

Marriage and the Sacred: Fragments Straight and Gay¹

© Sarah Bachelard

I find myself conflicted about the question of same-sex marriage. On the one hand, taking for granted the existence of homosexual orientation as a God-given, biological fact,² I see no reason that committed same-sex relationships may not in principle be expressed in the form of marriage.³ On the other hand, I am uneasy about aspects of the practice of marriage itself, particularly in a Christian context. It seems to me as though we have too often made an idol of marriage, and that it can bear all the hallmarks of the false sacred. And where that is so, then whether marriage is between a man and woman, or between persons of the same sex, it is hard to be excited about its practice or its defence. In this essay, I want to explore this unease of mine with a view to articulating an understanding of marriage for both straight and gay which is consistent with and expressive of discipleship of Christ and the transforming journey towards holiness. I will begin by elaborating on the notion of the ‘false sacred’.

Identifying the False Sacred

In an illuminating discussion of the Christian roots of secularism, James Alison has noticed that when the sacred is defined in opposition to the profane, then it is dependent for its meaning on what it excludes.⁴ ‘Sacred’ boundaries are sustained by taboo, sacrifice, religious rules and distinctions between pure and impure, righteous and

¹ Published in *A Kaleidoscope of Pieces: Anglican essays on sexuality, ecclesiology and theology*, edited by Alan H. Cadwallader, with a foreword by Bishop Kay Goldsworthy (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2016), chapter 3.

² James Alison speaks of the growing recognition that ‘there is a more or less regular minority of people of both sexes who ... simply are principally attracted to people of their own sex at an emotional and erotic level’. ‘Is it ethical to be Catholic? Queer perspectives’ in *Broken Hearts & New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010), pp.1-16, p.12. The title of my essay alludes to the title of another of Alison’s books, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*.

³ This is a large claim which I will discuss in more detail. Objections to it range from the semantic claim that the word ‘marriage’ just means marriage between a man and a woman, to the more substantive claim that marriage is ‘ordained by God’ to be between a man and woman, and that marriage must in principle admit of procreative potential even if in practice (as in the marriage of elderly or infertile people) procreation will not be an outcome of the marital union. On these kinds of accounts, despite the likeness of the commitment of same-sex couples to that of heterosexual couples, the very nature of same-sex union is incompatible with the possibility of what is called ‘marriage’.

⁴ In what follows, I am indebted to James Alison’s work, particularly ‘The Place of Shame and the Giving of the Spirit’, in *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-in* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006), pp.199-219 and ‘Sacrifice, law and the Catholic faith: is secularity really the enemy?’, in *Broken Hearts & New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010), pp.73-91.

unrighteous, Jew and Gentile, and so on. By his indiscriminate hospitality towards those who were on the ‘wrong’ side of this boundary, the unclean and religiously unsatisfactory, Jesus challenged this kind of sacred-profane duality. His challenge proved threatening to the religious and political authorities and he was executed, on a charge of blasphemy. In the resurrection, God revealed that the religious condemnation of Jesus was mistaken. ‘By raising Jesus Christ from the dead’, Thorwald Lorenzen writes, ‘God revealed, confirmed, verified, and enacted the mission of the life and death of Jesus. The resurrection is God’s concrete and unconditional “Yes” to Jesus’ life and death’.⁵ The holiness of God turned out to be not what the religious establishment thought it was.

Critical here is the insight that God does not simply reject the content of the particular set of sacred-profane distinctions whose transgression resulted in the charge of sacrilege against Jesus. Much more radically, what is called in question is the divine sanction for the whole religious mechanism that sets up the categories of insider and outsider, sacred and profane, where the righteousness, identity and belonging of some is secured at the expense of others.

The subversion of this mechanism is signalled, not simply by God’s vindication of Jesus and his way, but by the manner of his return to his disciples in the resurrection. For although the disciples came to understand the resurrection as God’s judgement of the judgement Jesus suffered, it did not take the form of casting out or excising the transgressors. Rather, God’s judgement offered forgiveness, healing and the invitation to renewed relationship (cf. John 21; Acts 2. 14-42). What becomes possible in its light is a vision of human belonging – to God and to one another – from which no-one need be excluded.⁶ Henceforward, on the Christian understanding, holiness or sanctity is connected to our participation in and transformation by, not law-keeping, ritual or cultic observance, but this pattern of life characterized by mercy, forgiveness and reconciling love.

