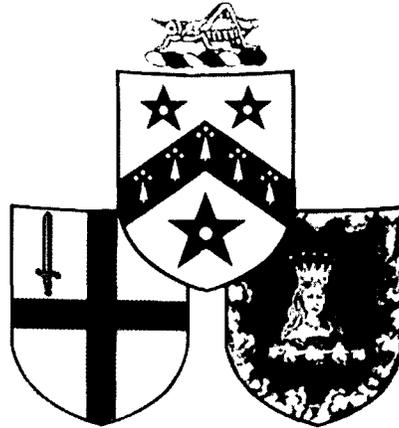


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**NEGOTIATING THE ETHICAL MINEFIELD**

Lecture 3

**WAS THE TROJAN HORSE GAY?**

by

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## Negotiating The Ethical Minefield

### III

#### **Was The Trojan Horse Gay?**

The topic I shall address in this lecture is the debate in the Christian Church about the moral and theological status of gay and lesbian men and women. I have given the lecture a rather dramatic title, because many commentators allege that it is this issue, above all others, that will finally blow apart the unity of the Anglican Communion, famed for its inclusivity and comprehensiveness. Living with the contradictions of gay sexuality will be one challenge too many for Anglicanism, the warning goes, and its unity will finally disintegrate like Troy. I am not a fortune-teller, so I cannot say whether that pessimistic prediction will come true. If we do come apart over this issue, however, it will be because of disagreements over theology and philosophy, not because of sex. The sexuality debate is a symptom or expression of a deeper, more substantive conflict about truth and the ways we apprehend it. So if we do break up, it will be because of profound, not superficial matters; it will be because of issues far more important than sexuality. That is why I want in this lecture to summarise and draw conclusions from my argument so far, before turning to the gay and lesbian issue as an example of the way in which an underlying philosophical conflict expresses itself.

I have taken up a point of view in this series of lectures about the nature and role of morality. Let me summarise some of the claims I have made. I have claimed that morality is a human construct; it is something that we ourselves have created. This may seem too obvious to be disputed, until we remember that many of our moral traditions claim to be the mind and command of God. Bringing God into the moral debate is problematic, however, no matter which way we go. If we think of God as the dictator of our moral systems, we run into difficulties when we confront their dynamic and changeful nature. We have already observed the difficulty believers encounter when they conclude that a given commandment or custom is one their reason can no longer accept. The example I have used is the role and status of women and their freedom to share with men privileges and opportunities from which

they were historically excluded by divine command. If there is no longer any reason why women should be excluded from a certain role, other than the commandment of God, then we have created a crisis for our understanding of God. This is why many conservative interpreters of scripture are in a state of confusion over the role of women in the Church. According to the most straightforward reading of some of the things Paul says, women should not hold positions of leadership over men. This places us in a dilemma. We either have to deny the evidence of history and our own experience, which shows that women are just as likely to be good leaders as men, or we deny the infallibility of Paul. The sane and obvious thing to do is to say that Paul got it wrong or, more appropriately, that what was right for Paul's day is wrong for ours. If we take that sane and rational approach, however, we relativise and contextualise the way we use God and the claims we have historically made on behalf of God. We are, as it were, putting the word God into quotation marks when we use it in moral discourse. We are admitting that it is the way we emphasise the seriousness of a particular moral tradition, but we dare not treat it as the last word on the subject, because last words are usually overtaken by events.

Of course, this is not the same thing as saying that none of the moral traditions for which we claim divine sanction has permanent authority over us. Some ancient moral traditions still have self-evidencing authority, but it is their obviousness that gives them authority, not their divine warrant. "Thou shalt do no murder" is a moral imperative in any civilised society, accepted by unbelievers and believers alike, because of its obviousness. In other words, we hold the principle on moral, not theological grounds. We justify it by reference to the way in which violating it would cause harm to persons or their interests or violate their rights or cause injustice. The argument from divine sanction, by itself, does none of these things. We obey the commandment because murder obviously violates the important moral principle that we should not harm persons, not because it is a divine command. This is why John Harris says that, *For a moral judgement to be respectable it must have something to say about just why a supposed wrong action is wrongful. If it fails to meet this test it is a preference and not a moral judgement at all.*<sup>1</sup> To meet this test, it is clearly not enough to quote the authority of God.

