

ECCLESIASTICAL SEX SCANDALS:  
THE LACK OF A CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY OF DESIRE

*Introduction: The Training of Desire*

In the late fourth century Gregory of Nyssa, the younger brother of Basil of Caesarea and one of the great Cappadocian Fathers who forged the ‘orthodox’ doctrine of the Trinity in response to late Arianism, wrote a remarkable treatise ‘On Virginité’ which has puzzled his readership ever since.<sup>1</sup> The reason for this puzzlement – which has, if anything, intensified of late, leading to a string of competing interpretative articles about what Gregory could possibly have meant in this treatise – lies in the fact that Gregory was almost certainly married at the time of his writing of it. Is his high praise of virginité – a life-style embraced by his admired elder brother, Basil – therefore merely *rhetorical*, even ‘ironic’? Or does his insight about the particular values of married life, too, succumb to an inflated rhetoric: does marriage simply pale, finally, alongside what he perceives as the infinitely higher vocation of celibacy? Or is it neither of these messages, exactly, that he propounds, but something more subtle? I think the latter, as I shall be arguing in due course. For what Gregory presents to us, in this unique text, is a vision of desire – and its right ordering in relation to God –

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, ‘On Virginité’, trans. William Moore, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. II.5 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 343–71. For commentary, see especially Mark D. Hart, ‘Gregory of Nyssa’s Ironic Praise of the Celibate Life’, *The Heythrop Journal* 33 (1992), 1–19; idem, ‘Reconciliation of Body and Soul: Gregory of Nyssa’s Deeper Theology of Marriage’, *Theological Studies* 51(1990), 450–78; and Valerie A. Karras, ‘A Re-evaluation of Marriage, Celibacy, and Irony in Gregory of Nyssa’s *On Virginité*’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13 (2005), 111–21.

<sup>1</sup> Gregory, ‘On Virginité’ 7, 352.

that (puzzlingly to the modern mind, as indeed for the most part to the ancient) does *not* require a disjunctive approach to marriage and celibacy. Rather, it entertains the thought that the godly ordering of desire is what *conjoins* the ascetic aims of marriage and celibacy, at their best, and equally what judges both of them, at their worst. Thus, at the height of his argument in the *de virginitate* Gregory can write that the choice for his reader is whether ultimately to be a ‘Pleasure-lover’ or a ‘God-lover’, that is, to make a choice about what the *final* telos of one’s desire is. Not that sexual pleasure holds any intrinsic fear for him, unlike for his near contemporary in the West, Augustine of Hippo, whose epic and tortured struggles for sexual continence we know about in detail from the *Confessions*.<sup>2</sup> Rather, says Gregory, it is all a matter of due balance or ‘proportion’. The key issue, in fact, for Gregory, is a *training* of desire, a life-long commitment to what we might now call the ‘long haul’ of personal, erotic transformation, and thereby of reflection on the final significance of all one’s desires before God.

Such a reference as this to an obscure, and puzzling, text of the patristic era might seem an odd place to open a discussion of the contemporary sex crises of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. But there is a method in my madness. For I seek, in this chapter, to outline, first, some of the problematic features of the journalistic – or ‘high popular’ – responses to the sex crises in both the Catholic and Anglican churches, and to indicate how strangely lacking here is a distinctively *theological* analysis of the fundamental issue of desire. Several well-publicized journalist volumes on the crises have appeared and are of varying quality and insight: they range from Steinfels’s highly-nuanced historical assessment of the Roman Church’s current crises, though Sipe’s largely psychological account of celibacy, via Greeley’s sociological riposte to Sipe’s pessimism on the priesthood, to the troublingly voyeuristic journalism of sexual abuse in France’s account, as also in

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: O. U. P., 1998).

Berry and Renner.<sup>3</sup> But my initial point here is that historical, political, sociological, and above all psychological theories abound about the causes for the scandals in the Roman Catholic Church, as indeed also for the threatened schism in the Anglican Communion.<sup>4</sup> But there is very little that could be called a sustained *theological* analysis of the problem of human sexual desire encoded in these two notable ecclesial furores.