⁵ Thorwald Lorenzen, *Resurrection and Discipleship: Interpretive Models, Biblical Reflections, Theological Consequences* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p.242.

⁶ Rowan Williams writes: ‘when God receives and approves the condemned Jesus and returns him to his judges through the preaching of the Church, he transcends the world of oppressor-oppressed relations to create a new humanity, capable of other kinds of relation – between human beings, and between humanity and the Father’. *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, second edition (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), p.9.

This means at least two things. First, as we see from the witness of the New Testament, increasingly the distinction between ‘sacred’ and profane, maintained by notions of taboo, religious rules and ritual sacrifice, is subverted. This distinction is now seen to have much more to do with human identity formation and boundary maintenance than with the ‘new’ humanity being brought into ‘one body’, the body of Christ. We see the painful process of subverting the old distinction in various places as, for example, when Peter learns in his vision of unclean animals that ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane’ (Acts 10.19). On this occasion, in a trance, Peter sees ‘something like a large sheet’ being lowered from above, and in it all kinds of animals. A voice tells him to ‘kill and eat’, and when Peter protests that he has never eaten anything profane or unclean, the voice tells him that he must not call profane what God has made clean. This episode is the immediate precursor to Peter’s encounter with the Gentile Cornelius and his baptism by the Holy Spirit, leading to Peter’s amazed confession that: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him’ (Acts 10.34-35).

The slow undoing of the old sacred-profane distinction is also evident as the early Christian community grapples with questions of ritual purity in relation to circumcision and the eating of meat sacrificed to idols (eg. Romans 14). This is the sense in which it is possible to understand secularism as having its roots in the Christian experience. Writes Alison:

Phrases like, ‘everything is permitted, but not everything is convenient’, or ‘to those who are pure, everything is pure’, or ‘the letter kills, but the spirit gives life’, could be quoted by anybody, and sound the rankest of secularising remarks. And they are. They are all phrases by which St Paul sought to make the oddity of the un-religion which he was preaching available to people: the subversiveness of the pattern of desire, unleashed by the sacrificial death of Christ, proving God’s goodness to us when faced with any ‘sacred’ religious observance.⁷

There is, in other words, no longer anything by definition that is profane or unclean, no food, no person, no nation or disease. There are instead ways of being, forms of life, that are consistent or not with God’s merciful and all-embracing love for the world.

⁷ Alison, ‘Sacrifice, law and the Catholic faith’, p.81.

Second, then, true holiness, true sanctity is to be conformed to and expressive of this hospitable and unthreatened way of being. Its growth in us is perhaps most evident in the character of our relationships with those who are victims of the judgement, including the religious judgement, that casts out. This is why the criterion of God's final judgement in Matthew's gospel is in terms of relationship to those who are hungry and thirsty, alien and naked, sick and in prison (Matthew 25.31-46). The true sacred, on this account, is intrinsically connected to catholicity, universality: 'the whole point of Christianity is to bring down the sort of wall of protective sacredness which makes universality impossible by having a necessary "other" over against whom we make ourselves "good"'.⁸

So on this analysis, the hallmarks of the false sacred include the maintenance of taboos or laws that systematically or necessarily exclude, and that tend to require sacrifice and deal death of some kind. And the true sacred, the Spirit of God, works to subvert that within any culture which tends towards sacrifice and divinely 'legitimated' violence at any level, inviting our participation in a larger, forgiving, more generous life.

Marriage and the False Sacred

So how do aspects of our understanding and practice of marriage display signs of complicity with the false sacred?⁹

The first concerns the way that being married can function as a means of identity formation which implicitly excludes and devalues the 'unmarried', so operating as a criterion for full social belonging and even virtue. This is the experience of many gay people who have, by definition, been excluded from the possibility of marriage,¹⁰ but it

⁸ Alison, 'Sacrifice, law and the Catholic faith', p.88.