Morality is something we construct in response to the tension created by nature or the life-force, and human consciousness and the sense of personal responsibility it creates. All of this is seen with particular clarity in the area of sexuality, where the life-force or pressure of the species is indifferent to our own personal contentment and creates an acute personal tension within us. Sexual morality is our attempt to order and contain that tension. But we have already seen how many of these moral constructions are arbitrary and revisable. This is why it is important to understand them from within their original contexts, as far as we are able to do so. There is an inescapable tendency to solidify our experiments into traditions, to establish them as normative, so that they guarantee our automatic consent. Traditions work as long as they operate in this unconscious way; they fail when we begin to question them and start withdrawing our consent from them. This begins to happen when the tradition is no longer in touch with the original context that gave it power and plausibility.

God's role is problematic, whichever way we jump, therefore. We have already seen that the positivist solution that treats the whole tradition as an unchanging divine imperative is likely to be sunk in the flow of change that characterises human experience, bringing God into contempt with those who, for highly moral reasons, can no longer accept a particular element of the tradition. This is why many of the debates among religious believers end up sounding like the war in Gulliver's Travels between those who insisted that a boiled egg should only be opened at the big end and those who insisted on the sharp end. All that is left is the *taboo* or prohibition, long since uncoupled from the context in which it originally made sense.

There is, however, an important subtlety we must observe here. Human freedom of choice, even if the choice is irrational, is one of our most important values, provided it does not clash with other, even more important values. People have the right to opt for what is called an intact moral community, if they want to. An intact moral community is a body, such as a religious group, that chooses to maintain an existing tradition in its entirety, in spite of the critical erosions of time and change upon it. Choosing to submit to an intact moral system is one way of avoiding the pain and

expenditure of time that moral dilemmas place us in. We rarely reach final, universally compelling conclusions in moral debate, but we do have to make decisions for our own lives and the lives of others. The root meaning of the word decide suggests the activity of cutting through, rather than painstakingly unravelling, a tangled knot. One way of dealing with these complexities is to opt into a system and let it decide for us. This does not deliver us completely from intellectual argument, however, because we will continue to live in a larger culture that embraces a number of other possible moral approaches, but our act of submission to a particular system removes moral uncertainty from our lives by transferring it to an external authority whose judgements we obey. However, moral pluralism is one of the distinguishing facts of our era, so opting into an intact moral community will not deliver us from the pains of disagreement with others, though it may, as a decision in intellectual economy, release us from personal doubt. There may be friction with other intact moral communities that operate from different premises, and there will certainly be conflict with groups that maintain an open approach to disputed questions.

This lecture is not about the existence of God and the intellectual difficulties that certain ways of holding faith create for believers, but if we hold that there is a reality to which our word God refers, which is more than the sum of our aspirations and longings, we are not thereby freed from the need to make choices in the kind of world we live in. It is also true that whatever choices we make, even choices that claim to be prompted by God, we will remain inescapably fixed on the human side of these equations. We can only know the divine mystery and the life it commends from within our own human experience, because no other experience is available to us. There is no Archimedean point outside our own experience from which we can survey the issue and pronounce upon it. We always see through the dark glass of our humanity, even when we are looking at God. A legitimate way of arguing, therefore, could be that if there is a reality which we think of as the divine mystery it has to be expressing itself through the plural, striving and incomplete nature of the universe itself. Whether we think of the universe as being in God or God as being in the universe, therefore, we have to acknowledge that God is experienced in the struggle of life and not in some magical rescue from it. The only other approach with any kind of

coherence that retains belief in God is some kind of dualism that pits the creation against God, and this causes more problems than it solves and usually creates contempt for the created order. Dualistic systems, as we saw in the last lecture, always end by creating between God and nature a gulf that can only be bridged by some mediating system, knowledge of which becomes the perquisite of an official caste or priesthood.