But some striking ‘cultural contradictions’<sup>5</sup> underlie these journalistic responses. Despite their own suppression of the theological, such responses are potentially more teasing and suggestive than the ‘official’, disjunctive theological opinions (‘conservative’ vs. ‘liberal’) that are currently overlaid like a clamping template upon them. ‘Conservatives’ here, of course, tend to have recourse either to biblical injunctions, which they take to be unambiguous, or to magisterial authority, often expressed, understandably, with a high degree of suspicion for modern, secular post-Freudian reflections on sexuality. ‘Liberals’, in contrast, tend to suggest, overbearingly, that they know better (in the light of modern psychological theory) than anything that the Bible or tradition or authority could disclose to them. The battle lines are then inexorably fixed. And it is of course this disjunction between religious ‘conservatives’ and ‘liberals’ that tends to dominate the headlines, and further stultify any newly *creative* theological way forward as the two parties retire into their entrenched bunkers of mutual hostility and suspicion.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003); A. W. Richard Sipe, *Celibacy in Crisis: A Secret World Revisited* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003); Andrew M. Greeley, *Priests: A Calling in Crisis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004); David France, *Our Fathers: The Secret Life of the Catholic Church in an Age of Scandal* (New York: Broadway, 2004); Jason Berry and Gerald Renner, *Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> On the latter, see Stephen Bates, *A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality* (London: Tauris, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> For this term, see Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2nd edn, 1996).

The central thesis of this chapter, then, is that there is another mode of discussion that could cut creatively across the established ecclesial battle-lines – ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’, ‘pro-gay’ and ‘anti-gay’ – and draw both camps into a new, and serious, reflection on *ascetical theology, tout court*. It is true that in order to get to where I want to be I am deliberately avoiding the usual pitfalls of a discussion that starts with, and then gets bogged down in, contentious biblical passages on ‘sodomy’: in short, I am not beginning with what might be called a ‘biblical/ethical’ approach. Instead I want first to establish, and negotiate, a new interaction between Freud, on the one hand, and pre-modern ascetical theologies such as Gregory’s, on the other, which the journalistic mind may indeed find fantastic, but which could be much more rich and strange than is expected. This will not, note, be a feeble kind of *via media*, the sort of compromised *rapprochement* between a secular ideology and a religious tradition that a study of the origins of the Anglican Communion might lead one to expect of me, an Anglican theologian. No, it will actually be an exposure of the richness, complexity and *unfinished* nature of Freud’s notion of ‘sublimation’, such that we are forced back to its sources in Plato and his Christian inheritors, and required to think afresh on matters that Freud himself never definitively parsed. Such, then, is the modest task of this brief undertaking: I cannot, of course, *solve* our current cultural dilemmas on the inexorable nature of human desire; but I do at least hope to muse creatively in such a way that new paths of theological discussion can be opened up.

#### *The Sex Scandals and ‘Cultural Contradictions’*

Anyone who has attentively followed the press coverage of the recent sex scandals in the Roman Catholic Church, on the one hand, and of the ecclesiastical divisions over homosexuality in the Anglican Communion, on the other, may have become aware of certain pressing contemporary ‘cultural contradictions’ on matters of sexuality and desire that these two crises enshrine, and to

which I now wish to draw explicit attention. It might be objected that even to name these two areas of ecclesial public furore thus in one breath is already to have committed a dire, and offensive, fallacy of ‘castigation by lumping’<sup>6</sup>; for surely the abusive and illegal activities of paedophile Roman Catholic priests must *in no wise* be conflated with the honest and open vowed relationships of gay Episcopalians, including one of such who is now a bishop? To this we must reply immediately that *of course* the difference is ethically crucial – not only in the eyes of the law, but in terms of the unequal power relationships, and the protective shroud of ecclesiastical secrecy, that have marked the Roman Catholic scandal in contrast to the Anglican scandal. Yet at the same time one cannot help noticing, simply by reflecting on the odd temporal coincidence of these two, very different, ecclesiastical paroxysms over same-sex desire, that a latent ‘cultural contradiction’ of great significance is here made manifest. There is a deep and pervasive public pessimism, on the one hand, over the very *possibility* of faithful celibacy, and yet an equally deep insistence that *certain* forms of sexual desire must at all costs not be enacted. This first cultural contradiction was forcefully, if perhaps unconsciously, expressed by Garry Wills in his famous article ‘The Case Against Celibacy’. Wills writes: ‘The whole celibacy structure is a house of cards, and honesty about any one problem can make the structure of pretense come toppling down... Treating paedophilia as a separate problem is impossible, since it thrives by its place in a compromised network of evasion. ... [The] *real enemy is celibacy*.’<sup>7</sup> Yet at the beginning of the same article Wills had inveighed against ‘the worst aspect’ of the crisis, ‘the victimization of the young’ and ‘the clerical epidemic of ... *crimes*’.<sup>8</sup> In other words, celibacy is impossible, compromising, and delusive. The whole system smacks of unreality; yet those

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<sup>6</sup> To use one of Jeffrey Stout’s memorable phrases; see, e.g., his *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 128.

