid-1990s to ban liturgies for homosexual partnership and ordination of homosexual partners. Synod did revoke these decisions, yet emphasized that there was still a basis for bishops or employment bodies for not ordaining or employing people living in homosexual unions. This effectively opened a two-way solution when it came to ordination and employment, leaving it up to a bishop and an employing council to decide whether they wanted to employ someone living in a same-sex partnership.

## 8.1.2.4 2010s: moving towards a marriage liturgy for same-sex couples

This had not solved the question about liturgy for homosexual marriage, which became pressing when the parliament introduced a 'gender-neutral' marriage act in 2009.

The bishops' conference therefore initiated a comprehensive study of marriage from a theological, cultural and legal perspective, but including reflection on other ways of living together. In its follow-up on the report from 2013, a majority of 7 bishops decided that the church ought to acknowledge homosexual relations and allow homosexual couples to get married in church. An important basis was that a gender-differentiated structure was not considered to be exclusive. A biblical understanding of marriage also contained ideals and components which could be realized within a marriage between two people of the same sex, such as mutual love and commitment to life-long, monogamous partnership, including the possibility of providing safe and caring families for children. A minority of four bishops considered that opening up for same-sex marriage in church

would break with the church's longstanding doctrine and lack theological backing. Acknowledging the pain and suffering this view had caused for homosexuals, they nonetheless believed the gender-differentiated structure of marriage was essential and indispensable to a Christian view of marriage.

Here, as well, the bishops' conference stated unanimously that this disagreement on marriage and liturgies was, although an essential doctrinal question, not of such a kind as to threaten the communion in worship and sacraments.

Nevertheless, the 2014 national synod decided by a small majority against introducing liturgies for marriage or intercessional prayer for same-sex couples. Many saw this as a disappointing halt to the process. The bishops' conference encouraged the national council to put the item of a new marriage liturgy for same-sex couples on the synod agenda in 2016, and also drafted a proposal for such a decision.

The national synod in 2016 decided to introduce a marriage liturgy for same-sex couples, and in 2017 eventually resolved, by a large majority, to welcome same-sex couples desiring to marry in the Church of Norway.

## 8.1.2.5 2016 onwards: LGBT+ work an integrated part of the national church bodies

Parallel with preparing this liturgy in 2016, the bishops' conference also established a working group aimed at developing initiatives to increase competence on LGBT matters in the church. As a result of their work, the national council in 2018 established a permanent committee for LGBT matters, and in 2020 carried out a comprehensive study of working conditions for employees of LGBT identity. This study documented that although the majority of

employees in the Church of Norway are positive toward LGBT colleagues and people in the church, and many LGBT people experience a good working environment there, discrimination still occurs and especially the debates on LGBT matters are experienced as a burden to many.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the decriminalizing of homosexuality in Norway, the national council and its LGBT committee hosted the conference "These are our lives – LGBT+ in the church", where the church leadership was invited to reflect together with, listen to and learn from LGBT+ people and their experiences. In the time to come, courses will be held for employees in all dioceses to improve understanding of and work with LGBT matters.

This anniversary also caused the bishops' conference to issue a statement where they acknowledged the harm gays and lesbians have suffered over the years from the church's attitudes and way of talking about them, not least how many had sensed objectification and being reduced to a matter or topic of discussion within the church. The conference also explicitly expressed appreciation for the growing recognition of acceptance and equality, as well as for the contribution from the many LGBT people in the church.

The chair of the national council, together with the presiding bishop, called upon the national synod to consider offering an explicit apology to people with LGBT identity, following upon the comprehensive competence-raising course initiative currently underway.

### 8.1.2.6 50 years: from condemnation to integration into ministry, worship and organization – but also a history of pain and suffering.

Over 50 years the Church of Norway has not only moved from more or less universal rejection and condemnation of homosexuals and homosexuality to equality in terms of working and living in the church, as well as having their lives and loves openly celebrated and confirmed in the midst of the congregation. It has also begun to recognize how its history of working with questions related to homosexuality and people of LGBT identity, both theologically and with regard to church practices, has not only been a history of coming to new insights and practices but also one of incredible pain and strain for those most concerned.

## 8.1.3 The Reformed Church in Hungary

The Reformed Church in Hungary is the largest Protestant church in Hungary, with parishes also among the Hungarian diaspora abroad. It is made up of 1,249 congregations in 27 presbyteries and four church districts and has a membership of over 1.1 million, making it the second largest church in Hungary, after the Catholic Church. As a Continental Reformed church, its doctrines and practices reflect a Calvinist theology. The Reformed Church in Hungary has respected the importance of caring for the national culture and language and preserving traditions ever since it approved the translation of the Bible into the Hungarian language and began contributing to the education of the population through its significant school system.

In Hungary same-sex couples have the opportunity to legalize their relationships by "registered partnership" from 2009, which – with a

few exceptions – grants same-sex couples all the rights and obligations that come with marriage.

The theological issue of homosexuality was exposed in a popular national daily newspaper in 2003,[536] when a young Reformed pastor and a theological student expressed their views in writing. Both of them urged the Reformed Church in Hungary to address the issue of homosexuality. Later the authors suffered adverse consequences for their opinions: Rev. András Kun was banned from publishing on the topic, and Balázs Szűcs was suspended from the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary for one year.

Meanwhile, another final-year theological student Gábor Csatádi,[537] preparing to become a pastor at Károli Gáspár University, openly admitted his homosexual orientation. This attitude challenged all the faculty and forced them to take a stand. They issued a statement refusing the blessing of same-sex marriage, and claiming that homosexual behaviour was incompatible with the service of pastor or religion teacher. The statement is based on the explicit New Testament sexual ethic, defining homosexuality as contrary to God's order. The text emphasizes the traditional Christian concept of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, the only alternative being sexual abstinence. They clearly stated their opposition to homosexual behaviour, underlining the importance of scriptural teachings. Additionally, the statement discusses the need for compassionate pastoral care for individuals with homosexual

[536]András N. Kun, Érték vagy ítélet? [Value or verdict?]; Balázs Szűcs, Egyházak és melegség [Churches and homosexuality], in: Népszabadság, 2003-09-26, 12.
[537]Gábor Csatádi (1979), cultural journalist, theatre critic, editor-in-chief, aesthete, Reformed theologian. After his leaving from Károli Gáspár University, he received a degree in theology at the Faculty of Theology of the Selye János University (Slovakia) in 2005. In 2009 he received a degree in Aesthetics from Eötvös Loránd University. He is currently pursuing a PhD in aesthetics at the same university. His research interests are on new approaches to catharsis theory. He is the founding editor-in-chief of the theatre portal potszekfoglalo.hu, launched in November 2015.

orientation, advocating understanding while upholding their religious beliefs.

The statement distinguishes between homosexual behaviour and homosexual inclination with the emphasis on the behaviour: "The ethical judgement of homosexual behaviour cannot be based on biological or psychological endowments. These factors are responsible for the development of the predisposition, so that the person cannot be blamed for feeling attracted to the same sex and not experiencing the same with the opposite sex. An ethical approach should take into account the aptitudes, but not be based on them."[538] This distinction is still characteristic of the Hungarian Reformed position, which is in some ways closer to the Roman Catholic view than to the "Protestant corridor", because it essentially prioritises action over intrinsic motivation. The university also urged the church to address the whole issue of sexual ethics: "It is imperative that the Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary issue a position statement as soon as possible, in which it sets out a teaching for the community of our Church covering all areas of sexual ethics, since these issues are emphasized together and equally in Scripture."[539] According to the statement, the student was dismissed from pastoral training, with permission to possibly continue his studies in another degree programme. He did not accept the university's decision and a long, highly publicised court case ensued.