⁹ I hesitated over the words 'our understanding of, practice and relationship to marriage' since that may seem to beg serious questions about the 'we' implied here. Contrary to the claim often made by defenders of 'traditional' marriage that marriage has 'always' been ordained by God as between one man and one woman, it is clear that understandings of, practices and relationships to marriage have a long and varied history, and so extrapolating universal truths from current experience is often fallacious. See, for example, Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), and Adrian Thatcher, 'Beginning Marriage: Two Traditions' in *Religion and Sexuality*, ed. Michael A. Hayes, Wendy Porter and David Tombs, *Studies in Theology and Sexuality*, 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). In this section, I am attempting to articulate what I believe is in the background of contemporary marriage debates in Australia, particularly in many Christian contexts, and so am relying on readers to recognise something of their own experience in my argument at this point.

¹⁰ Evidence to the Australian Commonwealth Parliamentary inquiry into the bills proposing 'marriage equality' claimed that the mental health of same-sex attracted people was adversely affected by their exclusion from

shows up among those who ‘fail’ to marry for other reasons as well. For women, until the fairly recent past, successfully marrying had direct consequences for economic security and social participation, and something of this aura of ‘prize’ or ‘success’ in achieving matrimonial status remains. Helen Fielding touched this nerve when Brigid Jones, the unmarried heroine of her novel, *Brigid Jones’ Diary*, loudly protested her experience of being condescended to by the ‘smug marrieds’ of her acquaintance. But the protest is itself a sign of a (strongly internalised) experience of exclusion from the ‘right’ order of things. In the Anglican church in my context, I experience the ascription of a special kind of ‘virtue’ to marriage and family in various though subtle ways: family photos prominently displayed in episcopal offices; new clergy appointments, diocesan employees or conference speakers introduced in terms of their being married and being parents as if that were significantly relevant to their professional competence or spiritual maturity;¹¹ the pressure on younger members of the church to marry early, and the stigma and sense of failure among the childless.

A second dimension of complicity with the false sacred concerns the entanglement of marriage with sacrifice, both in connection with its continuance and with the social and ecclesial punishment meted out to those whose marriages ‘fail’.¹² On the one hand, ‘the marriage’ becomes an end in itself and, for the sake of ‘the marriage’, all kinds of sacrifice can be enjoined with scant regard for the quality or possibilities of the particular marital relationship. Few Christians would now maintain that a marriage must be preserved at any cost, with violence or abuse together with adultery constituting commonly agreed justifying reasons for ending a marriage. But what about other kinds of suffering, mutual destruction, lack or the experience of entrapment in the context of marriage?

marriage ‘because it is recognised as an important institution’ and that to ‘be barred from it specifically on the basis of their relationship is harmful’ and an experience of ‘stigma’. House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, *Inquiry into the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2012 and the Marriage Amendment Bill 2012*, Official Committee Hansard, Public Hearing, Thursday 12 April, 2012, Sydney *Hansard*, p.9.

¹¹ I have not heard any unmarried speaker being introduced as ‘single’ and ‘childless’, this being tacitly considered perhaps an incomplete state – a slightly shameful fact best passed over in silence.

¹² This is evident, for example, in the heavier burden placed on pre-marriage preparation (for both the couple and officiating priest) in relation to those seeking re-marriage compared with those marrying for the first time, regardless of the relative maturity and self-awareness of particular couples. I have recent knowledge of a case where, in fact, the insistence on a requirement to undergo a formal rite of confession before being granted permission to re-marry in church, drove one couple to marry in a registry office instead.

Stanley Hauerwas argues strongly that considerations concerning personal fulfilment or happiness are rightly deemed more or less irrelevant in the Christian understanding of marriage. On his account, the proper end of Christian marriage is related to the building up of the Christian community, and ‘romanticism’, which considers marriage to be internally related to individuals’ sense of satisfaction in a relationship, is to be resisted as a corruption of this larger, ‘heroic’ task.¹³

The church exists to witness to God’s kingdom and here, he claims, both marriage and singleness ‘are necessary symbolic institutions’.¹⁴ Singleness signifies trust in ‘God’s power to affect lives for the growth of the church’,¹⁵ and the priority of belonging to the church rather than to the natural family. In marriage, by ‘our faithfulness to one another ... we experience and witness to the first fruits of the kingdom of God. Our commitment to exclusive relations witnesses to God’s pledge to his people, Israel and the church, that through his exclusive commitment to them, all people will be brought into his Kingdom’.¹⁶ ‘For the Christian’, according to Hauerwas, ‘marriage cannot and must not be seen as a necessary means for self-fulfilment. Christians are not called to marriage for “fulfilment”, but for the upbuilding of that community called church’.¹⁷ This leads him to coin such aphorisms as: ‘love does not create marriage; rather, marriage provides a good training ground to teach us what love involves’, and ‘You always marry the wrong person’.¹⁸

