
A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the Degree of Master of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

2017

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Contents

Chapter One Introduction

1) Issues in Human Sexuality. 7
2) What is asceticism? 10
3) Asceticism and sexual desire in Anglican thought. 12
4) An Anglican quest for holiness. 14
5) Definitions of celibacy. 17
6) Permanent, faithful and stable. 19
7) Queer theology. 25
8) Conclusion. 27

Chapter Two James Alison

1) Introduction. 28
2) The question of sin. 30
3) The ‘Gay Victim’. 31
4) Persecution by the church for being gay. 34
5) The desire for holiness. 36
6) Desire. 37
7) Sexual Desires. 40
8) Alison and identity. 41
9) Conclusions drawn from Alison’s writing. 43

Chapter Three Mark Jordan

1) Introduction. 45
2) The emerging contrast in history of sodomy being both evil and attractive. 47
3) Sex in the Reformation era. 48
4) Post reformation and the quest for power. 49
5) Asceticism and boundary. 50
6) Identity and holiness. 51
7) Jordan and ‘new holiness’. 52
8) Jordan’s understanding of freedom. 54
9) A return to the question of identity. 56
10) The challenge of a wider understanding of freedom. 57

Chapter Four Marcella Althaus-Reid

1) Introduction to complete liberation or freedom. 60
2) The Virgin of Guadalupe and the freedom of the female body. 60
3) Freedom to embrace indecency. 63
4) The widening of boundaries and the writing of the Marquis de Sade. 64
5) Althaus-Reid’s re construction of holiness and identity. 65
6) Holiness through identity with the poor. 68
7) Holiness through identity with the sexualisation of the body. 72
8) Asceticism and boundary. 74
Chapter Five Conclusion

1) Introduction. 77
2) Anglican holiness. 79
3) Regarding permanent relationships. 80
4) James Alison. 82
5) Mark Jordan. 85
6) Marcella Althaus-Reid. 87
7) Seeking priestly sexual identity. 90
8) Bibliography. 95

Word Count 49 094.
Abstract

The current debates in General Synod regarding the sexual conduct of homosexual clergy have suggested that the original document *Issues in Human Sexuality* has become inadequate for use. I wish to shed light on elements of the theology which lies behind *Issues in Human Sexuality*. I shall begin by arguing that *Issues in Human Sexuality* is a document written in a form which embraces legal imposition only rather than embracing a diversity of ascetic practice. I identify that the church has traditionally relied on some form of asceticism not exclusively but primarily for clerical life.

The definitions of asceticism are not universal; therefore I explore initially the early definitions of the word. My conclusion as to a working definition of asceticism is that it relies on two concepts, ‘holiness’ and ‘boundary’. I offer an initial Anglican concept of holiness through the writings primarily of Martin Thornton. I explore initially the concept of boundary through an understanding of celibacy, but note that celibacy also is a complex and varied term. Moving from celibacy to an introduction of the theology of permanent relationships I argue that permanent relationships embrace both boundary and holiness, but that permanence relies heavily on boundary, both chosen and imposed.

If the church seeks to reform an understanding of sexual practice then it needs to return to a definition of sexual activity which relates to holiness. The traditional expression for the desire for holiness has been asceticism. In offering differing attempts at a definition of asceticism I have sought to explore a diverse understanding of holiness and boundary which is not reflected in *Issues in Human Sexuality*.

A movement both outside and inside the study of theology which has arisen is the emergence of ‘queer’. The use of the word ‘queer’ challenges the existence of boundary particularly in relation to sexual boundary. The problem with ‘queer’ is that it has neither identifiable structure nor a creed of adherence. Therefore to engage with ‘queer’ I chose to engage with three individual theologians who either by their own admission or the identification by others fall within the category of ‘queer theology’.

James Alison’s writing is useful in arguing particularly for gay identity and inclusion within the church. He wrestles particularly with a desire for holiness whilst being gay. He offers an understanding as to how gay people have been treated by the church through his theology of ‘victim’.