The vice of all official systems is that the power relation, the need to control or be in charge of the exploration, takes over and inhibits our ability to go on asking questions and struggling with truth. This is why there is an ancient and important distinction between the priestly and prophetic poles in religion. The tension between the two types is expressed, though never resolved, in the bible. It is true that the priestly, controlling type of consciousness retrojected into scripture a dominant editorial overview, but the prophetic voice was never silenced, the voice of the critic and satirist, the voice we hear in Jesus. All official, priestly systems, whether political or religious, operate in the same way. Literary fabrication becomes necessary, what Plato would have called the necessary lie, so a sacred book is discovered and imposed with great solemnity upon the people. The evils that have befallen the nation or the sacred community, it is claimed, were the result of estrangement from the sacred text which has now been miraculously recovered and must be severely imposed by the priestly elite, whether it is a political cadre or a caste of sacred officials. Priesthoods, sacred or secular, all operate through the concept of sin or fault. Priests create a place of power for themselves by getting into position between nature and God, or humanity and political ideology. They become the mediators of value and truth and disobedience of their law acquires the name "sin". Conveniently, the means of becoming reconciled, whether with God or the Party, work to establish the priest more thoroughly in the mediating role, the role of fixer or broker: the priest alone redeems. This was one of the assumptions that Jesus, speaking from within the prophetic tradition, challenged by his claim that the kingdom of God, in Dominic Crossan's phrase, was "brokerless", required no mediator, so that people did not have to be issued passports by the priesthood to achieve access to God. Jesus said that he had come to remit sins and his most radical parables are all about a divine forgiveness

that precedes human repentance. Nietzsche, who revered Christ but hated Christianity, gives us an echo of this prophetic voice in scripture that is challenged but never defeated by the priestly megaphone. He wrote: *From a psychological point of view, "sins" are indispensable in any society organised by priests: they are the actual levers of power, the priest lives on sins, he needs "the commission of sins".....Supreme law: "God forgives him who repents" - in plain language: who subjects himself to the priest.*<sup>2</sup> By *sin* priests usually mean the private struggles of individuals, rarely the oppression of systems, and hardly ever the systems they serve.

All priesthoods or official systems live parasitically on the anguish we find in searching for honest ways to live in a world of competing claims. They count upon our weariness, our longing to be rescued from struggle and uncertainty in one bound. We can have compassion for the human need to be rescued from the burden of freedom in this way; we can even see the stabilising effect that some total systems have had upon human anarchy; but we also have to admit that they can be an abdication of human strength and freedom, a handing over of these precious gifts to the powerful, a withdrawal from the struggle. For personal reasons, we may choose one of these absolute solutions, the way people with spare capital sometimes hand it over to investment companies to manage for them. That may be a sensible way to manage our intellectual economy. It will give us the security of knowing that we have a large and prudent tradition behind us. What we cannot do, however, is claim that this is the only way to practise in the market of ideas. If God is ultimate reality, then all truth must be contained in that reality, so all struggle with truth is engagement with God, even if it appears to be a rejection of the claims tradition makes about God. The saying, *If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him*, is a warning against all traditions that claim to have an exclusive patent on the mind of God. Just as we are increasingly recognising the rich plurality of human cultures and traditions, even contradictory ones, so must we recognise the height and depth and variety of the human experience of God. This means that we can go on exploring the mystery of God, while retaining an appropriate, if critical, awareness of the traditions that have come down to us. We will recognise the important value of continuity, but we will also acknowledge the

danger of human laziness and the seductive effect of powerful interests or priesthods upon the human longing for painless stability.