It is important to note that the outbreak of the case coincided with the adoption of the new Act CXXV of 2003 on Equal Treatment and the Promotion of Equal Opportunities. At the time, Hungary had a

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[538]A Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem állásfoglalása a homoszexualitásról [The statement of the Károli Gáspár University on homosexuality], reformatus.hu, 2004-01-09.
[539]Ibid.

socialist-liberal government, which frowned on the university's decision. There was strong pressure on the university from the national government and also from the international church forums [540] to reconsider its decision. Education Minister Magyar Bálint pointed out that the state-financed university cannot distinguish between Hungarian citizens because of their sexual orientations. The newly established Equal Opportunity Cabinet Office declared: "We offer our personal and legal help to the man dismissed by the university so that he can exercise his rights." An NGO, Háttér Support Society for LGBT People, likewise supported the student with a statement and legal assistance.[541] The Court of Budapest condemned the university in the first instance, but the university appealed. After a long legal battle, on 8 June 2005, the Supreme Court upheld the university's case on the grounds that, as it is a church training course, the church can decide for itself who it ordains as a pastor, according to its own policy and faith.

According to the request of the university, the Reformed Church Synod issued a statement on marriage, family and sexuality in May 2004. The text also covers other questions of sexual ethics such as marriage, family and sexuality. The statement reflects the traditional approach of the church, which condemns fornication, prostitution, divorce and homosexuality. On the other hand, it notes self-critically that "not even our church has been able to make a strong moral stand in the world by demonstrating the virtues of purity and fidelity". It continues to distinguish between homosexual inclination (which it does not morally classify) and homosexual behaviour,

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[540] Dr Odair Pedroso Mateus, Executive Secretary of the Department of Theology of the (former) World Alliance of Reformed Churches (today World Communion of Reformed Churches) asked the university to reconsider their decision on 18 January in a national broadcast of Radio Kossuth (Egyházi szolgálat és szexuális beállítottság, Kossuth Rádió, Tizenhat óra).

[541] https://en.hatter.hu/what-we-do/legal-aid/significant-cases

which is a sin. It also declares that it is the church's duty to defend homosexual people against all forms of discrimination that violate their human dignity. Practising or propagating a homosexual lifestyle is incompatible with the vocation of a minister and teacher of religion, as well the training for such vocations and all types of service within the church.

MARRIAGE, FAMILY, SEXUALITY

Statement of the Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary

Budapest, 6 May 2004

I.

Based on Holy Scripture[542] the Reformed Church in Hungary considers marriage, the lifelong alliance between a man and a woman, to be the good order of creation of God. Although the institution of marriage and the family today appears to be confused, according to the biblical teachings underlying the traditional understanding, we profess that marriage is the basis for family life which God may bless with children, by this blessing the married couple for the creation of life. This biblical order is reinforced by the experience that the love between two people can be consummated in a permanent, monogamous marriage. This creates emotional, legal and financial security for both the parents and their children. We recognize that the diverse development of children is best secured in a harmonious family environment. As a result, the family is also the foundation for a complete and healthy life of society.

II.

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[542] Genesis 1:27, Genesis 2:24, Ephesians 5:32 cf. Calv. II. XXIX. 2.

We profess that sin has completely corrupted human nature, and the relationship between man and woman is no exception. This could result in marriage falling into crisis, becoming a formality, or falling apart. Although sexuality is a gift of God, it can become a tool of selfishness. Irresponsible relationships and the unrestricted practice of selfish desires may cause countless cases of damage to individuals and communities (e.g. surgical abortion[543]). This is why God regulates sexuality: "You shall not commit adultery."[544] In the spirit of our confessional writings, we declare the positive message of this commandment, that we must lead a pure life in marriage as well. "Since both our body and soul are temples of the Holy Spirit, God commands us to keep them pure and holy. He forbids therefore all unchaste actions, gestures, words, thoughts, desires and whatever can entice men thereto."[545] Nowadays, also known as the era of the sexual revolution, Christians – with all people – are exposed to greater temptation than in the times when society itself judged those breaking the above commandment by more stringent standards. We do not believe that humans of previous times were better, or that humans in our era are any more guilty, because as it is written in Scripture, "all have turned aside, together they have become worthless, there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one."[546] Yet we still have a duty to draw the attention of our church and our people to current sins such as uninhibited sexual life, pornography, prostitution and any other form of sexual exploitation, along with the irresponsible handling of the

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[543] Opinion of Reformed Church Synod on Protecting Foetal Life – Ref.Ch. Jul-Aug 1992. p.182.
[544] Exodus 20:14
[545] Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 108/109
[546] Romans 3:12

consequences. The massive and unrestricted presentation and dissemination of the above adversely impacts the development of the personalities of our children, infecting public morals and becoming a source for numerous forms of crime. In a spirit of repentance, we confess that not even our church has been able to make a strong moral stand in the world by demonstrating the virtues of purity and fidelity. We regret and disapprove of the divorces which occur among the members and office bearers of our church. [547] Yet, in solidarity with all of our contemporaries, we proclaim the grace of God, the gospel of conversion and the chance for new beginnings, which we consider to be the only opportunity for moral renewal in both our individual and community lives.

III.

It is with this attitude that we touch upon the phenomenon that wishes to designate life companions of different sexes and long-term relationships of same-sex couples as equivalent to the institution of marriage. We are aware that there are fellow human beings who are incapable of marriage according to the order of creation, as they are attracted to members of their own sex, be it a genetic or learned inclination or of their own volition. We do not morally judge this inclination. We receive these brothers and sisters with considerate pastoral care, and handle their profound human dilemma discreetly and with understanding. It is our duty to defend them against all forms of discrimination that violate their human dignity. However, since homosexual practice is condemned by both the Old and the New Testament and considered a sin equivalent to

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[547] Resolution of Synod Court - J. No. 5/1985

adultery,[548] our church is unable to accept such relations and cannot bless them.

It follows that practising or propagating such a lifestyle is incompatible with the vocation of a minister and teacher of religion, as well the training for such vocations and all types of service within the church. For the sake of protecting marriage and family, it is the duty of our church to protest when legislation wishes to accord the partnership of same-sex couples as equivalent to marriage, thus enabling them to adopt children. In this respect, we agree with the statement of the Hungarian Constitutional Court defending the values of marriage[549] and the relevant provisions of the family rights law currently in force.[550]

IV.

The Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary is aware that its statement differs from both the understanding of part of secular society and the opinions and convictions of some international churches. Nevertheless, in accordance with the confessional heritage of "reservation of a better instruction," we formulate our statement with freedom of conscience bound to the precept, "We must obey God",[551] rather than the spirit of our time.

Having seen examples of the practice of some western European churches, the Reformed Church in Hungary put the issue back on the agenda from 2019.

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[548] Leviticus 18:45, Romans 1:26
[549] Resolution 14/1995 (III.13.) of Constitution Court, Hungarian Gazette 1995/20 (III.13.)
[550] Section 10 of Act IV of 1952 on Marriage, Family and Guardianship
[551] Acts 5:29

In 2019, Synod confirmed the statement of "Marriage, Family, Sexuality" without any change.

On 25 September 2021, Synod asked the College of Doctors of the Reformed Church in Hungary to develop a background paper on the question of creation orders and gender identity by 31 October 2021. The College of Doctors includes different sections in the field of theology. The background paper was presented to the synod assembly on 11 November 2021, compiled with sections on Old Testament Theology, New Testament Theology, Pastoral Psychology, Ecumenism, and Canon Law. Due to time constraints, no section on Systematic Theology was available, although a relevant chapter written by Krisztián Kovács from a previously published handbook was included.[552]

After that, a joint declaration was issued on the initiative of the Reformed Church in Hungary in 2021. This joint statement was signed by representatives of fourteen faith communities, including Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and Jewish communities, as follows.

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:27-28).

The biblical position was also emphasized by Pope Francis during his visit to Budapest, reaffirming that the sanctity of marriage is between one man and one woman. In the Jewish

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[552] Krisztián Kovács, "A házasság, a család és a szexualitás etikája" [Ethics of Marriage, Family and Sexuality], in: Sándor Fazakas (ed.), *A protestáns etika kézikönyve* [The Handbook of Protestant Ethics], (Budapest: Református Kálvin Kiadó, 2007), 125-177.

tradition also, the sanctification of the male-female relationship through marriage is the foundation of human dignity. We, the undersigned representatives of the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Churches and Jewish communities, amid preparations for Christmas and in the light of the Hanukkah candles, and in response to the growing social debate in recent times, reaffirm the importance of the Jewish and Christian values of marriage, family and human dignity.