<sup>7</sup> Garry Wills, ‘The Case Against Celibacy’, *The Boston Globe Magazine*, 24 March 2002, 10–24 (22, 24).

<sup>8</sup> Wills, ‘Case’, 10.

who do have unmanageable and illegal desires must be held to account and punished: they must and *should* be celibate. Herein, then, we detect our first, and profound, ‘cultural contradiction’: celibacy is impossible, but celibacy *must* be embraced by some with unacceptable and illegal desires.

Now of course once the familiar ‘liberal’/‘conservative’ divide is imposed on this first ‘cultural contradiction’, we get a certain diversion from it and an ostensibly much clearer disjunction: the ‘liberals’ happily condone faithful vowed gay relationships but condemn illegal and abusive paedophile ones, and the ‘conservatives’ – whether Protestant or Catholic – disavow and ban all of them by appeal to biblical injunctions against sodomy, or with reference to ‘natural’ law. *This* division (between ‘pro-gay’ and ‘anti-gay’, ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives’), however, then tends to get most of the public attention in ecclesiastical circles and in the press, thus diverting us from the underlying and unsolved cultural conundrum: how can sexual control be demanded of *anyone* if celibacy is intrinsically ‘impossible’? To this issue we shall shortly return.

A second ‘cultural contradiction’ seems to afflict the treatment of homosexual desire versus heterosexual desire in contemporary popular discussion of church divisions. For it has been a marked feature of both the Roman Catholic and Anglican sex-crises that almost all the press attention has been focused on same-sex relationships, whether paedophile, ‘ephebophile’, or (mature) homosexual. It is as if, by comparison, no crisis at all has afflicted the *heterosexual* world *vis-à-vis* church life and what we might call the general ‘economy of desire’. But anyone surveying the cultural and political scene with a dispassionate eye would surely be forced to come to other conclusions. The general erosion of the instance of life-long marriage in North America, the rise in divorce rates, and the concomitant upsurge in the number of single-parent families, are all well-known to us in secular discussions, but are by no means absent from church-attending families, and indeed Protestant *clerical* families. In April 2005, for instance, the clergy of an Episcopalian Diocese in New England

received a mailing calmly announcing that one of their suffragan bishops was undergoing a divorce. One could not but be struck by the air of enforced ‘normalcy’ and psychological adjudication that hung over this letter. There were no regrets, no confessions, no distress even, and certainly no reference to either biblical or Christian tradition: just an insistence that the couple had been ‘faithful in caring for ... each other’ in the past, but were now ‘clear’ about the fact that their marriage was ‘ending’. Clergy were further informed by their suffragan bishop, in psychologized language: ‘I want to assure you that I am taking *care of myself* in this *period of change*.’ Apart from one reference to an ‘excellent Spiritual Director’ that the bishop had now decided to see, there was no theological reference in her letter at all. I wish to cast no specific judgments on this case since I have no independent information about it at all, and even if I did, the matter would surely be morally complex and demand due compassion. But in fact, the news of the ending of this marriage makes me much sadder than the letter would seem to warrant. I cite the case only to note an instance of the current culturally-condoned acknowledgement of the impermanence of marriage, even in the ranks of bishops.

Yet my more important, second point here is this: despite the extensive evidences of clerical divorce, and (quite differently) of clerical abuse or philandering, both Catholic and Protestant, in *heterosexual* encounters or relationships, the more emotive issue of clerical *homoerotic* desire currently tends to continue to glean much greater public attention in the press and related publications than anything to do with heterosexual sex. It is as if, suddenly in early twenty-first century America, homoeroticism has become sufficiently open to discussion to be publicly, and emotively, dissected in the press, and then either condoned or condemned. It is, however, insufficiently integrated into a *general* discussion of ‘desire’ to make comparisons with heterosexual patterns of behaviour a worthy topic of sustained theological reflection. Yet one might well say that our age is in a crisis — not so

much of homosexuality, but more generally of erotic *faithfulness*.<sup>9</sup> However, this is scarcely a chic reflection, granted the current prurient obsession with homosexuality, and the concomitant diversion from heterosexual failures in ascetic self-examination.