I see, at least to some extent, what he means. Of course, we want marriage to be about more than narcissistic self-gratification and the worst excesses of romanticism. The vowed life – whether it takes the form of marriage, celibate singleness, or ordination – constitutes a commitment that transcends the day to day feelings associated with the promises we make. In free consent to the discipline this requires, being schooled by

¹³ Stanley Hauerwas, ‘Sex in Public: How Adventurous Christians Are Doing It (1978)’ in *The Hauerwas Reader*, eds. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), pp.481-504, p.500.

¹⁴ Hauerwas, ‘Sex in Public’, p.499.

¹⁵ Hauerwas, ‘Sex in Public’, p.499.

¹⁶ Hauerwas, ‘Sex in Public’, p.499

¹⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, ‘The Radical Hope in the Annunciation: Why Both Single and Married Christians Welcome Children (2001)’ in *The Hauerwas Reader*, pp.505-518, p.512.

¹⁸ Hauerwas, ‘Sex in Public’, p.502fn. Hauerwas quotes approvingly from Rosemary Haughton who writes: ‘the qualities that make people stick out a hard life together, not stopping too much to wonder if they are fulfilled, are the qualities people need if they are to develop the hero in marriage, which is what being married “in the Lord” is about’. ‘Sex in Public’, p.500. This injunction to ‘heroism’, however, seems more reflective of Stoic than Christian virtue, and causes me to wonder exactly what is so edifying or appealing about a community where self-sacrifice has been equated this closely with self-suppression.

fidelity to their commitments, people may witness to the fidelity of God and offer themselves to be transformed through the inevitable sufferings of their chosen way into selflessness and Christ-likeness. In this way the church is edified and the counter-cultural kingdom of God made visible.

I am troubled, however, by the abstract generality of Hauerwas' argument, its over-realised eschatology and its assumptions about what it is in fact that builds up the church. Eschatologically speaking, marriage may indeed be a symbol of God's life-generating faithfulness to humankind, but it is not in itself God's faithfulness.¹⁹ To make every actual marriage bear that weight of meaning risks crushing the human bearers of the symbol and, just as Jesus insisted that 'the sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath' (Mark 2.27), so I want to insist that marriage is a gift given for our flourishing, not a burden to be borne at any cost. There is a difference between a cheap romanticism, to which Hauerwas rightly objects, and costly and truthful engagement with the question of what actually is the state and the possibilities, not of 'marriage in general', but of any particular marriage and so what faithfulness (to God, oneself, and others) calls for in that context.

Yet because of his prior commitment to the 'sacred' character of marriage in and of itself, Hauerwas offers no possibility of discerning the particulars of when and how a marriage is truly sanctifying, and when it may instead be oppressive or infantilising. In the name of some generic notion of the edification of the Christian community, he ties up 'heavy burdens, hard to bear, and [lays] them on the shoulders of others' (Matt. 23.4). What seems missing from Hauerwas's understanding of the church is the notion of our being not only a sacrament of the kingdom but also a community 'on the way', a people who are making the cruciform journey from falsity to truth, and from alienation to wholeness. But if that is who we are, then what is more edifying for the church? That it consist of people who stick heroically to their first commitments without pausing to reflect on what fruit is being borne, or that it allow the space for authentic and responsible discernment of the movement of life, penitent recognition of wounds

¹⁹ Strikingly, the value of marriage is expressed as contingent in the gospels, both in Jesus' response to the Sadducees' question about marriage in the resurrection (Mark 12.18-27; Matt 22. 23-33; Luke 20.27-40) , and in Jesus' undermining of any claim to the absolute nature of 'family values' in the context of discipleship (Luke 14.26; cf. Matt 10.37).

inflicted and suffered, and the gracious possibility of forgiveness and new life emerging from brokenness?²⁰

A former religious sister told me that after years of struggling with her vows, she began to understand that she had undertaken them in the first place out of a need for security and the certainty of salvation.²¹ In the deeply frightening process of asking whether this was the life God wanted for her after all, she faced letting go of everything on which she had relied. At that moment, she said, she finally understood St Francis's divesting himself of everything to stand naked before the love of God. For her, the real poverty to which she realized she was being called was not the vowed poverty of religious life, but the deeper surrender and vulnerability of letting go her ecclesial strategy for self-protection.