Mark Jordan explores the boundaries of sexual freedom but also wishes for some understanding of a ‘new holiness’. He identifies an understanding of asceticism through a definition of pleasure. However he moves beyond Alison by concentrating on the question of identity. Jordan removes gay identity but replaces it with a definition of ‘sodomy’.

Finally Marcella Althaus-Reid attempts to find holiness through the removal of boundary. This is particularly useful because she extends even the boundaries of Jordan by examining the role of women in seeking holiness.
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Chapter One Introduction

1 Issues in Human Sexuality

*Issues in Human Sexuality*\(^1\) is the definitive statement issued by the Church of England as a guideline as to how clergy in particular are required to live their sexual lives. Although debates within the Church of England continue as to *Issues in Human Sexuality*’s importance, it is still considered to be the document to which the House of Bishops refers for guidance on sexuality and in particular on the conduct of homosexual clergy. The purpose of this study is to consider the differing meanings and theological understandings of the term ‘asceticism’ and how they are, or are not, reflected in *Issues in Human Sexuality*.

*Issues in Human Sexuality* relies on only one form of asceticism to determine a lifestyle for homosexual clergy. In applying only a single definition of asceticism, the document relies on setting boundaries for conduct rather than a wider understanding of ascetic practice. In exploring other understandings of asceticism, I wish to argue that only relying on some form of imposed boundary is an inadequate basis for any theological understanding of how to determine the sexual activity of homosexual clergy.

The document suggests that it is concerned with the wider context of all sexual expression within the Anglican Church. However, it is widely used to define the sexual activities of homosexual relationships particularly for clergy who acknowledge to others that they are homosexual. It is important to note also that the initial document is written with a clear understanding that in 1991 before the ordination of women and so much of its emphasis on clerical same sex attraction is written primarily relating to gay men, although the arguments regarding clerical celibacy and sexual practice clearly extend beyond this.

The document is clear that it is heterosexual marriage that is the fullest expression of Christian values and that this is reflected particularly in scripture. Moreover through the use of scripture it also seeks to justify a division between clergy and laity. It states that ‘From the time of the New Testament onwards it has been expected of those appointed to the ministry of authority in the Church, that they shall not only preach but also live the Gospel...this means that certain possibilities are not open to the clergy by comparison with the laity, something that in principle has always been accepted.’\(^2\) It concludes by stating that ‘those who disagree with that mind (that is the mind of the church) are free to argue for change, what they are not free to do is to go against that mind in their own practice.’\(^3\) The conclusion is clear: gay clergy are required to accept the ascetic discipline of celibacy and this is the boundary that is required for ordination. The document is emphatic enough that ‘homophiles’, as it refers to those who have an attraction primarily to those of the same rather than the opposite sex, are to be welcomed into the church and to be valued as followers of the Christian tradition.

However forthright *Issues in Human Sexuality* seeks to be in accepting ‘homophiles’ as members of the church, the sense of exclusion rather than inclusion is evident, as it states

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‘heterosexuality and homosexuality are not equally congruous with the observed order of creation’. This strongly worded phrase immediately gives grounds for concluding that the Church of England’s view on sexuality is not necessarily that reflected by wider society in western culture.

Clearly, a document published in 1991 also would reflect a particular period of change and development in society which has moved forward to an extent where marriage itself has become legally available to couples of the same sex. Yet despite societal shifts towards equal acceptance of homosexual relationships, *Issues in Human Sexuality* is still the document used to prohibit the sexual activity of homosexual clergy. It is the accepted required boundaries of sexual activity which are expected of ordained people in the Church of England.

With the shifting changes in societal attitudes towards homosexuality in 2003 the church sought to review the initial documentation and offered *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate*. This somewhat lengthier publication sought not only to outline the then current debate, but to attempt to analyse sexuality from a biblical and historical point of view, as well as current thinking on the appropriate expressions of sex.

