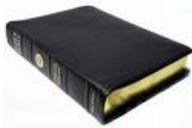


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A Pink Reformation? Sexuality, Credibility, and the Church

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Theo Hobson is a very thoughtful commentator on contemporary Christianity. He holds a doctorate from Cambridge University and writes regularly for *The Guardian* [London]. In his most recent column, "A Pink Reformation," Hobson argues that controversies over homosexuality now present the Christian church with a credibility crisis of historic proportions. Hobson presents an argument that demands careful attention.

Indeed, Hobson argues that the church now faces a shift as cataclysmic as the Reformation of the 16th century. He asserts that it is "not absurd" to draw this parallel, arguing that the debate about homosexuality poses "a serious threat to organized religion." As he sets his case:

Some will reply that the churches have always faced difficult moral issues, and they have muddled through: the gay issue is nothing unusual. Until quite recently I would have agreed. But it becomes ever clearer that the issue of homosexuality really is different.

Why? Look carefully at Hobson's central theses:

It is not sex in general that is so threatening to churches: it is homosexuality in particular. Why? Why is this issue doing such damage to religious institutions?

It seems to me that a couple of factors coincide. Firstly, this is an issue that shuns compromise. It has a stark "either/or" quality. Either homosexuality is a fully valid alternative to heterosexuality or it is not. There is no room for compromise, no third way: poor Rowan Williams is trying to make himself a perch on a barbed-wire fence. You don't find such absoluteness in other moral debates, such a complete absence of shared assumptions and aims. This is not a normal moral debate but a pure clash of visceral responses.

The second factor is the sheer speed of the homosexual cause's success. Something that was assumed for centuries to be unspeakably immoral has emerged as an alternative form of life, an identity that merits legal protection. The demand for gay equality has basically ousted traditionalist sexual morality from the moral high ground. The speed of this is stunning: feminism was brewing for a century or two before it started to win the argument, and the same applies to the case for racial equality.

And there is another, more complex factor. The public change in attitudes towards homosexuality is not just the waning of a taboo. It is not just a case of a practice losing its aura of immorality (as with premarital sex or illegitimacy). Instead, the case for homosexual equality takes the form of a moral crusade. Those who want to uphold the old attitude are not just dated moralists (as is the case with those who want to uphold the old attitude to premarital sex or illegitimacy). They are accused of moral deficiency. The old taboo surrounding this practice does not disappear but "bounces back" at those who seek to uphold it. Such a sharp turn-around is, I think, without parallel in moral history.

It seems to me that Theo Hobson is just about right in everything he asserts here. His immediate frame of reference is the travail of the Church of England, but the same changed context is experienced by all churches in Europe and North America now. Can we argue with his main points? I think not.

It is refreshing to see Hobson point to the “either/or” character of this controversy. He is precisely right — there is no middle ground — no third way. Homosexuality will be seen as either normal or sinful. Everything hinges on that assessment. If it is accepted as normal, those who consider it sinful will be seen as repressive, hateful, and dangerous to the good of society. This, he argues, is where the church now stands.

Hobson’s depiction of this moral transformation in the society is chilling, but seemingly impossible to refute. The trends seem all too clear. Can we argue that traditionalist sexual morality is *not* losing the moral high ground in the larger culture?

The most interesting section of Hobson’s article is his explanation that the shift on homosexuality in the culture is “taking the form of a moral crusade,” so that those who were once seen as upholding the high moral position are now seen as immoral, with the reverse also true — those just recently seen as engaged in sexual immorality are seen as morally superior to those who believe homosexuality to be sinful.

As Hobson explains, this seems to represent “the church’s perfect storm.” In his words: “So the issue of homosexuality has the strange power to turn the moral tables. The traditional moralist is subject to accusations of immorality. And this inversion is doing terrible damage to the Christian churches.”

This is where my judgment is likely to diverge from Theo Hobson’s. I agree with his assessment of the changed cultural situation, and with his depiction of the crisis as a “perfect storm” for the church. Yet, the believing church that remains faithful to Christ and faithful to the Scriptures cannot surrender to a moral revolution that demands the abandonment of Scriptural teaching — no matter how powerful the revolution may appear.

The church does not get to choose its cultural context or moral challenges. It may well be that the church *does* now face a credibility crisis over this issue — but this is just one of several issues that would present such a challenge.

The church may well lose this debate within the culture, and thus find itself suffering what the world sees as a credibility crisis, but it cannot abandon the Scriptures or deny its Lord. Scriptural credibility is infinitely more important than cultural credibility.