A third and final ‘cultural contradiction’ that I want to propose hovers over the common assumption that celibacy and marriage are somehow *opposites*, with one ostensibly involving no ‘sex’ at all, and the other, again supposedly, involving as much sex as one or both partners might like at any one time. But this, on reflection, is also a perplexing cultural fantasy that does not bear close, analytic scrutiny. The ‘ethnographic’ evidence provided in Richard Sipe’s book *Celibacy in Crisis* is revealing here. Not only does faithful (or what Sipe calls ‘achieved’) celibacy generally involve, perforce, a *greater* consciousness of sexual desire and its frustration than a life lived with regular sexual satisfaction (that attacks one side of the false presumption); but married sexuality, on the other hand, is rarely as carefree and mutually satisfied as this third ‘cultural contradiction’ might presume.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, a *realistic* reflection on long and faithful marriages (now almost in the minority) will surely reveal periods of enforced ‘celibacy’ even *within* marriages during periods of delicate pregnancy, parturition, illness, physical separation, or impotence, which are simply the lot of the marital ‘long haul’, realistically considered. And if this is so, then the generally-assumed disjunction between ‘celibacy’ and ‘marriage’ will turn out to be not as profound as it seems. Rather, the reflective, faithful celibate and the reflective, faithful married person may have more in common — by way of prayerful surrendering of inevitably *thwarted* desire to God — than the unreflective or faithless celibate, or the carelessly happy, or indeed unhappily careless, married person.

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<sup>9</sup> On this same point see David Brooks, ‘The Power of Marriage’, *The New York Times*, 22 November 2003, A15.

<sup>10</sup> See Sipe, *Celibacy*, XX-XX.

We shall return fleetingly to these three ‘cultural contradictions’ I have outlined at the end of this chapter. We cannot go further now, however, without attacking a different sort of cultural presumption head-on: that of the supposed psychological *dangers* of celibacy or of so-called ‘repressed’ sexuality. But we may here be surprised to discover what Freud himself said on this matter, and to him we shall now turn. Could it be that he actually gives us, despite himself, certain back-handed resources for thinking afresh *theologically* about ‘desire’?

*The Re-channeling of Desire: Freud and His Precursors*

1. Freud on ‘Sublimation’: Desire Without God

The journalistic commentators on the Roman Catholic sex crises tend to take the view, as we have mentioned, that celibacy is ‘impossible’, or virtually so. Even Sipe – who wishes, despite his sustained exposé of clerical failures in celibacy, to defend the estimated 2% of Roman Catholic priests whom he thinks (as he puts it) ‘achieve’ celibacy – avers that this ‘achievement’ is always at the cost of earlier ‘experimentation’ and fumbling, through which the priest must inevitably pass *en route* to something like mature sexual balance.<sup>11</sup> These analyses are gloomy: Sipe estimates that nearly half of so-called ‘celibates’ are actually not so at any one time. Underlying these accounts seems to lurk the psychological presumption, often attributed to Freud, that celibacy is unnatural and even harmful; or if not *inherently* ‘unnatural’, then distinctly ‘unusual’ and ‘utopian’.<sup>12</sup> It might come as some surprise, then, to find that Freud’s own views on ‘sublimation’ were not only malleable over time, remaining finally somewhat unclear and inconsistent, but that he moved distinctly away from his early, and purely biological, account of ‘Eros’ and its power for redirection. At no time, in

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<sup>11</sup> Sipe, *Celibacy*, 301–2.

<sup>12</sup> For such a minority report amongst journalistic commentators, see Steinfels, *A People Adrift*, 330. Steinfels is considerably more charitable than most American journalists on celibacy.

fact (as far as I can see), does Freud's position provide a mandate for the view that 'sublimation' is *harmful* – or, at any rate, any more harmful than the psychological repressions we necessarily negotiate all the time, according to Freud. On the contrary, as I shall now sketch, Freud's later view is that if civilization is to endure we must all be engaged in forms of 'sublimation', and that celibacy has always been the choice of a 'minority' who interpret this pressure 'religiously'.

Two points about Freud on sexual desire seem particularly intriguing in our quest for a revitalized *theological* account of such desire. The first is that we can trace a distinct change in his views on 'Eros' from his early writings on the biological drive of sex in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and the *Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, through a transitional period represented by *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to a mature sensibility about the possible re-channeling of 'erotic' power in a less biological and less repressive sense, in *Civilization and Its Discontents* and *Why War?*<sup>13</sup> These shifts are highly illuminating and show how unafraid Freud was to change his mind, indeed, how his mind – even when changed – remained somewhat unclear on the matter as late as the 1930s. The shifts particularly give the lie to the popular misconstrual that Freud sees sublimation/repression as inevitably *harmful*. In his early writings, Freud rarely uses the word 'Eros', although when he does it is as a synonym for the 'Libido', the physical, biological, sexual drive which at this stage, he argues, often comes into conflict with the 'Ego'. Note that, even in this early phase, Freud is by no means of the opinion that it is harmful to *resist* physical sexual expression in all circumstances. He stresses, for instance, how harmful sexual activity itself can often be, precisely because its significance is social