This means that it is important to go on thinking about our approach to what is called "revelation", especially in its written form. The concept of revelation as a direct or unmediated word from God has been critically eroded by the knowledge we now have of the history of the formation of ancient texts. It is this cumulative process of erosion that gives a specious respectability to those who call for "an all or nothing" approach to the bible. Once you start picking and choosing, it is claimed, the whole thing unravels. There is considerable intellectual dishonesty in this approach, however, because it refuses to acknowledge that even avowed traditionalists have hierarchies of value in their interpretation of scripture. I pointed out in my last lecture the significant disparity in the way Christians have interpreted the many strictures on money and possessions in the New Testament, compared to their approach to the paucity of texts on the subject of human sexuality. The debate on the ordination of women has already caused a massive reconsideration of our attitude to the authority of particular texts. We need to take the process further and find the courage to rethink our attitude to the authority of scripture as a whole and how we should use it today. As we do this, however, we will have to acknowledge that there will always be an asymmetry between the personal and official approaches to this matter, not unlike the distinction between the prophetic and the priestly approaches to the mystery of God and the nature of the world. The Church as a priestly edifice will always contend for the traditional understanding of scriptural authority, because it bolsters its own claim to be the official mediator between the divine and the human. The prophetic approach, on the other hand, will have more regard for the truth of experience than for official dogma or institutional stability, and will have an enduring suspicion of texts that are used as excuses for punishing or devaluing people. One of the paradoxes of scripture is the very presence within it of this prophetic, self-contradictory tradition that calls us to overthrow systems that claim to mediate the God who needs no mediator. This is why we should not shirk the task of rethinking the authority of the bible over our lives, allowing the living scripture of our own experience to challenge the dead letter of the written law. We have always done this with written scripture,

though rarely with complete candour. We have always found ways to get round the obvious meaning of a text when it no longer conforms to our own understanding of value and truth. And, contrary to what traditionalists often say to us, this is not because we want to avoid hard sayings that cause us discomfort. We are all experts at pointing out the importance of texts that bring pain to others, while carefully avoiding the ones that challenge our own comforts. The rich always find it easy to call upon the poor to make sacrifices they would never dream of making themselves. Heterosexuals, especially Christian heterosexuals, are expert at calling upon homosexuals to deny themselves consolations they themselves could not live without. We are all inescapably caught in a web of complicity here, so we should be careful about rushing to judgement on our troubled neighbours. The heart of the message of Jesus was a challenge to the powerful to acknowledge their complicity in the fact of human misery. Only the destitute were innocent, he told them; only the wretched were guiltless; only those who had no bread had no fault. And in today's debate about human sexuality he would probably say that only the gay are without hypocrisy.

Paradoxically, it is scripture itself that calls us to overturn scripture; it is the witness of the living word of Jesus that challenges us to follow the logic that scripture was made for humanity and not humanity for scripture. We should not, therefore, have to torture scripture into self-contradictory positions, when it no longer conforms to our experience of truth and value. It is much more honest to abandon it, acknowledging that it witnesses to an earlier, no longer appropriate, attitude to human relationships. We have done this over its attitude to slavery; we have done it over its attitude to usury or the taking of interest, the very basis of the modern global market economy; we seem unable to make this liberating change in our attitude to human sexuality, because of a moral virus that invaded the Christian bloodstream during its encounter with Gnosticism. It cannot be the texts that cause the problem, because we are adept at eluding the force of texts we reject on other grounds. But how are we to think about the texts themselves, why have such claims been made on their behalf?

We are involved in an inescapable circularity here. Christians believe the bible is inspired, because the bible itself tells them so, but what do we mean by the claim?

We use the term in secular ways, so we might find a clue there. We talk about the *canon* of scripture and the word suggests measurement or comparison. These books have a certain definitive quality about them compared to lesser works, we say. And we apply the same criterion to secular literature. Scholars talk about the Western literary canon, for instance. Individuals may disagree about the right of particular authors to a place in the canon, but they would agree that there is a continuum of excellence and it is an interesting and amusing game to place the names of dead, white, mainly male writers on the list. We would probably all agree that writing covers a wide spectrum of value, just like cooking. Some writing is the equivalent of junk-food, quick and stimulating, but of no enduring value to us; other writing has the ability to go on challenging and delighting the generations. We can be fairly certain that a century from now people will still be reading and performing Shakespeare, whereas Jeffrey Archer will be unremembered. Shakespeare is in the canon, Archer never will be. The same is true of music, probably the highest of the human arts. The discerning recognise the intrinsic quality of good art, they are compelled by its self-evidencing greatness. There is a canon of western philosophy, as well, even though it has been described as nothing but a footnote to Plato.