Budapest, 9 December 2021

The strength of the declaration is evident in the fact that all major faith communities signed it. Such united action between churches on social issues has not been seen in Hungary in recent times. However, after the declaration was published, a great controversy arose about the sentence on human dignity. The sentence raises the question whether without marriage between a man and a woman there is no foundation for human dignity? The 'also' in the sentence suggests that this reflects the views of both the Jewish and Christian traditions. Obviously, from the Catholic point of view, this is in conflict with celibacy. The critical phrase was inserted in the declaration at a later stage of the rapid consultation process, which was not noticed by all. Lutherans and one Jewish community apologized for this and distanced themselves from the sentence.[553]

On 10 February 2022, the Reformed Church organized a day of debate on creation orders, gender identity and sexuality where theological, social, pastoral and pedagogical aspects were discussed. It was the first time that such a wide range of participants, more than 130 in number, had engaged in a common reflection on one of the most discussed issues of our time.

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[553]https://index.hu/belfold/2021/12/24/fabiny-tamas-bocsanatot-kert-az-egyhazak-nyilatkozatanak-egy-mondata-miatt/

Immediate, dramatic outcomes from discussions on significant church issues, including gender identity, are unrealistic. Instead, these conversations should be approached with patience, prayer, and unity. Synod's 2004 Statement, valued for its consensus, remains a key point of reference for these debates. Additionally, the need for more supportive measures for pastoral workers assisting individuals with gender identity crises was emphasized, promoting a strategy that balances empathy with decisiveness. The commitment to continue these essential dialogues signifies a collective determination to tackle these challenges through cooperation.[554]

# 8.1.4 The Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren[555]

The Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ECCB) was founded in 1918 after the dissolution of Austria-Hungary and the emergence of independent Czechoslovakia at the end of World War I. The church was a union of the Czech-speaking Reformed and Lutheran churches and had just over 100,000 members at the time of founding. Questions of sexual orientation were not discussed back then but it is clear that there were already people of other sexual orientation in the church. Documents and life stories indicate that even some leading church members had a different sexual identity, although they probably did not think about themselves like that at the time. Some were apparently aware of their difference and found differing solutions for it – choosing a celibate life or marrying a person of the opposite sex. These marriages then sometimes led to family tragedies. Practised "homosexuality" was punishable but there are

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[554] https://reformatus.hu/egyhazunk/hirek/szeretetben-keresni-es-kovetni-az-igazsagot-vitanap-a-teremtesi-rendrol-es-a-nemi-identitasrol/
[555] This contribution was written by Mikuláš Vymětal and translated first into German by Oliver Engelhardt.

no signs of people being judged for different sexual orientation in the Protestant church. That was a time when the discussion about LGBT rights was beginning, e.g. in the magazine *Hlas sexuální menšiny* (Voice of the sexual minority) and with the translation and publication of Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness*; there is no evidence, however, that the Protestant church positioned itself in the debate. If anything, the topic was taken up by poets of Catholic faith (Julius Zeyer, Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic).

After World War II, homosexuality was decriminalized in socialist Czechoslovakia in 1961. In the same year, work began on the major Czech ecumenical translation of the Bible with commentaries (1961-1979). This edition still comments on the biblical passages cited in discussions about LGBT people in traditional terms (e.g. referring to Genesis 19 with its story of Lot in Sodom, it calls homosexuality "perverse"). People from the LGBT community participated sporadically in parish life, not hiding their sexual orientation, and they were accepted with their partners. In a certain sense, the struggles of queer persons in the West were echoed in socialist Czechoslovakia. At the end of the 1980s the Czech Protestant newspaper *Český Bratr* (Czech Brethren) devoted some pages to the topic of homosexuality.

In November 1989 the totalitarian Communist regime was removed with the slogan "Love and truth will overcome lies and hatred". The Velvet Revolution drew on the philosophy of Václav Havel – who later became the first president of the free country – about living in truth (notably his essay "The Power of the Powerless"). The first demonstration for LGBT rights took place in Prague in 1990 with the motto "Living in truth", which is also the basic principle for a coming-out – asserting your own sexual identity.

In the same year 1990, the Catholic weekly *Katolický týdeník* advertized for people with an interest in giving and receiving pastoral care for homosexuals. The resultant community soon found a home in the Protestant parish of Prague 8 – Kobylisy and was institutionalized in 1993 as the Logos association of homosexual Christians. It was in this congregation that the first blessing of a same-sex couple took place around the turn of the millennium. At the suggestion of Logos, the ECCB's diaconal agency ran a gay telephone hotline from 1994 to 2007.

In 2005/2006 the ECCB Synod took up the question of homosexuality, the result being an extensive document "Problematika homosexuálních vztahů" (The issue of homosexual relations), which described the issue from the perspective of the Old and New Testaments, theological ethics and medicine. Written in scholarly but clear style, it shows that the present understanding of homosexuality does not match what is described in the biblical texts traditionally cited against homosexuals; instead, sexual orientation is understood to be an integral part of the identity of some people and can be expressed in a stable, loving relationship between two persons of the same sex.

2006 saw the introduction of registered partnership between two persons of the same sex in the Czech Republic, enabling same-sex couples to live together legally. The ECCB pastors' association was the only church institution to welcome this change in the law. The association justified it as follows: "We hear the biblical statement that 'it is not good for the human being to be alone' above all as a sign and a promise that our humanity is fulfilled in a relationship with another human being. Hence we understand the legal form of registered partnership as support for such a relationship with homosexual orientation." By contrast, ten other churches spoke out against the introduction of registered partnership, including the

Roman Catholic Church, and sent a protest letter to the Senate and then President Václav Klaus.

Since 2011 the festival Prague Pride has taken place in Prague, since 2012 starting and ending with a special service in the Protestant Church of St Martin in the Wall.

In 2015 the ECCB Synod established the position of a whole-church chaplaincy for humanitarian activities, minorities and socially excluded people. Rev. Mikuláš Vymětal, who has held this position from the start, thereby has an official mandate for pastoral care extending to LGBT people and, at the same time, participates actively in debates within the church and society at large.

In 2019 the ECCB established an advisory committee to prepare for conversation with LGBT people. The committee regards it as important to form a church position on people with diverse sexual orientation when talking with them in interpersonal encounters. Consequently, the advisory committee has run three online discussions – with the authors of the 2006 document, with a Protestant gay man, a Catholic lesbian woman and the Protestant parents of a homosexual girl, and with church representatives from Slovakia, Germany and the United States who speak Czech and Slovak. These discussions have been accessed frequently on the church's website – both from the Czech Republic and from Slovakia, where the situation is much more conservative. The text of the advisory committee "Žijeme spolu v jedné církvi" (We live together in one church) was adopted by the ECCB Synod in Svitavy in 2022, thereby becoming the church's official doctrinal opinion. The short text[556] contains an apology to homosexually oriented persons for the harm and offences done them by the church in the past, and the wish

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[556] https://e-cirkev.cz/en/statements/eccb-synod22-news-2-3-we-live-together-in-one-church/.

that such people can find a home in the Protestant congregations and be accepted there with their partners. The document, approved by a large majority of members of synod, triggered a discussion both at Synod and in a church internet forum. However, the most vocal opponents had already left the Protestant church twenty years before and now took part in this discussion from outside it.

The positive change in the societal and church atmosphere can be observed in the Logos association. While its members twenty years ago were mainly singles and there were only a few couples, who could not have an official relationship, today it brings together people from the whole LGBT community, some of whom are married (though that had to happen in the West) and also look after adopted children as parents.

At present two proposals are being discussed in Czech society and in the parliament of the Czech Republic: introducing a definition of marriage for all, including same-sex couples, as already exists in many countries worldwide – and the counter-proposal to define marriage so as to fundamentally exclude marriage for all. A similarly exclusionary definition of marriage recently won the day in Poland and Slovakia. The leaders of some churches are polemicizing against marriage for all, while the ECCB is not officially participating in the current discussions.