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<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ed. Ritchie Robertson, trans. Joyce Crick (Oxford: O. U. P., 1999 [1900]); idem, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1985 [1916–17]); idem, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. Strachey (New York: Norton, 1975 [1920]); idem, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989 [1929–30]); idem, 'Why War?' [an open letter to Albert Einstein], in *Civilization, War and Death: Selections from Three Works by Sigmund Freud*, ed. John Rickman (London: Hogarth, 1939 [1933]), 82–97.

and not merely individual. ‘Sexuality’, he writes, has ‘advantages, but, in return for an unusually high degree of pleasure, brings dangers which threaten the individual’s life and often destroy it.’<sup>14</sup> Eros at this stage, then, is conceived biologically and as always in a state of restless negotiation and tension: it must *necessarily* be repressed in part, and hence its difficulties.

By 1920, however, Freud significantly extends his concept of Libido and more consistently labels it ‘Eros’. He also draws the Ego and the Libido closer together, rather than placing them in conflict; Eros/Libido have come now to include not just *biological* sex drive but all of the Ego’s instincts to self-preservation and the maintenance of life. At this point, too, Freud first introduces the notion of Thanatos (death) as a new binary opposite to Eros: whereas Eros is the drive that presses towards the future and new life, Thanatos looks backwards and is death-obsessed. In short, Freud has created a new binary, more publicly-oriented than the earlier individual psychic tension between Ego and Libido, and which provides a sort of Hegelian dialectic of *cultural* propulsion. No wonder, then, that his later theory of ‘sublimation’ (*Aufhebung* in German) has a wider cultural remit than his earlier account of individual biological needs and their necessary repressions. This new theory – expressed in *Civilization and its Discontents* and then, slightly differently, in *Why War?* – is now fascinatingly, and explicitly, linked to Plato’s theory of erotic ‘ascent’ to Beauty in the *Symposium*, and it is ‘what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, whether scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life’.<sup>15</sup> Although in *Civilization*, Freud remains of the opinion that such culturally-conceived *Aufhebung* comes with the danger and cost of a necessary accompanying ‘renunciation’ or ‘repression’<sup>16</sup>, it is far from clear that he consistently

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<sup>14</sup> Freud, *New Introductory Lectures*, 413.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Freud, *Why War?*, 90; quotation from idem, *Civilization*, 51. See Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Walter Hamilton (London: Penguin, 1951).

<sup>16</sup> Freud, *Civilization*, 52.

maintains this position later. As Marcuse argued, there seems to be in Freud yet another strand on ‘sublimation’ that does *not* involve repression, but rather a more straightforward transference of aggressive energy to a good, ‘erotic’ end.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in the course of a striking correspondence of 1933 initiated by Albert Einstein, Freud can express the astonishingly optimistic view, as war-clouds gathered in Europe, that ‘Erotism’ – the love instinct – could finally triumph over Hate and war and aggression (Thanatos), by a sort of *direct* transference of the energies of hate. As he now puts it to Einstein, love and hate must always go together, so that one – love – can modify or redirect the energies of the other – hate. ‘*Complete* suppression of man’s aggressive tendencies’, he concludes, ‘is not in issue; what we try is to *divert it into a channel* other than that of warfare.’<sup>18</sup> Note, then, that a discussion of ‘sublimation’, which started in Freud’s early works as a matter related to mere biological drive, has now become a theory of a *positive*, and seemingly non-repressive, ‘rechanneling’ of psychic energy. Let us keep this theme of positive ‘rechanneling’ in mind when we go back to Christian authors later: we might find more continuity with Freud, via the shared resource of Plato, than we may expect.

The second point about Freud on ‘sublimation’ that I want to stress here, however, is the issue on which he is most at odds with Christianity, and indeed with Plato. And this too is instructive, at least backhandedly, for our theological purposes, and again, not what one might expect to hear from him. For when Freud speaks about specifically *Christian* celibacy he does not inveigh against it, nor deride it as psychically dangerous or impossible – though he does say that it is only a ‘small minority’ who are ‘enabled by their constitution to find happiness, in spite of everything’ according to this path. Rather, he says – *à la* Plato’s first stages of erotic ascent in the

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<sup>17</sup> Herbert Marcuse, ‘The transformation of sexuality into eros’, in *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon, 1974), 197–221.