The bible is one of these canons in its own right. It is the record of a particular set of experiences of the human encounter with the meaning of God. It varies enormously within itself. There are obvious differences of quality between, say, the official, priestly version of Old Testament history in the Book of Chronicles and the white-hot prophecies of Jeremiah or the three writers in the book of Isaiah. There is an equally obvious disparity in the New Testament between, say, the Letters of James and II Peter, and Paul's magnificent Letter to the Romans. It is always the same test that is applied. We do not revere the books because of their official status, but because of their intrinsic value. In fact, the books that claim too much for themselves, the official texts, are transparent in their special pleading, like all propaganda, and leave us cold or make us angry; while the great prophecies of Isaiah or the parables of Jesus, even if we cannot fully understand them, challenge and exalt us. In all of this we are already doing the wise and obvious thing, we are recognising that inspired material, like good wine, needs no "bush" or advertisement for itself, no official authorisation requiring

our consent. It compels our assent by its own quality, and our judgement of that quality is a crucial part of the revelatory process. What we bring to scripture, therefore, is as important as what we get from it. We are inescapably led to the acknowledgement of a canon within a canon in our use of the bible, as in our use of all great literature and art; but we have to go further. Is any of it to be taken as positive law and, if so, by what principle of discernment? Shakespeare usually exalts and stimulates me, but I do not believe that Polonius's speech to Laertes in *Hamlet* has legal authority over me, though much of it is sound advice. Why should I offer Paul a different treatment? We have already seen how we dealt with Paul over the place of women in the Church. Common sense prevailed over any claim that Paul's strictures had permanent authority for us. They were a historic photograph of the customs of his day, but we persuaded ourselves that they were no longer normative for our time. The same has to be said of the few things that Paul said about same-sex relations in the Letter to the Romans in chapter one. *They have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and have offered reverence and worship to created things instead of to the Creator. Blessed is he for ever, Amen. As a result God has given them up to shameful passions. Among them women have exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and men too, giving up natural relations with women, burn with lust for one another; males behave indecently with males, and are paid in their own persons the fitting wage of such perversion.* We can try to torture a liberal interpretation out of that text by claiming that Paul did not understand same sex relations in the way we now do, so his strictures, which seem to be based on fear of idol worship of some sort, cannot apply to our time. The really honest way for us to deal with the question is to ask, even if Paul would have opposed what we mean by same-sex relations, why his opposition should be normative for us today. In other parts of Pauline theology we make choices. We still find his metaphors for explaining the power of Christ's death suggestive, and his doctrine of God's justifying grace liberating; we no longer make much of his expectation of the imminent return of Jesus, and some of us find his certainty that all rulers get their authority from God dangerous as well as unconvincing. Sensibly, we make choices here, we take what still has authority for us, because of its self-evidencing power, and reject the rest. In fact, we no longer treat an injunction from scripture as having moral authority over us simply because it

is in scripture. It has to have moral force independent of its scriptural context. We judge scripture by our own moral standards, not the other way round. We now do this in most areas except the area of sexual behaviour. We must find the honesty and courage to apply this criterion of authenticity to the tangled area of human sexuality. Actual human sexual experience no longer accords with the traditional interpretation of the few biblical texts there are on the subject. We are, in practice, if not yet in law, moving from a rules morality to a values morality. We no longer believe that any sexual act, as such, is right or wrong except on moral grounds. You cannot define its moral nature from the sexual content. The morality of the act lies not in its sexuality, whatever it is, but on whether it causes harm to persons or their interests or violates their rights or causes injustice. In my next lecture I shall try to explore in greater depth the application of these criteria to some of the situations we find ourselves, as well as asking how we can help people live the good life in our day. As far as the Trojan horse is concerned, we ought to accept that the city of scriptural authority has already fallen, and we are now engaged in trying to be honest about the consequences.

**Richard Holloway**

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<sup>1</sup> John Harris. *Wonderwoman and Superman*. OUP. 1992. page 42

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Anti-Christ*. Penguin edition. 1990. section 26. page 150

# *GRESHAM COLLEGE*

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