It may have been, of course, that through her struggle she could have remained a religious, although on an entirely different footing. It may have been that her maturing could have happened within the framework of the vows she had made. In fact, however, that was not how she discerned her situation. May not the same kind of struggle be undergone in the life of discipleship in the context of a marriage? As certain 'sins' are recognized and the call to deeper integration and reconciliation is answered,²² there may be the possibility of transforming the basis of one's first commitment. But will it necessarily be so? Sometimes a journey of deepening integration goes by way of a necessary disintegration.

On the other hand, if the injunction to self-sacrifice to 'save' the marriage is refused, then in a community enthralled by the false sacred, there remains the possibility of sacrificing the transgressor anyway. Those deemed guilty of ending the marriage are

²⁰ Hauerwas says that 'we as church rightfully will hold you to promises you made when you did not know and could not fully comprehend what you were promising ... From the church's perspective the question is not whether you know what you are promising; rather the question is whether you are the kind of person who can be held to a promise you made when you did not know what you were promising. We believe, of course, that baptism creates the condition that makes possible the presumption that we might be just such people'. 'The Radical Hope in the Annunciation', p.517. I think it is true that the church will 'rightfully' hold you to such promises, in the sense that you cannot simply abandon them without responsible and responsive discernment, and acknowledgement or engagement with those to whom you have promised yourself. But I would have thought that baptism creates the condition precisely for being able to acknowledge the 'death' of pretensions to heroic self-righteousness, which might (in some circumstances) allow for the humble acknowledgement of failure or the possibility of being released from a promise sincerely made.

²¹ 'Needs' which are themselves symptoms of consciousness in thrall to the 'false sacred'. I tell this story in my *Resurrection and Moral Imagination* (London: Ashgate, 2014), p.172.

²² By 'sins', I have in mind the deep defences that keep in place our self-possession and strategies for self-protection – fear and avoidance of pain, patterns of inauthentic self-denial or self-hatred, and so on.

judged and shunned, no longer fit to belong to the community of the heroically hitched. A friend of mine who suffered this kind of rejection says that the church preaches the forgiveness of sin, but actually wants to be a community made up of people who never need forgiveness. In my ecclesial experience, if someone's divorce happened ten years ago or out of sight, we can cope. But if we are asked to bear with the painful, confronting, messy process of a marriage coming apart in our midst, then likely as not our church communities will leap to judgements of 'guilt' and 'innocence', and offer our brothers and sisters not patient solidarity and friendship, but condemnation and shame. And whether or not we happen to agree with another's discernment in any particular case, such willingness to sacrifice the one for the sake of the unruffled moral complacency of the many is an infallible sign of the false sacred.

I believe that marriage may indeed be a symbol of God's generous love poured out, a relationship in and through which we come to realise our fuller life and capacity for self-giving love, sometimes in joy and sometimes in sorrow and struggle. But its true sacred character and its gift to the wider community is realised, not by sacralising the institution of marriage and hedging it about with taboos and oppressive social rules, but only by deepening our practice of marriage as a way of sanctification.

Marriage and Sanctification

We learn from Jesus' calling of his disciples that the process of transformation or sanctification involves embracing and embodying the risk of unconditional commitment or self-gift, together with a growing non-possessiveness or non-attachment. These are the necessary elements, I propose, of a practice of marriage which is actually capable of signifying and communicating God's reconciling love for the world.

The call to unconditional commitment and self-gift is about no safety net, no foothold or backdoor leaving a way out for the fearful and controlling ego which constantly seeks to have life on its own terms. Jesus says simply: 'Follow me', and he gives short shrift to those who seek to hedge their bets or hang onto some piece of their life not yielded to the way.²³ The way of transformation is necessarily a way of

²³ Consider, for example, the story of the rich young ruler who went away sad because he was unable to let go his many possessions and follow Jesus (Mark 10.21), the injunction to 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their

vulnerability, openness and trust. This is because, as Jesus said, we must 'lose' our lives if we want to be healed (Luke 17.33; Mark 8.35); we must die to the self-sufficient, self-protecting, self-righteous self.