<sup>18</sup> Freud in Einstein and Freud, ‘Why War?’, 91, quotation with my emphasis, 93.

*Symposium* – that celibates have managed to direct their love to ‘all men alike’ rather than simply to *one*, chosen sexual ‘love-object’.<sup>19</sup> It is precisely ‘religion’ that helps them to do this, he admits; and, as we might expect from Freud, this causes him to inject a sneer. It is not that he thinks celibacy is intrinsically damaging, but rather that he has *moral* objections to the ‘religious’ idea that one should love everyone equally. First he writes: ‘A love that does not discriminate seems to me to forfeit a part of its own value.’ He goes on: ‘not all men are *worthy* of love’.<sup>20</sup> What this rhetoric hides, it seems to me, is a deep abiding *aporia* in Freud’s new, but partial, accommodation of Plato. Since there is no final theory of ‘forms’ for Freud, still less a Christian God, then the newly-embraced Platonic ladder of ascent leads nowhere: ‘Eros’ lacks eschatological, or *divine*, direction. Thus, while celibacy remains both possible, and even undamaging, for the later Freud, he cannot accept its *moral* goals, and nor can he give it final *theological* meaning.

## 2. Anders Nygren as Distractor: *Eros* and *Agape* disjoined

If we have now successfully shown, then, that Freud himself – as opposed to the contemporary popular American misunderstanding of him – sees ‘sublimation’ as personally and culturally *necessity*, and even priestly celibacy as *possible*, wherein lies the continuing felt resistance to a contemporary *theology* of desire? We have seen how Freud, motivated by sheer atheistical conviction, himself blocks the upward ascent of ‘Eros’ towards any heavenly goal. It might, however, be that Anders Nygren’s famous study *Agape and Eros* (which originally appeared in Swedish in 1930-6), rather than the secular Freud, has actually played a wider cultural role here than is normally recognized in undermining a modern Christian theology of ‘desire’. A twentieth century classic, the

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<sup>19</sup> Freud, *Civilization*, 56ff.

<sup>20</sup> Freud, *Civilization*, 57, my emphasis.

book's rigidly Lutheran (and oft-criticized) thesis is so well-known as scarcely to need another rehearsal. *Agape*, claims Nygren, is the Christian love of Jesus in the New Testament – graced, God-given, sacrificial, downward-moving, unselfish; whereas nasty Platonic *eros* or 'desire' is, in contrast, acquisitive, man-centred, upward-moving, egocentric, and needy. To again pick up our metaphor of 'channeling', we may note how frightened Nygren is about the possibility of *any* safe channeling of the alarming erotic urge: 'The idea of Agape', he writes, 'can be compared to a *small stream* which, even in the history of Christianity, flows along an extremely narrow channel and sometimes seems to lose itself entirely in its surrounding; but Eros is a *broad river that overflows its banks*, carrying everything away with it, so that it is not easy even in thought to dam it up and make it flow in an orderly course'.<sup>21</sup> I mention Nygren's thesis here only briefly as a bridge back to our discussion of Gregory of Nyssa and other pre-modern Christian theorizers of 'desire'. This is because anyone who wishes, as I now do, to re-engage a significant dimension of Christian tradition that consciously married the New Testament with Platonic and neo-Platonic ideas of *eros*, inevitably has to run Nygren's gauntlet. It is worth pointing out, then, with earlier critics of Nygren, that while his account of New Testament views of *agape* is relatively accurate, his reading of Platonic *eros* is by contrast highly selective, negative and contentious.<sup>22</sup> It shows little cognizance even of the subtlety of Diotima's speech on the nature of love in Plato's *Symposium*, in which the ladder of erotic purification is mounted in order finally to 'have disclosed' to her 'suddenly' – and as a sort of gift or revelation – a *participaton* in the form of Beauty. This is no mere selfish 'grasping'. Not only is Nygren's reading of Plato marred by an imposition of Christian, and specifically Lutheran, fears of 'works righteousness' and of Pelagianism. It also has the effect of placing sexual attraction and

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<sup>21</sup> Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (London: S. P. C. K., 1953), 49–50, my emphasis.

<sup>22</sup> Especially Martin C. D'Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love* (London: Faber, 1954).