This document in itself does in fact seek to give voice to every type of opinion, and is a fair and reasoned critique of many angles of the debate, and by its final pages seeks to reach a conclusion on how the church can proceed with a united purpose with regard to sexual practice. However, despite outlining in some detail the biblically conservative argument and those of ‘queer’ theologians such as Elizabeth Stewart and the writings of Mary Daly, it seems to suggest that the only conclusion that the church is ‘to continue together our journey of dialogue and demonstrating the love of God to one another’.

The desire for further dialogue is also outlined by the Pilling Report which was published in 2013. This document seeks to acknowledge the existence and possibility of relationships between lay people of the same sex and in many ways seeks to affirm this, but it does not affirm homosexual relationships between clergy. It states firstly that ‘the church needs to find ways of honouring and affirming those Christians who experience same sex attraction, who conscious of the church’s teaching, have embraced a chaste and single lifestyle, and also those who in good conscience have entered partnerships with a firm intention of life-

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5 ‘Current church doctrine states that while LGBT people are able to become members of the clergy they must be celibate and cannot get married or conduct same-sex wedding ceremonies.’ The Independent website http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/same-sex-marriage-church-of-england-anglican-general-synod-man-woman-report-lgbt-rights-gay-clergy-a7582611.htm accessed 1/05/17
6 It is accepted that the wider Anglican Communion, particularly in America and Canada may not share the viewpoints expressed by *Issues in Human Sexuality* but for the benefit of this study, I wish to concentrate on the understandings within the Church of England only.
long fidelity’. Yet it is still the 1991 statement which is considered to be the primary statement of church authority on the issue of clergy relationships. It has been my experience that Bishops have required homosexual clergy to assent to *Issues in Human Sexuality*. Although the General Synod of the Church of England has voted to reject the Bishops’ recommendation to retain the sentiment of *Issues in Human Sexuality* the document still remains the key definition of sexual practice for homosexual clergy.

Despite many attempts at revision and alteration the position of sexual abstinence in homosexual relationships has not changed. This means that in the context of the Church in acknowledging that marriage is only permissible between a woman and a man, it does not acknowledge the equality of same sex relationships nor permit sexually active relationships for homosexual clergy. For clergy it is sexual abstinence rather than fidelity that is important. It states ‘however we are clear that it is entirely legitimate for the Church to require higher standards of conduct from its clergy than for the laity.’ The boundaries of conduct are clear. The document states emphatically that ‘deliberate (homosexual) genital contact does nevertheless represent the crossing of a significant boundary’. The conclusion of *Issues in Human Sexuality* is that homosexual clergy should abstain from sexual activity and this continues to be the current understanding in the Church of England.

As *Issues in Human Sexuality* prohibits sexual acts for homosexual clergy, a word that has been applied to the denial of a particular activity is the word *asceticism*. The question I wish to explore is whether *Issues in Human Sexuality* relies on a particular definition of asceticism to reach its conclusion of clerical sexual abstinence. The document certainly relies on some form of ascetic practice that involves a denial of sex or more precisely a denial of any form of sexual practice that does not conform to heterosexual marriage. What it does not reflect is any element of choice by the individual to follow this in effect imposed boundary. What *Issues in Human Sexuality* certainly does is conform to a definition of asceticism that relies on the setting of boundaries not by individual choice but rather by an institution. What is also somewhat significant is the definitive nature of the conclusion in that it defines a code of conduct for homosexual clergy but this is expressed in a style which reflects legal language and expected adherence. The document establishes boundaries of acceptable behaviour but little else. One may expect with a document that is written for the conduct of clergy that some form of quest for sanctity or holy living might be present, but ‘acceptable’ behaviour seems only to be expressed in terms of legality and church order. Interestingly the word asceticism is not used, nor the word celibacy. Both these words reflect a desire for holy living. I argue that the absence of the word holiness from *Issues in Human Sexuality* indicates that it is a legally styled document used for conduct only, not a reflection or desire for an

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11 The Church of England has been plunged into fresh turmoil after its general assembly threw out a report on same-sex relationships in a rebuff to bishops following almost three years of intense internal discussion and intractable divisions.
asceticism which reflects the individual’s quest for sanctity. The question that arises from a desire towards asceticism is what the word may actually mean.