Practically speaking, the topic is dividing the Czech church landscape with the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, the Czechoslovakian Hussite Church and the Old Catholic Church on one side, and all other churches taking a more or less radical counter-position. However, there are also views diverging from the official standpoints of the churches. In the ECCB there are voices for whom practising homosexuality and particularly same-sex marriages remain

unacceptable. In all churches there are also Christians, including clergy, who have sympathy for people from the LGBT community.

The gender issue is much more complicated. In the Czech Republic it is often dubbed an ideology and disparaged, without any attempt to understand its concern more deeply. Particularly the Catholic Church preaches against what it calls gender ideology. It is a consequence of the social and political attitude that the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence was signed by the Czech Republic in 2016 (as one of the last EU member states), but it has not been ratified yet. A more thorough discussion of gender is lacking in the Protestant church, as well.

# 8.2 Case studies: what can be learned?

What can be learned from these four cases regarding handling ethical disagreements within church unity and church fellowship? What kind of tensions arise between ethical disagreements and church unity, and how are they handled?

## 8.2.1 Church unity and ethical disagreements

How ethical disagreements and differences are related to questions about church unity is both a procedural and a substantive or material question: How do churches address and decide on matters of ethical disagreement in terms of their organizational structures? And which material concerns are relevant in deciding which ethical disagreements constitute a threat to church unity?

Which procedures or working methods/formats are used or operative in churches' engagement with ethical disagreements?

The Church of Norway, a church with 3.5 million members and nearly 1200 parishes, has to a large extent worked with these questions of ethical difference in terms of its formal bodies of ecclesial authority as a combination of ordained ministry, priesthood of all believers, and episkopé: the CoN national council and synod, the bishops' conference and the doctrinal commission.[557] The work processes have thus been rather centralized – initiated, designed and carried out at the central levels of the church. On more occasions, they have started as a comprehensive in-depth study prepared by a commission with representation from academic experts and stakeholders/affected groups within the church, followed by a formal decision by the commissioning church body. These work processes have ensured a quite high degree of formal transparency and legitimacy, and a focus on church unity's formal aspects and expressions: authorized liturgies, access to ordination and employment.

An important dimension was that the question about potential consequences for church unity was made an explicit part not only of the discussions but also of the formal decisions; the decision-making bodies committed themselves to the position that it would not be considered and treated as a threat to the unity of the church. These were hard-won conclusions, not obvious and trivial. Indeed, it was a process that not only enabled but also committed the parties to continued church unity despite at times profound disagreement, without sweeping problems under the carpet – quite the contrary.

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[557] The doctrinal commission was terminated in 2016, and its function of issuing statements on questions of fundamental doctrinal significance and implication was transferred to the bishops' conference.

The material concerns in the most extensive and elaborate treatment of this issue, which led to the position and commitment that disagreements on access to ordained ministry or marriage liturgies did not threaten church unity, [558] were derived from reflections on the implications of CA VII. Its statement that "to the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the gospel and administration of the sacraments" was not understood as though ethical questions and ethical disagreements as such could not pose a threat to church unity. The "doctrine of the gospel" cannot be disconnected from Scripture as the reliable testimony to the revelation of God's loving and salvific act, proclaimed as law and gospel. Ethical disagreements considered to challenge or be incompatible with the idea of Scripture as the norm for Christian faith and life, as law and gospel, could thus threaten church unity. However, the understanding that prevailed after lengthy and intense discussions and scrutiny was that disagreements on same-sex relations, although clearly profound and serious, did not indicate disagreement about the status of Scripture as reliable and binding testimony to God's revelation and action in the world, through law and gospel.

Two things are striking in the ecclesial 'methodology' for handling issues of ethical disagreement in the Waldensian Church. First, the participation and engagement of local congregations. 'Synodality' was not only about placing the formal decision in the body of Synod, with representation from congregations. It took a much more dynamic, 'embodied' and local form, with processes of reflection on issues as well as interpretation of Scripture, thus embodying communities of interpretation. Local, face-to-face meetings were

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[558] Kirkerådet, *Skriftforståelse og skriftbruk med særlig henblikk på homofilisaken* [Understanding and use of Scripture, with special regard to the question about homosexuality] (Oslo: Kirkerådet, 2006). Statement from the Doctrinal Commission.

facilitated, sometimes also involving people from a wider public. Second, how this was portrayed as continuous and ongoing processes. Decisions and adoption of reports and positions by central organs needed not only to be prepared in terms of extensive, local reflection and interpretation. They also had, and have, to be appropriated and absorbed locally, through continued dialogue and reflection. In other words, the Waldensian case embodies and manifests how handling ethical divisive issues with a commitment to church unity is also a profoundly local matter, needing to be embodied and enacted in local congregations.

For the Reformed Church in Hungary, synod as a formal church organ decides the church's position, but it does so in interaction with other agents. Its original statement issued in 2004 was developed in response to a request from the church's university, having experienced controversies concerning homosexuality and same-sex relations in the early 2000s. And when synod re-affirmed this statement in 2019, the Reformed Church mobilized support from other religious communities, including Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox and Jewish communities, testifying to the possibility and significance of engaging not only in ecumenical but also interreligious exchanges.

The topic of homosexuality and same-sex relations is approached as a question of sexual ethics, as a matter of moral discernment according to divine purposes for human life, guided by its readings of Scripture and perceptions of divine orders in creation in the light of Scripture. Together it leads to a strong affirmation of marriage between man and woman as the divinely ordered condition and possibility for procreation, childbearing, and family-life, as well as rejection of same-sex relations. The church underscores a distinction between inclination and behaviour, arguing that whereas homosexual behaviour must be repudiated, inclination is beyond

human volition and blame. It therefore also emphasises how church and congregations must receive people of homosexual inclination with understanding and pastoral care rather than condemnation, and that they have a duty to defend them against all forms of discrimination. At the same time, it also says that the church has a responsibility to protest against legislation accepting same sex relations. Furthermore, the Reformed Church in Hungary exemplifies how holding an unequivocal, strong position – whether it be restrictive or permissive/orthodox or liberal – entails continued commitment and responsibility to further examine and explain one's arguments and how they are justified.

The Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren illustrates, first, how pastoral initiatives in relation to people or groups concerned by the matter of dispute may also serve as elements or components of ethical engagement with controversial issues. Christian and ecclesial ethics engage with issues and questions very much in the form of personal encounters with and pastoral ministry to those concerned, and not only in the form of ethical deliberation. It is a reminder of how 'ethical disagreement' on particular topics such as homosexuality and same-sex relations might inadvertently produce too narrow an image of Christian and ecclesial moral engagement with a given domain or area of life. Second, the account also points honestly to the challenge of church unity, describing how some of those against a more permissive position concerning homosexuality and same-sex relations left the church years ago. This is also a reminder to reflect on what it means in practical terms that ethical differences are a threat to being together as church. Whereas no one is justified in taking others 'hostage' to their own points of view by threats to break away, it is also profoundly disturbing and painful when concrete rifts and breaches ensue. A third insight, also one to be harvested from the Church of Norway, is how ethical and ecclesial

deliberations and practices, which at the time they unfolded were probably thought to be considerate and respectful to those most affected, with hindsight are realized to have been nothing like that at all. Both churches have either done so or are considering offering public apologies to LGBTQI+ communities/people of LGBTQI+ identities for the pain and suffering caused by the churches, their discussions, ways of talking about and behaviour towards people who were often in vulnerable positions.

## 8.2.2 Church unity, ethical disagreements and ethic of disagreement

Church unity and fellowship, and ethical disagreements is not only about which – if any – ethical disagreements might conflict with church unity or church fellowship, and through which procedures they can be cleared up. It is also about reflecting on how being in church unity or fellowship entails certain ethical ideals or principles regarding ways to relate to and handle situations of disagreement. There are not only ethical disagreements in congregations, churches and church fellowships. There is also what we might call an ethic of how to disagree, or rather of how to behave in case of profound disagreement, rooted in our being together in the congregation, church and church fellowship.