‘Christian love’ in radically different boxes with no obvious means of mutual influence – a Protestant trait, which has lethal consequences for any theological theorizing of sexuality and its relation to God’s love. To move towards our own constructive proposal, based on Gregory of Nyssa’s seminal insights, we shall have simply to bypass Nygren’s roadblock and declare it a mistaken and false construction. Nygren is in fact quite unable, on account of his rigid binary, to give any positive account of the fruitful alliance of Christian *agape* and Platonic *eros* which began in the third century with Hippolytus and Origen, and their commentaries on *The Song of Songs*, and passed directly from there to Nyssen; and yet this was the marriage that was to spawn innumerable classics of ‘mystical theology’ thereafter. For Origen, *agape* simply *is eros*, by any other name; whereas for his rather different successor in the *Song*-commentary tradition, Gregory of Nyssa, *eros* is *agape* (as he puts it) ‘stretched out in longing’ towards the divine goal. Let us therefore turn back, in the final section of this chapter, to see further how Nyssen’s views on celibacy curiously *cohere* with his views on marriage, and how his insights might steer us beyond the false ‘cultural contradictions’ with which we started this chapter.

### 3. Platonic *eros* and Christian appropriation: Gregory of Nyssa

We have been charting, in the cases of both Freud and Nygren, how the image of ‘channeling’ is used in relation to erotic desire in interestingly contrastive ways. For Freud, it provides a means of positive transference of energies, whereas for Nygren the dangerous ‘eros’ is forever destructively bursting its banks. Precisely this same image of channeling, interestingly, is at the heart of Gregory of Nyssa’s theorizing of marriage and celibacy in his *de virginitate*. As Valerie Karras perceptively shows in her excellent article on this treatise, Gregory is being ‘ironic’, neither in his adulation of celibacy nor of marriage, puzzling as it may seem that they should be put thus

together.<sup>23</sup> The really interesting and unique heart of the argument, then, lies in the metaphor of the ‘stream’ of desire, and of its right direction, use, and even *intensification* in relation to God. As far as Gregory is concerned, celibates and married people are equally involved in this task as a life-long ascetical exercise. He writes:

Imagine a stream flowing from a spring and dividing itself off into a number of accidental channels. As long as it proceeds so, it will be useless for any purpose of agriculture, the dissipation of its waters making each particular current small and feeble, and therefore slow. But if one were to mass these wandering and widely dispersed rivulets again into one single channel, he would have a full and collected stream for the supplies which life demands. Just so the human mind . . . , as long as its current spreads itself in all directions over the pleasures of the senses, has no power that is worth the naming of making its way towards the Real Good; but once call it back and collect it upon itself . . . it will find no obstacle in mounting to higher things, in grasping realities.<sup>24</sup>

This compares interestingly with Nygren’s imaging of *dangerous* and excessive ‘erotic’ channels. It might be thought that Gregory intends this intensification of desire towards God to be mutually exclusive with a sexually-active life in marriage; but interestingly he repeats the same metaphor of the stream in the following chapter 8, precisely to explain how sex in marriage can be a ‘good irrigation’ provided it, too, is ordered in relation to God and so made ‘moderate’ in comparison with the intensified and unified stream that desire for God demands. The treatise is not written, then, to *suppress* ‘passion’; but actually (as stated by Gregory at the very outset) precisely to ‘*create passion*’ for ‘the life according to excellence’. Married sexual expression, and its erotic

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<sup>23</sup> See Karras, ‘Re-evaluation’, *passim*.

<sup>24</sup> Gregory, ‘On Virginity’ 7, 352.

metaphors, thus holds no worries for Gregory – unlike for Augustine, who was to find even lawful married intercourse a matter for concern on account of its capacity for male loss of ‘control’<sup>25</sup>, and who notably never expanded any theology of *The Song of Songs* as did Gregory later. Here, in the earlier *de virginitate*, however, Gregory lauds ‘virginity’ *not* on account of its sexlessness, but because of its withdrawal from *worldly* interests – the building up of families, status and honour – and hence its emulation of the changeless life of the Trinity. It is not sex that is the problem, but worldly values. And he sees a good, spiritually-productive marriage as almost on a par with celibacy given its equal potential capacity, when desire is rightly ‘aimed’, to bear the fruits of *leitourgia*, ‘service’ to others, especially to the poor. Consequently, by the end of the treatise, as Valerie Karras rightly shows, we have an instructive set of hierarchically-ordered possibilities for ‘erotic’ states of affairs: bad marriage, in which the external rules of fidelity may be kept but no spiritual unification of desire towards God occurs – no right ‘channeling’ of *eros*; bad celibacy, in which the external rules likewise may, or may not, be obeyed, but in which physical virginity is not leading to any transformation of the soul; and then spiritually fruitful marriage and spiritually fruitful celibacy, which in contrast both turn out to have more in common with one another than do the other states. Hence, as Karras puts it, the married person who can ‘channel the water’ erotically towards God is significantly above the mere *physically* celibate virgin who is still subject to false attachments or the ‘spiritual’ vices of envy, malice and slander.<sup>26</sup> But the special power of the virgin who has also rightly channeled the erotic stream lies, for Gregory, in his significance for others. Gregory ends, much in the spirit of Alasdair

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<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans* 14.16, trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1998), 614–15.