2 What is asceticism?

The word asceticism is used in a variety of ways. It is difficult to establish its origin but the earliest definition I have encountered is that of an Ancient Greek usage in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*. The dictionary describes asceticism in the following terms: ‘The Greek word askēsis implies disciplined and productive effort. At first mainly physical in sense—alluding to the skill of the craftsman and the vigour of the athlete—it quickly acquired a moral sense also, clear in Xenophon.’\(^{14}\) This outlines at the very beginning the diversity which the term asceticism has come to be used. If the Greek definition is employed, then asceticism becomes a pinnacle of achievement or something that is to be celebrated, such as an athletic triumph or a particular skill in craftmanship. This also suggests that asceticism is not merely connected with denial of the body, but also with achievement and purpose. Athletic prowess is achieved through the denial of particular physical desires such as the consumption of excess food or physical training regimes which require dedication and commitment.

The ancient definition of asceticism which involves denial of the body to enhance physical prowess is something that would be recognised easily today in the realms of sporting achievement. The Christian tradition embraces this denial of the body but for a different purpose, that of Christian discipleship. Interestingly the illustration of running a race and gaining salvation is a link that is present in the Pauline epistles as an analogy for Christian discipleship.\(^{15}\) However, it is not athletic achievement but rather a sense of denial of the body which links early Christianity with asceticism. Ascetic discipline of the body has been at the very core of Christian thought, reflecting directly the teachings of Christ that ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me’.\(^{16}\) Christ’s teachings in the New Testament echo an asceticism that requires some form of denial of the body to be one of Christ’s followers and this has been part of the teachings of Christianity, where taking up the cross has been a means by which discipleship can be expressed.\(^{17}\)

Yet this initial definition of asceticism outlines only one form of particular practice, that of denial and consequently leads Vincent Wimbush in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* to conclude that for him asceticism has been misused and misinterpreted throughout Christian history. He states that ‘asceticism in Christian tradition must be viewed


\(^{16}\) Luke 9:23

in terms of complex origin, rhetorical and literary representations, forms and practices, institutionalisation, meanings and power dynamics'.\textsuperscript{18} He continues this argument by stating that ‘there have always been expressions of the ascetic in Christian practice and thought and there has always been diversity in those expressions and there has always been conflict about the appropriate expression of Christian asceticism’.\textsuperscript{19} Yet he tempers this too by stating that ‘individuals who define themselves as other worldly and employ strategies and practices for creating, shaping and maintaining new identities, communities and world views, they and their strategies and practices can be deemed to be ascetic’.\textsuperscript{20}

Vincent Wimbush seeks both to outline the diversity of ascetic definition, but also to suggest that Christianity has used asceticism to gain power and control. The exercise of control is used in this context as a means by which authority can be maintained by particular religious groups over its members. It is clear that Wimbush’s definition of Christian asceticism relies primarily on control and power. It is therefore possible to see that the Anglican Church in \textit{Issues in Human Sexuality} has relied on power and control as the only definition of asceticism to determine an ascetic lifestyle for homosexual clergy.

The inadequacy of a definition of asceticism that relies on control and power \textit{only}, is illustrated by the feminist writer Mary Daly. An asceticism which relies on denial only is for her a lifestyle which is to be treated with caution. She argues that ‘obsessive asceticism is imposed upon others as well as themselves by the fabricators of ascetic fixations’.\textsuperscript{21} Where this becomes even more problematic for Daly is when the zeal of this ascetic fixation becomes evangelistic, where the individual’s choice to perform a particular act of piety has generated disciples and followers. This has certainly been the case with many different expressions of Christianity but Daly uses as her example the life of St Benedict. Benedict is widely regarded as the founder of western monasticism. When he was tempted by particularly sexual desire he ‘flung himself naked into a thorn bush and rolled himself in this bed until he had extinguished the lure of the senses’.\textsuperscript{22} His piety and wish to control the body required an extreme ascetic practice which is reasonable to suggest would fall outside most contemporary forms of Christian discipleship. Yet such practices reflect a wish to control sexual desire by extreme methods. However, what Benedict’s extreme mortification of the body in the name of monastic discipline outlines is a definition of asceticism which echoes particularly the elements of power and control that Daly wishes to oppose.