Essential to this is a commitment to continued, shared exploration and explication of conflictual positions.[559] This is also implied by the Leuenberg Agreement, as part of the mutual commitment and obligation of CPCE member churches.[560] Church unity or communion entails an obligation to mutually set out your own position to those

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[559] World Council of Churches, *Moral Discernment in the Churches. A Study Document* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2020).
[560] Leuenberg Agreement, 37–41.

who disagree, as well as being willing to reflect critically on your own position, in light of how others read and understand it. This is not only a matter of being accountable for your position over against others. It is also about engaging in mutual, continued and open-ended conversation and reflection, carefully and continuously reading and interpreting Scripture together the light of each other's traditions and experiences, and by being informed by knowledge and experiences from other sources and other places. And on the other hand, withdrawing from these processes without having engaged in them with serious commitment and effort, 'leaving the table' prematurely, so to speak, not only conflicts with what is here called an ethic of disagreement regarding church fellowship. It also, in disturbing ways, complicates mutual explorations of possibilities and chances of preserving church unity across ethical disagreements.

The above accounts of the processes in the Church of Norway and the Waldensian Church exemplify this kind of process of mutually analysing, clarifying, and critically reading and reflecting on Scripture and ethical questions and disagreements in light of it. These can be – as also indicated in the accounts – demanding, difficult and painful processes, especially for those mostly affected by the discussions, but also for the entire church communion. And yet these processes of committed and continued mutual explication and reflection are not only necessary conditions for continued church unity. They are also actual embodiments of church unity and fellowship in situations of ethical disagreement, visible and concrete signs and manifestations of persistent commitment to unity and fellowship between churches.

# 8.3 Study questions

Has your church/congregation struggled with disagreements and conflicts over topics related to gender and sexuality? If so, how has it handled them? Do you find this way satisfying? Why/why not?

Which insights do you think could be derived from the way your church/congregation has dealt with disagreements?

If your church/congregation has not encountered such disagreements, why do you think that is?

How would you assess the relation between ethical disagreement and church communion?

# Appendices

## Participants in the study process

### Members of the study group

**Prof. Dr Mariecke van den Berg**, theology and gender studies, Radboud University and VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Dutch Reformed Churches.

**Prof. Dr Thorsten Dietz**, theology and ethics, Evangelische Hochschule (EH) TABOR Marburg, Germany (until 2022); theologian, Reformed Church of Canton Zurich, Switzerland. Evangelical Church of Hesse Electorate-Waldeck (June 2020 – September 2023).

**Dr Michał Koktysz**, theology, OT/Biblical Hebrew, Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw, Poland. Evangelical Reformed Church in Poland (April 2019 – February 2023).

**Prof. Neil Messer**, theology and ethics, University of Winchester, United Kingdom. United Reformed Church.

**Dr Paola Schellenbaum**, psychology/anthropology, Italy. Waldensian Church in Italy.

**Prof. Dr Ulla Schmidt** (chair), theology, Aarhus University, Denmark. Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark.

**Dr Tamas Kodacsy,** theology, pastor, Reformed Church of Hungary (October 2019 – September 2021).

# Participants in the consultation in Dresden, 23-25 February 2023

Rev Claudia Baumann, Evangelical Church in Baden, Germany

Rev Nicole Becher, United Methodist Church – Central Conference Central and Southern Europe, Switzerland

Rev Alex Clare-Young, United Reformed Church, United Kingdom

Rev Barbara Damaschke-Bösch, Protestant Church in Switzerland

Rev Jana Daněčková, United Methodist Church – Central Conference Central and Southern Europe, Czech Republic

Rev Émeline Daudé, United Protestant Church of France

Prof. Dr Thorsten Dietz, CPCE Study Group

Rev Alan Donaldson, European Baptist Federation

Dr Christine Keim, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg, Germany

Nathalie Eleyth, CPCE reference group Young Theologians in Communion / Evangelical Church of Westfalen, Germany

Dr Oliver Engelhardt, CPCE Head office

Rev Thomas Fender, Reformed Church in Germany

Rev Dr Mario Fischer, CPCE General Secretary

Rev Laurence Flachon, United Protestant Church of Belgium

Rev Katarína Hudáková, Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in the Slovak Republic

Rev Jakub Helebrant, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Czech Republic

Rev Dr Tamás Kodácsy, Reformed Church in Hungary

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Rev Gregorio Plescan, Waldensian Evangelical Church, Italy

Prof. Dr Jonathan Reinert, Konfessionskundliches Institut Bensheim, Germany

Rev Marek Říčan, Silesian Evangelical Church of the A.C. in the Czech Republic

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Christin Sirtl, Evangelical Church in Central Germany

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Kathrin Wallrabe, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony, Germany

Prof. Dr Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark

Prof. Dr Mathias Wirth, Faculty of Theology, University of Bern, Switzerland

Rev Ruth Wolff-Bonsirven, Union des Eglises Protestantes d'Alsace et de Lorraine, France

Olexandr Zhakun, German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ukraine

Prof. Dr Heleen Zorgdrager, Moravian Church – European Continental Province, Netherlands

Renate E. Zwick, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Italy

# Glossary[561]

**Asexuality**: Term used to describe a sexual orientation that involves feeling no sexual attraction to others but having emotional needs and in some instances desiring emotional intimacy.

**Bisexual(-ity)**: Women or men who are attracted to both sexes, female and male. Refers to the sexual and romantic attraction to both women and men.

**Cis-gender:** An adjective used to describe a person whose gender assigned at birth is the same as the gender they identify with. This is often shortened to and can be used interchangeably with 'cis'.

**Cisnormativity**: The prevailing social atmosphere that enforces the idea that being cisgender is the normal and default way for humans to feel and exist, with all other gender identities and behaviours being deviant.

**Cissexism**: The perpetuation of gender essentialism and cisnormativity, sometimes used interchangeably with transphobia.

**Coming out**: An expression used to describe the making public of your sexual preferences or gender identity, mostly used in connection with coming out as lesbian or gay. It implies that you have previously not disclosed that preference or not recognized it, and have been in the closet.

**Cross-dressing**: This word refers to the practice of wearing clothes typically associated with the opposite sex (men wearing women's

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[561] This glossary has been based on the entries and definitions from the following: European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender Equality Glossary and Thesaurus*; Gabriele Griffin, *Oxford Dictionary of Gender Studies* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2017); Augusta University,*Women's and Gender Studies: Common Terms* https://augustauniversity.app.box.com/s/wkdrjj3h6u98vs29cuf82yk0ub3teqsm (accessed 26.10.22.)

clothes, or women wearing men's clothes) in a given society. See also under 'transvestite'.

**Female**: Biologically based references to the sex of a woman.

**Feminism**: Political stance and commitment to change the political position of women and promote gender equality, based on the claim that women are subjugated because of their gendered body, i.e. sex.

**Femininity**: Refers to the quality of acting or being like a particular version of a woman which conforms to or defies certain gender stereotypes and notions of what it means to be a woman, including patterns of conduct linked to a women's assumed place in a given set of gender roles and relations.

**Gender**: The notion of what it means to be male or female. Social attributes and opportunities associated with being female and male, and to the relationships between women and men, girls and boys, as well as to relations between women and those between men.

**Gender binary**; The belief that biological sex allows for only two gender identities, namely male and female, which are mutually exclusive. This view does not allow for identities outside of or in the middle of this opposition

**Gender discrimination**: This phrase refers to biases based on a person's gender. Gender discrimination may occur in education, the workplace, and cultural contexts where girls and women are disadvantaged relative to boys and men on account of their gender such that they do not have the same opportunities to have certain kinds of education or jobs, for example.

**Gender dysphoria**: The experienced mismatch between gender identity and the sex assigned at birth. E.g. a person identifies as male, but was assigned a female sex at birth. Often, the mismatch is cause for stress and anxiety.