<sup>26</sup> Karras, ‘Re-evaluation’, 121.

MacIntyre today,<sup>27</sup> with an insistence that ascetical *practices* are means of transformation and of the indispensable spiritual power of a person from whom one may *mimetically* ‘catch the halo’, as he puts it, of rightly-ordered desire. In other words – and this is surely a point of great spiritual significance today – rightly-channeled *eros*, whether married or celibate, is impossible without deep prayer and ascetic perseverance; but it is even more impossible, interestingly, without shining examples to emulate. Such, for Gregory himself, was the inspiration of his celibate brother Basil: celibacy was ultimately to be ‘caught’, not ‘taught’.

*Conclusions: Beyond Repression and Libertarianism*

Let me now gather the strands of this chapter. As we have seen, Nyssen’s tract ‘On Virginité’ is unique and puzzling in the tradition precisely because it is written by a married person and cuts across the usual dividing categories of lay and ordained, married and celibate. As such, I suggest, it not only provides a potential hermeneutical key for reading other forms of ascetic literature against the grain and across traditional disjunctions (so that literature for monastics can be given lay application), but surely also gives the lie to Peter Steinfels’s insistence that a celibate clergy could only now be re-invigorated within contemporary Roman Catholicism *at the cost of* a continuing high theology of lay and married service. As Steinfels puts it: ‘If the church wants to restore celibacy to [its] former status, there is really only one practical way to do it: demote marriage to the second-class standing it once had.’<sup>28</sup> It has been the burden of this chapter to suggest otherwise, in the spirit of Gregory; and not only to insist that marriage and celibacy should thus be re-thought alongside one another, but also implicitly – and doubtless more contentiously – that heterosexual and homosexual

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<sup>27</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 3rd edn, 2007), for his re-enunciated emphasis on the importance of ‘practice’ in the moral life.

<sup>28</sup> Steinfels, *A People Adrift*, 330.

desire should also, and analogously, be reflected on in concert by the same exacting standards of progressive non-attachment and ascetical transformation. Then, I submit, homoerotic desire could potentially be released from its cultural and biblical associations with libertarianism, promiscuity and disorder. Gregory's vision of desire as thwarted, chastened, transformed, renewed and finally *intensified* in God, bringing forth spiritual fruits of *agape* and *leitourgia* in a number of different contexts, represents a way beyond and through the false modern alternatives of 'repression' and 'libertarianism', between *agape* and *eros*. This way, as I have argued in this chapter, has curiously more points of contact with the real Freud than with the imaginary Freud of American popular consciousness. Whether Gregory's stern intimations of the final locus of desire can also be the means of a sublation of all three of the cultural contradictions I outlined at the start of this chapter I leave to you to decide, but such has been my implicit argument. Certainly the re-thinking of celibacy and faithful vowed relations (whether heterosexual or homosexual) in an age of instantly commodified desire and massive infidelity is a task of daunting proportions, in which no-one can be very confident of widespread success. But as Gregory himself warns, we cannot believe it unless we see it lived: 'Any theory divorced from living examples ... is like [an] unbreathing statue.'<sup>29</sup> Therein, perhaps, lies the true challenge for us today: the counter-cultural production, not of film-stars, sports heroes or (sometimes) faithless royal families, but of erotic *saints*.

The conclusion, then, to which I have finally brought us is that we cannot solve our ecclesiastical crises about 'homosexuality' unless we first, all of us, re-imagine theologically the whole project of our human sorting, taming and purifying of desires within the crucible of *divine* desire. Such is the ascetical long haul set before us, in which faithfulness plays the indispensable role endemic to the demands of the primary love for God. To re-think the current ecclesiastical

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<sup>29</sup> Gregory, 'On Virginity' 23, 368.

'homosexuality' crises in *this* light, I have suggested, would be to re-invest the debate with a theological and spiritual wisdom too long forgotten.