Marriage, like other forms of the vowed life, may be understood as a practice that particularises and incarnates that movement of self-gift and love for something beyond the self, risking the vulnerability of unconditional commitment in the face of the unknown.²⁴ That is the significance I take it, in the Christian marriage service, of the unconditional nature of the vows – 'for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health'. We yield ourselves to a life, a call that transcends us, in faith, hope and love.

Yet, as Jesus also taught, this unconditional commitment to any particular human relationship finds its proper place, character and freedom only as we receive our identity from God. It must therefore be characterised, for both lover and beloved, by non-possessiveness or non-attachment, and a sense of its being non-ultimate. Jesus said: 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14.26). Discipleship, in other words, is about letting go attachment to the old sources of one's identity and receiving one's life, one's self, as gift from God. As Rowan Williams has said:

Only as this begins to happen will I be delivered from treating the gifts of God as yet another set of things I may acquire to make me happy, or to dominate other people. And as this process unfolds, I become more free ... to 'love human beings in a human way', to love them not for what they may promise me, to love them not as if they were there to provide me with lasting safety and comfort, but as fragile fellow-creatures held in the love of God. I discover ... how to see other persons and things for what they are in relation to God, not to me. And it is here that true justice as well as true love has its roots.²⁵

own dead' (Matthew 8.22), and the 'hard saying' that 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God' (Luke 9.62).

²⁴ Of course, marriage in many contexts has no such 'spiritual' meaning or potential but may be understood as no more than a contractual relationship for the begetting of heirs and securing of dynastic property. I note that such a 'contractual' relationship would fall within the definition of 'marriage between a man and a woman', but would not by itself constitute (I take it) the 'sacred' institution that many defenders of traditional marriage are concerned to uphold.

²⁵ *The Archbishop of Canterbury's Address to the Thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, 10 October 2012, Rome, (accessed: <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome#sthash.ky9vuE1H.dpuf>), para.5

Without this kind of ‘freedom’ and letting the other be, then our human love tends to be corrupted by possessiveness and fear. Rather than partaking of the gift quality of God’s love, it becomes enmeshed with guilt, shame, obligation and self-deception. If our commitment to another is truly to be unconditional, then it must be characterised by the willingness to let the other go.

The love that is God’s own Trinitarian life is a communion of persons in relation, and each person of the Trinity is fully themselves and liberated to be so through the self-giving, non-possessive love of the other. It is this dynamic of authentic and life-generating communion between persons which may give marriage its sacramental character and its sanctifying potential.²⁶ It is to the extent that our practice of marriage leads into this kind of communion that it may rightly be called ‘sacred’ and, like the love of God, a source of life for others.

Same-sex Marriage

If a certain content is given by definition to the word ‘marriage’, then some relationships will fall outside its range. If ‘marriage’ just means the union of a man and a woman, then the possibility of same-sex marriage will be ruled out by stipulation. This might preserve what is called ‘traditional’ marriage, but it seems a cheap victory that fails to touch the heart of the marriage debate. Those who advocate for same-sex marriage seek acknowledgement of the depth, seriousness and life-giving potential of committed homosexual relationships as on a par with and as deserving of public recognition as heterosexual unions. Those on the other side of the debate seem to suggest that expanding the concept of marriage to include same-sex unions will undermine the very nature of heterosexual marriage.

The logic of this argument can be difficult to follow, but it seems to be connected to the sense that since heterosexual marriage is sacred because it has been ‘ordained by God’, allowing same-sex unions to count as marriage will compromise the intrinsically sacred, God-given character of any marriage. Responses to a survey conducted as part of

²⁶ I do not believe that marriage is the only kind of human relationship which may have such sacramental and sanctifying potential. In the gospels other analogies for unconditional divine love include the parent-child relationship, and friendship (cf. John 15.15). Notably, orthopraxis does not require us to hold that every parent-child relationship or every friendship actually communicates, or is apt for communicating, this reality.

the parliamentary inquiry into amendments to the marriage laws in Australia, for example, included the claims that:

Having been married to my wife for 40 years, I find it repulsive and insulting that the people supporting this notion are trying to push this legislation through. If same sex couples wish to live together that is none of my business and I would not discriminate against them in any way. However, I feel that the people trying to legalise same sex marriage are trying to gate crash our sacred institution of marriage between a man and a woman.