**Gender equality**: Equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men, girls and boys.

**Gender expression**: A person's outward presentation including clothing, hair style, cosmetics, speech patterns, body language, etc. that is understood to display feminine, masculine, or androgynous characteristics based on a given culture's ideas of gender roles and expression. A person's gender expression may not always 'match' their gender identity.

**Gender identity**: Each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms.

**Gender identity disorder:** This diagnostic term was previously used to refer to the phenomenon of **gender dysphoria**, but is no longer current because of the stigma associated with the term 'disorder'.

**Gender reassignment**: Set of medical measures that can, but do not have to, include psychological, endocrinological and surgical treatments aimed at aligning a person's physical appearance with their gender identity.

**Gender mainstreaming**: Systematic consideration of the differences between the conditions, situations and needs of women and men in all policies and actions. Gender mainstreaming is a measure for promoting gender equality. It consists of assessing the implications of any action or policy on women and men with a view to establishing equality of opportunity for them.

**Gender-neutral**: Policy, programme or situation that has no differential positive or negative impact in terms of gender relations or equality between women and men.

**Gender roles**: Social and behavioural norms which, within a specific culture, are widely considered to be socially appropriate for individuals of a specific sex.

**Gender sensitivity**: Aim of understanding and taking account of the societal and cultural factors involved in gender-based exclusion and discrimination in the most diverse spheres of public and private life.

**Glass ceiling**: Artificial impediments and invisible barriers that militate against women's access to top decision-making and managerial positions in an organization, whether public or private and in whatever domain.

**Hegemonic masculinity**: Cultural norm that continuously connects men to power and economic achievements.

**Heteronormativity**: Assumption that the sexes are binary, divided into female and male, with complementary roles, and that this is a given, fixed state in accordance with which we should act. The assumption that a person is sexually attracted to the opposite sex is an essential part of this complementarity.

**Heterosexism**: Assumption that every person should be heterosexual, thus marginalizing those who do not identify themselves as heterosexual.

**Heterosexuality**: The sexual attraction of people to those of the opposite sex. Heterosexuality frequently assumes a binary division between women and men.

**Homophobia**: Fear or hatred of, and aversion to, homosexuality and to lesbian, gay and bisexual people based on prejudice. Homophobia

can lead to hate crimes such as seeking out and attacking lesbians and gay men for being different in their sexual orientation from heterosexuals.

**Homosexuality**: Sexual, emotional and/or romantic attraction to persons of the same sex.

**Hyper-masculinity**: Exaggerated image of hegemonic masculinity, mainly in the media. It overemphasizes the ideals, such as physical strength, aggression and sexuality set out for men, thereby reinforcing them.

**Identity politics**: Identity politics references a political disposition and political arguments founded on particular traits or interests concerning a specific group of people. Often centring on gender, race, ethnicity, or religious beliefs, identity politics has been concerned with making political claims based on group identities that share these traits or interests.

**Intersectionality**: An approach to difference in which it is acknowledged that difference plays out on a variety of axes, such as gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, class and ability. These different axes influence each other. For instance: a white bisexual person with a disability encounters structures of race, sexuality and ability in different ways than does a person who is black, heterosexual and who does not have a disability.

**Intersex**: Variations in sex characteristics that do not fit the conventional stereotypical physiological binary of female and male so that the intersex person has physiological traits of the female and the male sex. These variations may relate to the presence of particular hormones and the particularities of external and internal genitals. In many countries such intersex conditions, if discovered at birth, are dealt with medically in early infancy, for example through gender assignment surgery. This process has not always resulted in

the intersex person being content with the sex they were assigned. The ethics of gender reassignment surgery on young children is currently being debated.

**Lesbian**: Woman who is attracted to other women.

**LGBTQIA (incl. LGBT/LGBT+/LGBTQ+/LGBTQI+)**: An acronym for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual community. This is often shortened to LGBTQI+, LGBTQ+, LGBTQ, or LGBT and is understood to encompass all non-cisgender, non-straight identities.

**Male**: Biologically based references to the sex of a man.

**Man**: Male human being; a person assigned a male sex at birth, or a person who defines himself as a man.

**Masculinity/-ies**: Different notions of what it means to be a man, including patterns of conduct linked to men's place in a given set of gender roles and relations. Traits and qualities conventionally associated with boys and men. These may be physiologically defined in terms of physical appearance and biological properties, but more commonly masculinity is considered as socially constructed and hence circumscribed by the norms applied to boys and men in a given culture.

**Misogyny**: Contempt for, dislike of women; fear or hate, and the active perpetuation of that fear and hate, against people who identify as women or female on the basis that they are inferior to men and males due to their gender or perceived sex categorization. Practices that denigrate women are misogynistic. Patriarchal cultures are misogynistic in that they constrain women because they regard them as lesser beings than men.

**Queer**: A label used to describe a wide variety of sexual and/or romantic identities within the LGBT community, individuals who fall

outside of the gender and sexuality 'norms'. Word for strange or odd which was reclaimed in the 1990s to refer to people of divergent sexual orientations who might be part of the LGBT communities. Intended to transcend the binarisms of lesbian and gay and to signal the fluidity of sexed and gendered identities, queer has socially become increasingly identified with a particular sub-section of the LGBT communities.

**Queer theory**: A gender theory that emerged in the early 1990s, rejecting sex and gender binarisms, that is the division of people into female and male based on their biological sex, in favour of a recognition of the fluidity and ambiguity of both gender identity and sexuality. Queer theory critiques heteronormativity. It encompasses both the analysis of 'queerness' and using queer strategies to interpret texts and sign systems.

**Sex**: The division of living entities (humans, animals, plants, etc.) into male and female. Also, engaging in activities designed to give sexual pleasure, including sexual intercourse.

**Sexism**: Denigrating attitudes and behaviours towards a person on the basis of their sex which draw on conventional gender stereotypes. Mostly directed at women, it can involve expecting women in a mixed-sex meeting to make the tea or coffee, calling women by abusive names such as 'bitch' or 'slut'.

**Sexual identity/orientation**: A personal label used to define the categories of people someone is physically attracted to. How you think of yourself in terms of attraction to the same sex or members of the other sex, based on your own experiences, thoughts and reactions, rather than defining yourself based on the gender or sex of your sexual partner(s). These include, but are not limited to, straight/heterosexual, gay/lesbian/homosexual, bisexual, pansexual and asexual.

**Sexuality**: Central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. The bodily, emotional, sociocultural, and intellectual aspects of a person's self which impact on and articulate their sexual identity and whom or what they desire as sexual partners. Some view sexuality as innate, i.e. we are born heterosexual or homosexual, for example, whilst others regard sexuality as fluid and as culturally determined. Sexuality encompasses many different forms, including asexuality.

**Transgender**: Refers to gender identity and includes people who identify as female or male but were born or assigned the other sex at birth, people who identify as neither female or male, as a combination of both, or as gender-fluid.

**Transsexual(-ity)**: Refers to the situation of identifying with the opposite gender to one's bodily sex. A man may feel that he is a woman 'trapped in the wrong body', and a woman may feel that she should have been born a man, as well as feel the need to undergo physical alterations to the body to express this feeling, such as hormone treatment and/or surgery. Some transsexuals decide to have sex-corrective or gender reassignment surgery to align their body with their gender identification.

**Transvestite**: A person who adopts the clothes and behaviours of someone of the opposite sex, i.e. a man who (occasionally) enjoys dressing and acting as a woman or a woman who wants to dress and act as a man.

**Woman**: Female human being; a person assigned a female sex at birth, or a person who defines herself as a woman.

# Questionnaire

The questionnaire was sent to all member churches in March 2022, with reminders in May and June 2022, and direct phone calls in August/September 2022. The questionnaire was placed online, and accessed via a link.

**Information**

At its 2018 meeting in Basel, the General Assembly of the CPCE, decided a study on "gender and sexuality" as part of its work programme. The CPCE Council decided on a mandate for the study and set up the study group. In order to prepare a study document that is as relevant and exact as possible regarding the status in our member churches, the study group has, in collaboration and understanding with the Vienna office as well as the CPCE Council, decided to conduct a small online survey. The data collected from this survey are crucial to address important topics in the study adequately.