Daly’s definition of asceticism becomes interesting: she broadens the definition of asceticism from the willingness of the individual to discipline the body for physical gain to the means by which one belongs to a particular religious group. For Daly, to be a member of a particular group of Christian devotees requires acceptance of certain regulations which are imposed on members who wish to be included in that group. For her, enforced asceticism is particularly illustrated in monastic discipline and in the quest of individual orders of monks to practise

\textsuperscript{19} Wimbush, \textit{The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought} 46.
\textsuperscript{20} Wimbush, \textit{The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought} 45.
\textsuperscript{21} Mary Daly, \textit{Pure Lust} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 35.
\textsuperscript{22} Daly, \textit{Pure Lust} 37.
particular forms of ascetic control, on themselves but also on the other members of their order. Thus asceticism becomes a form of controlling individuals by a wider organisation. Belonging to the wider organisation of the church may involve a particular adherence to a code of conduct that is imposed rather than decided upon by the individual. This imposition is illustrated by the requirement in *Issues in Human Sexuality* for homosexual sexual abstinence.

Daly’s writings are also useful at the initial stages of defining asceticism in that she outlines that, even in its most extreme forms, that is throwing oneself into thorn bushes, there is a complicated relationship between denial and pleasure. Daly uses the example of masochism where an ascetic practice becomes pleasurable in itself or finding gratification through painful experience or self-denial. She suggests that for Lawrence of Arabia, for example, his desire for extreme asceticism through bodily pain ‘required a repetition of the sexual aspect of the experience’.23 Thus for Daly masochistic sex is both pleasurable and ascetic.

This is particularly interesting because it outlines the complexity involved with dealing with the body, where various kinds of ‘pleasures’ are sought in the denial or persecution of the body. Thus boundaries between pleasure and denial become complex and not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is therefore useful to consider that what may be seen by some as conventional ascetic discipline may be experienced by others as pleasure in different circumstances. Some ascetic practices become not a denial of sexual pleasure but rather an enhancement of it.

Therefore what Daly does outline in her definition of the diversity of asceticism is not only an expectation of physical denial but a particular relationship between asceticism and sex or sexual gratification. The link between asceticism and sex is not immediately apparent in either Christ’s call for denial or Pauline teaching or in the definition described by Wimbush. For Daly, however, asceticism shifts from a denial of the cross or a demonstration of athletic prowess to being particularly associated with sexual expression and sexual diversity. The link between sex and asceticism and the complexity of this link is one that I wish to explore further.

3 Asceticism and sexual denial in Anglican thought

Having established a link through the writing of Daly between asceticism and sexual practice or sexual diversity, it is important now for this study to make a connection between asceticism and Anglicanism. For this purpose I use an article by Elizabeth Clarke who outlines a distinct relationship between these three themes of asceticism, sex and Anglicanism. She states that ‘nineteenth-century Protestants exhibited a cowardly and selfish spirit, exhorting Christians to flee “the world” rather than to work for its improvement’.24 However, what she also suggests is that Anglicans have been cautious about embracing an ascetic lifestyle, and she illustrates this point by using the work of the nineteenth century Anglican divine Isaac Taylor for whom asceticism becomes directly relevant to sex and celibacy in particular.

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23 Mary Daly, *Pure Lust* 43.
Taylor sees forms of sexual asceticism as making ‘one of early Christianity’s most notable features, the praise of celibacy and virginity.’ Clarke further paraphrases Taylor by suggesting that ‘trying to force celibacy on the Anglican clergy now would be a more difficult task than lifting up the buildings of the Oxford colleges and planting them in the clouds’. Ascetic practice is not connected with Christian devotion of any other sort, but merely with the regulation of sexual activity. There is no mention at all of denial of the body in any other form than that of sexual abstinence.