I do not agree that a same sex union is an equivalent relationship to a marriage between a man and a woman. I have been married for nearly thirty years and raised five children to adulthood with my wife. I think maybe without intending this bill demeans the specialness of the relationship which has so defined my life by making it one of a number of 'valid' expressions of human relationship. Find other ways to deal with same sex and de facto relationships but don't make them equivalent to marriage with the stroke of a pen.²⁷

In this paper, I have sought to explore what the notion of the sanctity of marriage amounts to. I have argued that, in the Christian context, claims concerning sacred or profane which function simply as taboos cannot be accepted unquestioningly. As they were for the New Testament communities, such claims must be tested in relation to the revelation of God's holiness in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. As James Alison has pointed out, as this revelation unfolds, increasingly there is an 'undoing' of established taboos such that there

will no longer be any good reasons for sacred rules concerning food, for particular sorts of food which may not be eaten, or for special cultic killing rites for meat, for religiously-required forms of dress, for beliefs of impurity or impropriety concerning women's menstrual cycles. It is not that these things will suddenly be abolished, but that in every case the same realities will gradually come to be looked at differently: is such and such a food good for you, or for us?; is such and such a form of dress appropriate?; might not we agree on such and such a communal fast for those strong enough to do so?²⁸

²⁷ The survey was conducted as part of the *Inquiry into the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2012 and the Marriage Amendment Bill 2012*. It was not a statistically significant survey, and overall the number of respondents who supported the amendment bills (64% and 60.5% respectively) was greater than the number opposed (36% and 39.5% respectively). A selection of comments, from which I have drawn these two, was published on the inquiry's website (http://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=spl/a/bill%20marriage/survey.htm, accessed 22 September 2014).

²⁸ Alison, 'Sacrifice, law and the Catholic faith', pp.80-81.

It seems to me that we are at a point in the life of our community and our religious tradition, where something of the false sacred character of our practice of heterosexual marriage has begun to be visible. And this means that we are being invited to let go of the old religious taboos that have scaffolded and enmeshed it, often hiddenly, with mechanisms of exclusion and quasi-violent sacrifice. And I sense that, contrary to much of the rhetoric surrounding these questions, this may signal not the end of Christian marriage, but the fuller liberation of its authentically sanctifying potential. For now that we have glimpsed the distinction between the false sacred conception of marriage, hedged about by fear and arbitrary rule, and the possibility of being opened through profound mutual self-giving to participation in the life of God, then our understanding of what are the truly Christian questions to be asked concerning heterosexual and same-sex marriage, as well as concerning divorce and co-habitation, will be different.²⁹

Recall again what Alison said of taboos concerning food: ‘It is not that these things will suddenly be abolished, but that in every case the same realities will gradually come to be looked at differently: is such and such a food good for you, or for us?’ In the same way, the question has gradually come to be asked about same-sex unions: is the possibility of same-sex marriage, good for you or for us? Of course, part of what needs to be worked out is what ‘good for us’ actually means. Increasingly, however, it is difficult to disregard the ordinary, incarnate criteria for discerning the human good (vitality, compassion for others, joyful participation in the common life of the community) in favour of arbitrary claims about what is allegedly ‘ordained by God’. For if in the unions of our brothers and sisters who happen to be gay, we recognise the same possibility of non-possessive, self-giving, unconditional love which characterises the best of heterosexual unions, which transforms lover and beloved, and gives life to all, then these unions are equally sacramental signs of God’s love for the world. As such, I believe, they exemplify what any of us, straight or gay, desire to practice as marriage.

²⁹ I note here that there are those who choose not to marry precisely because they see in the institutional practice of heterosexual marriage something that is incompatible with their love (a false sacred character) and so potentially corrupting of their life together. I am thinking, among others, of a well-known Australian couple, David and Emma Pocock, who have formalised their relationship with a commitment ceremony but have refused to marry legally because ‘we didn’t want to participate in a ceremony that doesn’t allow others to take part due to their sexual orientation’. *When David Met Emma*, www.news.com.au/lifestyle/relationships/love-story/story-fnet09p2-1226645450501 (accessed 11 December 2014).