We therefore strongly urge you to reply!

**The survey consists of a total of 12 questions. All questions are factual questions concerning your church/organization, so provided you have the information, it should not take any longer than max 7-8 minutes. The questions pertain to two topics: first, safeguarding measures concerning sexual abuse and misconduct; second, liturgies and other church practices related to people in same-sex partnerships, as well as other gender, sexuality or marriage-/family-related liturgies.**

Practical:

IMPORTANT! We want ONE reply from each CPCE member church/organisation. If you don't think you have the relevant or necessary information, please forward the mail with the link to someone you think has the relevant information. You are obviously also welcome to ask for information from colleagues or other people in your church for assistance.

The data we collect here will first be presented and discussed at a church consultation 20.-22. November (in Meissen, Germany) [later correction: February 2023 in Dresden], and then incorporated into the report.

No personal data are collected in this survey.

**What is the name of your member church/member organisation? [roll-down menu with all CPCE members listed]**

(56) Church of… etc.

# Safeguarding

First we have a few questions about measures and initiatives in your church concerning sexual abuse or misconduct. This refers to clergy, other church leaders or employees, volunteers or other persons of trust within the church using their position to force or coerce (including by threats, manipulation, grooming, or exploitation of relations of dependence or trust) congregants or others – adults or minors – into sexual actions or relations, as well as for sexual harassment in the sense of sexualized behaviour (e.g. inappropriate touching, proposals, questions, or language), or other sexual-boundary violations against congregants or others.

**Has your church established initiatives to prevent or safeguard against this kind of sexual abuse or misconduct within church and parishes, for example rules of conduct, guidelines, mandatory supervision, courses (select all answers that apply)?**

(1) Yes, at national level. If you like, describe further: _____
(2) Yes, at regional level - all. If you like, describe further: _____
(3) Yes, at regional level - some. If you like, describe further: _____
(4) No.
(5) I/we don't know.

**Has your church developed procedures for decision-making bodies (leaders, boards at local, regional or national levels) concerning how to handle complaints of sexual abuse or misconduct committed by clergy or other church leaders, employees or volunteers against congregants or others (select all answers that apply)?**

(1) Yes, at national level.
(2) Yes, at regional level - all.
(3) Yes, at regional level - some.
(4) Yes, at local level.
(5) No.
(6) I/we don't know.

**Does your church have a process for receiving complaints against clergy, other church leaders or employees, or volunteers for sexual abuse or misconduct?**

(1) Yes.
(2) No.

**Where/how is this process made accessible to someone who wants to file a complaint (select all answers that apply)?**

(1) On our central webpages - front page.
(2) On our central webpages - not the homepage.
(3) On webpages of regional 'units' [such as dioceses or synods].
(4) On webpages of [most, some] local congregations.
(5) I don't know.
(6) Other ways: _____

**As far as you know, have any complaints been received?**

(1) Yes.
(2) No.
(3) I don't know.

**Does your church provide any form of support (such as counselling, support groups etc.) for people who have been subject to sexual abuse or misconduct within the church?**

(1) Yes. If you like, describe further: _____
(2) No.
(3) I don't know.

# Gender, sexuality and church practice

We have come to the second half of the survey. Here we ask questions about church actions in relation to gender and sexuality.

**Is same-sex marriage/partnership legally recognized in your country?**

(1) Yes.

(2) No.

**Does your church ordain persons living openly in same-sex relationships for pastoral ministry?**

(1) Yes.
(2) No.
(3) There is no decision on the matter.
(4) I don't know.

**Does your church accept as employees (other than ordained pastors) people living openly in same-sex relationships?**

(1) Yes.
(2) Yes, but only for some positions.
(3) No, not for any positions employed/salaried by the church.
(4) There is no decision on the matter.
(5) I don't know.

**Does your church/organisation have a wedding liturgy or liturgy for blessing of same-sex partnerships, (or a "gender-neutral" wedding/blessing liturgy)?**

[Information: We are interested in whether or not your church has liturgical practices of wedding or blessing of same-sex partnerships whether or not this liturgy also has legal status and forms a marriage/union in a legal sense]

(1) Yes, our church has an official wedding/blessing liturgy for same-sex partnerships.
(2) No, our church has no official wedding/blessing liturgy for same-sex partnerships.

(3) No, at present there is no liturgy, but formal decisions have been made to develop such a liturgy.

(4) Our church does not have formal liturgies, but (some) congregations DO celebrate weddings/blessings of same sex partnerships.

(5) Our church has a decision that same sex marriages/blessings must not be celebrated in the church.

**Does your church [or one or more congregations within your church] have any of the following (select all answers that apply)?**

(1) Liturgy for divorce.

(2) Liturgy for gender transitioning.

(3) Neither of these.

(4) If you would like to add anything regarding this, please elaborate: _____

# Statements

## Recommendation of the Presidium of the General Convent of the Hungarian Reformed Church

The Presidium of the General Convent of the Hungarian Reformed Church (HRC), at its meeting on 17 July 2024, discussed the issue related to the participation of its member churches in the 9th General Assembly of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE).

The Presidium of the General Convent of the HRC unanimously recommended that the delegates of the part (i.e. member) churches of the HRC should not participate in the forthcoming General Assembly of the CPCE, to be held in Sibiu (Nagyszeben) from 27 August to 2 September 2024, nor in its accompanying events.

The study text on Gender – Sexuality – Marriage – Family is part of the agenda of the General Assembly, finalised in May. Several requests have been made to the leadership of CPCE by the co-hosting Transylvanian Reformed Church District and the Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District to discuss this paper at another General Assembly, rather than in Sibiu (Nagyszeben).

All churches recognized by the Romanian state share the biblical, confessional position of the Hungarian-speaking Reformed churches. We note with regret that this request has not been granted.

Since 2004, the General Convent has been working in fraternal love and joint commitment in Christ on the unity of the relevant church bodies in the Carpathian Basin, in supporting each other and in nurturing solidarity with each other. For this reason, we have discussed the issue of participation in the General Assembly at length and on several occasions. In conclusion, the leadership of the Transylvanian Reformed Church District and Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District, also members of the Presidium General Convent, regret that the CPCE leadership did not understand their request as co-hosting church districts. Therefore, as adopted in the resolutions of their respective Assemblies, they will not be able to participate in the General Assembly. To express our solidarity with them, we ask the Hungarian Reformed delegates from our churches in the Carpathian Basin not to participate in this event.

The Leuenberg Fellowship and cooperation is important for the member churches of the Hungarian Reformed Church, and our ecumenical commitment has not changed.

Our absence concerns the 9th CPCE General Assembly only, and we remain committed to participating constructively in the cooperation and the working groups of CPCE. Thus, the Transylvanian Reformed Church District will make the necessary infrastructure available to CPCE on the basis of prior arrangements.

Presidium of the General Convent

Budapest, 17 July 2024.

The Presidium of the General Convent consists of the leadership [bishops and lay presidents] of the Hungarian-speaking Reformed churches/church districts in Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

# Statement of the Bishops' Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary

By preparing the study guide under the title "Gender - Sexuality - Marriage - Family", the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) fulfilled the resolution of the 2018 Basel Assembly.

It is a well-known fact that there is a growing interest in the theological and ethical problems discussed in the study. These issues often lead to controversies in narrow and wider church circles, and sometimes even threaten to cause schism. There is a tension between different views and approaches in secular societies, too, members of which are also curious about the debates going on in churches. Clearly, this was the thinking behind the 2018 Basel decision.

We share the concern of all those who are filled with increasing pain when our neighbours are discriminated against, despised or abused not only in legal or economic terms, but also in their most personal capacity – in their marriage, their relationship or in their sexual identity – whether in the family, at work, in the social or political life or even in church community.

Not only in the society but also in our church, we consider it necessary to support all efforts that aim at avoiding, terminating or rectifying external circumstances, personal relations and attachments or harmful individual habits that make such situations possible.

