

### **3. Temple, Sex, Gender and Society**

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#### ***Abstract***

This article gives an overview of the main economic, legal and cultural changes around the role of women, debates about gender identity and patterns of marriage and the family that have taken place over the past 80 years since *Christianity and Social Order* was first published.

#### ***Keywords***

Women, gender, marriage, sexuality, Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, middle axioms, *Living in Love and Faith*.

#### **Introduction**

In *Christianity and Social Order*, William Temple argues that there is ‘an authentic tradition of Christian social teaching. But like other parts of the Christian tradition, it is a living thing, proving its vitality in the only way in which that can be done by showing a capacity to relate itself effectively to changing conditions and circumstances.’ (Temple, 1976, p. 57)

In his work, Temple was concerned with how theological principles ‘translate’ into social policy, as well as the question of whether traditional teachings had to adapt and evolve in the light of social change or new non-theological knowledge. This question of how to adjudicate between the wisdom of faith and new and changing contexts, and how to discern the word of God amidst theological and non-theological voices, is nowhere more acutely experienced for us today than in the Church of England’s debates around issues of gender and sexuality. As *Living in Love and Faith*, published in 2020 puts it:

How are Christians to discern what is compatible, and what is incompatible, with the life of Christ's body? How are we to discern what is holy – what embodies and communicates the loving kindness of God?' (General Synod, 2020, p. 229)

An overview of the main economic, legal and cultural changes around the role of women, debates about gender identity and patterns of marriage and the family that have taken place over the past 80 years serves to highlight how much has changed since Temple's day. It is complicated by the fact that the gulf has increasingly widened during that period between mainstream public opinion and the official teaching of the Church around such issues, including and especially acceptance of same-sex relationships. This means that we need to be aware that any process of *theological* discernment takes place in the context of rapidly-changing social trends and an increasing complexity and diversity of life-styles. As *Living in Love and Faith* observes, 'The Church of England's deliberations about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage don't happen in isolation, but alongside and entangled with the conversations of many other religious and non-religious communities' (General Synod, 2020, p. 122).

Despite these massive cultural changes, however, it is arguable that the Church is still asking questions that would have been familiar to William Temple and which he poses in *Christianity and Social Order*: How does the church speak or intervene in society? What values should it be upholding? How does it communicate its core convictions to a wider public? My aim in this article, then, is not so much to evaluate Temple's views on these matters, but rather to ask whether we can learn anything from his theological method and his approach to Christian social ethics about how to address these questions in a way that is theologically serious, mindful of cultural change yet still capable of contributing constructively to society.

### **Temple's Method**

In *Christianity and Social Order*, Temple argues that the Church can justify its 'interference' in matters of state on the grounds that nothing falls beyond the scope of God. Temple's sacramental and incarnational theology, and his Hegelian idea of God's providential presence in history, impels him to listen and respond to changing circumstances and to be respectful of 'secular' wisdom and new discoveries in scientific understanding.

Alan Suggate characterises this approach to social ethics as ‘dialectical’. It was informed by ‘a continual interplay of Scripture, tradition and ... grounded in experience of faith and life, in a union of reflection and action. At any point in time we are to use our current understanding of faith and life to interpret our concrete experience of living, and we are to allow particular experience to modify that understanding.’ (Suggate, 2014, p. 30)

Hence Temple’s advocacy of what others termed ‘middle axioms’, which attempt to chart a course between general principles and detailed directives; between theologically-derived values and concrete policies. Middle axioms also serve as a kind of ‘interim ethic’ (and therefore a reflection of Temple’s Christian realism) which recognises that in a fallen and imperfect world no practical policy will ever fully embody the entirety of God’s Kingdom. So, again, middle axioms serve to mediate between Church and world, this world and the next, between traditional teachings and concrete policies.

It’s also worth noting also that Temple placed a great emphasis on Natural Law, which he defined as ‘the proper function of a human activity as apprehended by a consideration of its own nature’ (Temple, 1976, p. 80). But especially when we are thinking about issues of gender and sexuality, we should not interpret Temple’s understanding or use of Natural Law as referring to some kind of biological reductionism. As several contemporary commentators have noted, we should hear this much more as a kind of virtue ethic in which the ‘ends’ or telos of human life are derived from the purposes of God as active in history. Later in *Christianity and Social Order* Temple sets out that vision of human flourishing as necessarily facilitated by social institutions such as education, work, family life and voluntary associations.

In Temple’s work we can see a characteristically Anglican triangulation between Scripture, Tradition and Reason as sources for theological understanding. Tradition was to be interpreted with the aid of conscience, and revelation was required to ‘vindicate its claim at the bar of reason and conscience’ (Suggate, 2004, pp. 176-177).

In some approaches, a fourth element is added, that of ‘experience’. This may be conceived as the inward and intimate apprehension of one’s relationship to God as in early modern Pietism, or as the narrative of God’s grace at work autobiographically (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2019, pp. 22-54). Alternatively, it can be deployed as a critical category by which established canons and authorities are challenged by those who are marginalised and

excluded from official teachings. This third emphasis, of theologies constructed ‘from the underside of history’ and the idea of the ‘preferential option for the poor’ as a central hermeneutic, has formed a powerful and influential sensibility for theological method since the last quarter of the twentieth century. Drawing on experiential and inductive pedagogies, conventional hierarchies of expertise are reversed in that professional educators regard their role as facilitating and learning from the poor (Freire, 1972: 53-54).