Admittedly, the contexts of Taylor’s writings reflect a nineteenth century revival of Anglican monasticism, which may be at the core of the distaste Taylor feels for ascetic practice. However, what is interesting is that Clarke sees Taylor as using the denial of sex to deter people from sympathising with a Tractarian cause. ‘Tractarians have deliberately masked the praise of celibacy and virginity; with good instinct, Taylor adds, they sensed that such a revelation would prove “instantly fatal” to their cause.’ To avoid converts to Tractarianism, it is for Taylor through the denial of sex that this is to be achieved. Adherence to a monastic discipline requires abstinence from sexual activity. The particular stance against asceticism becomes most powerful when it has direct relevance to the denial of sexual practice. Asceticism is to be avoided because it denies sexual activity.

Therefore through Clarke’s understanding of Taylor’s writings what becomes evident is a relationship between asceticism and sex which is present in a distinctly Anglican context. For Taylor heterosexual marriage of clergy is not only permitted but actively encouraged. Asceticism becomes directly linked with celibacy, and in this nineteenth century thinking is something to be avoided. The normative lifestyle for Anglican clergy, according to Taylor, is heterosexual marriage.

However, Taylor’s conclusions on asceticism became inadequate when heterosexuality no longer remained the only legal expression of sexual practice. As homosexuality was decriminalised in the United Kingdom in 1967 the Church of England faced a crisis of definition of sexual practice. Theologians of the 1960s and 70s were beginning to advocate a sexual diversity which Taylor’s nineteenth century writings regarding marital sexual continence would not have engaged with. Harry Williams, for example, a renowned progressive Anglican theologian of the 1970s period and still highly regarded today, in his autobiography Some Day I’ll Find You talks quite openly about sexual encounter. He expresses finding love through a variety of sexual experiences not a monogamous relationship. He states ‘during the next years I slept with several men in each case fairly regularly. They were all of them friends. Cynics of course will smile, but I have seldom felt more like thanking God than when thus having sex...sex is one of the most glorious things of human life.’ What Williams outlined was the possibility that homosexual sexual encounter could be fulfilling rather than something to be avoided. He states that ‘once I was in the misery of bondage and then became free. And in the achievement of that freedom sex

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26 Clark, “Contested Bodies”, 287.
27 Clark, “Contested Bodies”, 287.
29 Williams, Some Day I’ll Find You, 197.
played its not inconsiderable part.' In contrast to the later document *Issues in Human Sexuality* Williams’ arguments reflect a desire for fulfilment rather than abstinence. He seeks holiness through sexual exploration rather than sexual denial.

Yet a desire for holiness is something that Anglicans have wrestled with outside the debates regarding sexual expression. Therefore in seeking to explore a wider definition of asceticism in an Anglican context it is necessary to engage with some understanding of Anglican holiness. For this purpose I have engaged with the writing of Malcolm Thornton, who sought for ascetic holiness as an Anglican priest of the 1950s but was obviously not engaged directly with *Issues in Human Sexuality*. For Thornton, his quest for Anglican priestly holiness is certainly connected with asceticism, but it reflects a desire for holiness which is largely absent from the language of *Issues in Human Sexuality*.

4 An Anglican quest for holiness

Thornton outlines a desire for clerical holiness and for him an ascetic desire for this holiness is reflected in a life of prayer and serving community. Thornton does not address sex directly, but what he does address is a sense of calling and self-discipline which relies on a particular lifestyle choice and a lifestyle choice that seeks to define a clerical sanctity in particular. He writes at a time when sexual freedom in secular as well as sacred law would be confined to heterosexual expression and predominantly within heterosexual marriage contracts. However his view on ascetic practice is a definition which relies on individual choice and a quest for piety and sanctity amongst clergy. He states that the pre-medieval monastic disciplines of setting oneself aside as a ‘remnant concept’ is an important one. His definition of ‘remnant concept lead to whatever God thought fit for its age’ which in medieval times would have been monasticism but in his thinking is currently the clerical life. Thornton’s understanding of clergy is that their lives should reflect the remnant concept of monastic discipline.