In the view of our church, man and woman can share a life based on equality, mutual respect, appreciation, fulfilment and happiness,

they can voluntarily take up each other's burden, help each other and eventually rejoice in the gift of parenthood. This is what we refer to as marriage and this is what we consider the order of creation to be.

We are convinced that the protection of this basic cell of society serves the common interest. While we might take issue with those who cannot or do not want to assume this order, we do not cast doubt on their createdness, neither do we question God's love in Jesus Christ towards them or turn them down if they want to belong to God.

Our age is characterized by the massive and increasingly visible presence of opinions and lifestyles that diverge from what the Christian Church has traditionally been standing for. Hence the facts cannot be ignored. Yet, it is not enough to reject or condemn these phenomena. We need to get to know them, look at the driving forces behind them and expose all those opinions, factors and, especially, malpractices (often committed or tolerated by Christians) that alienate people from the Christian understanding.

As part of the six-year activities of CPCE, the study is rightly included in the report of the Council and in the agenda of the 2024 Sibiu Assembly. Unfortunately, its length and the brevity of time between its publication and the meeting have made it difficult to discuss and analyse it in depth. It is also unlikely that the Assembly will be able to provide for ample space to do so. However, it can be stated that the Council of the CPCE has published a study guide that

(a) provides in-depth knowledge of the subject including the historical, sociological, biological and theological/biblical background,

(b) approaches the issues from different angles addressing a range of arguments and counter-arguments, and

(c) covers the problems and the solutions in a complex manner without oversimplification.

This way the study can serve as a background to the exchange of views necessary in and between our churches. The Bishops' Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary is looking forward to a Europe-wide dialogue that is based on theological and scientific grounds and is thus capable of preventing the formation of rash and ideologically motivated opinions.

Budapest, 5th August 2024

The Bishops' Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary

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# Comment on the CPCE's publication formats and on the hierarchy of approval of CPCE documents

The number and variety of publications of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) has grown considerably over the course of half a century. A few explanations are therefore needed to help orientation. The CPCE's main communication platform, its website www.leuenberg.eu, provides information on the printed publications and makes them available in electronic form (*open access*) whenever possible.

Since the end of the 1970s, the CPCE (until 2003 the Leuenberg Church Fellowship) has published its publications through the publishing house Otto Lembeck (Frankfurt am Main, Germany). The documentation volumes of its General Assemblies of 1976 Sigtuna, 1981 Driebergen, 1987 Strasbourg, 1994 Vienna, 2001 Belfast, 2006 Budapest and the Leuenberg Agreement have been published there.

In 1995, Lembeck launched the bilingual series "Leuenberg Documents" (LD). The results of their common "continuing theological task" (Leuenberg Agreement 37–41) were published in this series – initially also retrospectively from earlier times. These are the results of their doctrinal discussions and other study processes, but also documentation from the context of their ecumenical dialogues of various formats. In addition, some declarations of the CPCE Council, some other texts from the CPCE's advisory boards and expert groups or historical documents and papers from the context

of the Leuenberg Agreement or individual study processes have been published in individual volumes.

Since the relocation of the CPCE Head Office to Vienna, there has been cooperation with the Evangelischer Presseverband Österreich (epv). Since 2007, several study texts of the General Assemblies, the anniversary volume on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Leuenberg Agreement and two ethical orientation guides commissioned by the CPCE Council have been published there.

After the dissolution of the Lembeck publishing house in 2012, the LD series was continued by the Evangelische Verlagsanstalt (EVA) Leipzig (a total of 16 volumes had been published by 2024). The publisher also published the documentation volumes for the CPCE's General Assemblies in Florence in 2012 and Basel in 2018, as well as several collections of academic essays related to the work of the CPCE.

Common theological study is a basic dimension of the realisation of church communion and a form of experiencing the unity of the church. The theological work processes initiated by the General Assembly and their results received by the General Assembly are of particular importance in CPCE publications. Four stages of consent by the General Assembly have emerged – indicated by the terms "adopt", "approve", "receive", "take note of". The respective wording of the decision on a document shows the status with which the General Assembly has acknowledged the document and the type of continuation of its reception in the member churches that the General Assembly requests.

An overview of the hierarchy of consent to CPCE texts, which is determined by the respective procedure used for the creation of a text and is associated with various consequences for its intended use, can be found in the table below.

The CPCE endeavours to ensure that all results of joint theological work published in print are also made available in *open access* form on the CPCE website as soon as possible.

In view of the increase in the number of CPCE study and other work processes that are documented in publications, usually only doctrinal conversations have been published in the LD series (EVA Leipzig) since the 2018 General Assembly. These doctrinal discussion texts have the highest binding authority within the church communion through the General Assembly and are therefore also the texts that are the primary reference in its ecumenical dialogues. The CPCE also publishes academic-theological publications, such as conference proceedings, at EVA Leipzig. Further study results, ethical guidelines and other documents are usually published by epv.

Doctrinal conversations and other forms of joint theological work develop, deepen, communicate and document the CPCE's self-understanding as a church communion. Their consideration or reception in the CPCE member churches is a sign of mutual recognition, attention and solidarity.

| Term / Begriff | Formal criterion / Formales Kriterium | Amendment / Textänderung |
|---|---|---|
| adopt<br><br>Sich zu eigen machen<br><br>adopter | | The General Assembly may amend the submitted text.<br><br>Die Vollversammlung kann den eingereichten Text verändern. |
| approve<br><br>annehmen<br><br>approuver | The mandate for this document came from the General Assembly.<br><br>Das Dokument wurde im Auftrag der Vollversammlung erstellt. | |
| receive<br><br>entgegennehmen<br><br>recevoir | | The General Assembly cannot amend the submitted text.<br><br>Die Vollversammlung kann den eingereichten Text nicht verändern. |
| take note of<br><br>zur Kenntnis nehmen<br><br>prendre acte de | The mandate for this document did not come from the General Assembly (but e.g. from the Council ).<br><br>Das Dokument wurde nicht im Auftrag der Vollversammlung erstellt (z.B. im Auftrag des Rates). | |

## Consequences /
## Konsequenzen

The document (generally the result of doctrinal conversations) becomes the basis of CPCE's position in future doctrinal conversations and ecumenical dialogues. The General Assembly recommends that the member churches proceed with reception of the document, on which they have already taken a position before it was presented.

Das Dokument (in der Regel Lehrgesprächsergebnis) wird zur Grundlage der GEKE-Position für künftige Lehrgespräche und ökumenische Dialoge. Die Vollversammlung empfiehlt den Mitgliedskirchen die Rezeption des Dokuments. Das Dokument hat zuvor bereits ein Stellungnahmeverfahren in den Mitgliedskirchen durchlaufen.

The document (generally the result of a study) becomes the basis of further operational and substantive work by CPCE. The General Assembly recommends that the member churches take it into account in their thinking on the topic.

Das Dokument (in der Regel Studienergebnis) wird zur Grundlage der weiteren Arbeit der GEKE, sowohl für operative Konsequenzen als auch für die inhaltliche Weiterarbeit. Die Vollversammlung empfiehlt den Mitgliedskirchen das Dokument bei ihren Überlegungen zu dem Thema zu berücksichtigen.

The document is regarded as the result of the work of a certain group and as such it is not amended. It may have practical consequences for the work of CPCE and so the General Assembly would welcome a discussion of the document in the member churches.

Das Dokument wird als Arbeitsergebnis einer bestimmten Gruppe angesehen und als solches nicht verändert. Es kann konkrete Folgen für die Arbeit der GEKE haben. Die Vollversammlung begrüßt die Diskussion des Dokuments in den Mitgliedskirchen.

The document arose within the work of CPCE and it is presented to the General Assembly for information. Normally it has already been published.

Das Dokument ist innerhalb der Arbeit der GEKE entstanden und soll der Vollversammlung der GEKE präsentiert werden. Die Veröffentlichung ist in der Regel schon vorab geschehen.

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