Despite Temple’s insistence that the Church should listen to non-theological voices, however, his notion of that was essentially confined to a fairly elitist model of expertise, such as the interdisciplinary gatherings of intellectuals and the governing classes through groups like the ‘Moot’ between the wars. (Reeves, 1999, pp. 21-22, 24-48) But by the beginning of this century, it was starting to be accepted that any Church deliberations could not take place without listening to personal experience, and particularly the perspectives and stories of those most affected by virtue of being excluded or marginalised.

This principle begins to seep into Church deliberations around human sexuality, although it takes time. *Issues in Human Sexuality*, issued in 1991 by the House of Bishops, draws on Scripture and tradition but is notable for its absence of any non-theological scientific or social scientific data and lack of any first-hand testimonies from anyone openly identifying as LGBTQI+. Subsequently, however, the Church moved to correct that omission. With *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* published in 2003 and with the initiation of the so-called ‘Shared Conversations’ after 2017, Church deliberations on issues of gender, sexuality and relationships have been increasingly mindful of the principle of ‘don’t talk about us, without us’. The most recent phase of the Church’s discussions, *Living in Love and Faith*, concluding at the end of 2022, is acutely aware of the importance of incorporating a diversity of voices speaking from a variety of marital, gendered and family arrangements -- in people’s own words. In asking itself that perennial question of how to bring tradition into dialogue with contemporary context it tacitly acknowledges that what Temple called ‘the conception of a governing divine Spirit which is in all the world’ (1924, p. 153) might actually indwell the lives and lifestyles of ordinary Christians, including LGBTQI+ people.

### **New middle axioms?**

What else can we learn about how the Church might engage constructively with wider society in thinking about the nature of marriage and the ethics of personal identity? Returning to

William Temple, and to *Christianity and Social Order*, I wonder whether the three great themes that run throughout his discussion as the personal and social ends towards which human flourishing might be directed – freedom, fellowship and service – might in some way come back into play as helpful benchmarks for us today.

Two recent contributions to the debates about same-sex relationships attempt something of this nature. Susannah Cornwall looks for a way beyond the polarisation of the debate about gender and sexuality within the Anglican Church, and in particular the impasse around differing interpretations of Scripture. She suggests that a more constructive way might be to develop some new concepts of the ‘goods’ inherent in marriage, of whatever gender:

... emerging questions in sexuality and sexual ethics ... and in gender, including the rise of non-binary identity, may prompt ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives’ alike to step well beyond their comfort zones and reconsider *what are the goods that Christians should endorse*. In this way, they may discover that, despite their disagreements ... they are closer together on broader concerns such as *faithfulness, stability and permanence* than they might previously have suspected.’ (Cornwall, 2021, p. 1)

Cornwall also demonstrates a similar concern to Temple that the Church’s deliberations on matters of human and social life should be a form of public theology, a contribution to wider society’s quest for a more constructive and humane social order. ‘If there continue to be goods in sexual ethics on which Christians can agree, let us ask which institutions, behaviours and theologies actually best uphold them.’ (Cornwall, 2021, p. 12)

Similarly, following the consultations between the Church of England and the Cameron government in 2012 on the introduction of civil marriage for same-sex couples, Gill Henwood carried out a series of extended interviews with a range of Christian couples – same-sex and different-sex (Henwood, 2014). Based on their lived experience and first-hand perspectives, Henwood considered the prospects for a Christian doctrine of what she terms ‘equal marriage’ or equal access to marriage and parity within marriage, regardless of sexual identity. She argues that Christian ethics around marriage have been dominated by a teleology of procreation, yet in the twenty-first century moral choices are open to so many factors that it is no longer possible to speak of a single, normative framework by which family, marriage and sexuality might be guided. Taken-for-granted concepts of parenting,

family structure, reproduction are being transformed; and perhaps Christian social ethics needs to be more open to a whole range of new horizons.

Henwood therefore addresses the three traditional pillars of marriage of mutuality, fidelity and procreation, as cited by the Church of England's response to the Civil Partnerships Bill. The first two are evident in same-sex relationships, as her interviewees affirm; but it is around the third principle where contemporary scientific data and personal testimony – that process of listening to the wider world – may prove critical. She therefore proposes 'mutuality, fidelity and pro/creation', the latter an indication of a greater generativity beyond biological reproduction. Like Susannah Cornwall, therefore, Henwood advances a set of interim principles, similar to middle axioms, which emerge from Christian tradition, take account of a diversity of lived experiences, as the basis of shared 'goods' around which mutual and inclusive dialogue can converge.

Temple's approach to Christian social ethics in *Christianity and Social Order* still has something to say to us today. First, Temple insists on attending to non-theological sources and voices *on theological grounds*, grounded in an incarnational and sacramental understanding of God's presence in the world. Similarly, his attachment to Natural Law and to a concept of common grace informs his commitment to seeking out shared territory with others through a process of mediating core principles that can be widely and accessibly translated into public discourse. For Temple, it follows that the Church has a mission to help create civil spaces of discourse in the pursuit of its vocation to nurture good citizens and build a just and sustainable society. But the past eighty years have also taught us the importance of listening to a range of grass-roots, everyday voices in a spirit of greater inclusivity when it comes to theological discernment and public discourse. I think Temple would have endorsed this continuing quest to re-imagine our notions of whose voices matter and where, in our times, the spirit of God is at work in human affairs.