However, he argues that this remnant is ‘hardly compatible with the social structure of our age’ reflecting the desire that the priest should be within the community they serve rather than an enclosed monastic order. The desire for holy living in community is also reflected by what is still regarded as a definitive text for ordination, Michael Ramsey’s *The Christian Priest Today*. Priestly ministry is seen as something within the world rather than in monastic community: ‘To be Christ to one another within the ministry, to the people whom they serve and to the world around them’.

In using the example of prayer rather than sexual abstinence, Thornton wishes to establish an ‘ascetic of natural theology’ where the division between clergy and laity is somehow associated with incarnation both from within and outside the church. His writing reflects a particular devotional style which means that his argument is somewhat church focussed, but

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what he appears to be suggesting is that the revelation of the Godhead is found through ascetic practice which may involve the wonder of divine creation for example by looking at nature, but that the real ascetic practice is found through participation in the sacramental life of the church. 36 His view that the true way of ascetic practice is found in the ‘remnant body’ 37 of the church means that a sacramental life becomes the most powerful connection with the divine being. It would not be difficult then to make an assumption that the priestly life of sacramental presence is one that should contain some form of ascetic practice.

Yet his view of the church is almost apologetic, whereby ‘we find prayer easier in a familiar church’ 38 but that it is through control and practice that we gain a ‘purification of will and sense’. 39 In seeking asceticism in a church context he sees some kind of moralistic code emerging whereby ‘humility, self-surrender, sacrifice and purity’ 40 lead to God.

However, this becomes somewhat complex because Thornton accepts that the ‘Christian ethic is largely concerned with motives’ 41 and that it is through right motives that asceticism can be found in many different ways. He uses the interesting example of artwork, where ‘craftsmanship may be the sacramental expression of the Christian faith’. 42 What I think he is suggesting is that ascetic practice may be found in many different contexts, the ploughman finding God in nature, the artist or sculptor finding God through paint and stone, but it is easier to see God in things that are specifically religious. What I take from this is that one may indeed experience the Godhead though a painting of a landscape, but one is more likely to experience God through a depiction of the manger scene in Bethlehem or participation in the sacramental life of the Church.

Thornton chooses his words very carefully, because for him where one finds a spiritual context is a reflection of an individual’s devotion. It is not something defined by particular adherence to a set of absolute principles. He does acknowledge that things which are specifically religious reflect a particular devotion or asceticism outside the choice of the individual. He states that ‘the village clusters around its church, for this is a central focus’. 43 The quest for ascetic living is found primarily if not exclusively within the church.

Yet he also reiterates his understanding that ‘religion begins with experience’ 44 and that ‘religious health springs directly from the soul’s experiential conception of God’. 45 Yet he also sees that this religious experience is one that can be found through spiritual exercise: ‘private prayer, meditation, recollection, self-examination’. 46 It is through these religious experiences which become particularly focussed around the church that one becomes part of the remnant which ‘is the Body of Christ recapitulated in one place, or the localized

36 Thornton, Pastoral Theology, 117.
37 Thornton, Pastoral Theology, 30.
38 Thornton, Pastoral Theology, 170.
39 Thornton, Pastoral Theology, 170.
40 Thornton, Pastoral Theology, 172.
41 Thornton, Pastoral Theology, 173.
42 Thornton, Pastoral Theology, 174.
43 Thornton, Pastoral Theology, 176.
44 Thornton, Pastoral Theology, 179.
45 Thornton, Pastoral Theology, 190.
46 Thornton, Pastoral Theology, 205.
microcosm of the Body of Christ. And the Church militant is the Body of all faithful parishes; immediately of all faithful Remnants. Therefore if belonging to the Church (and in Thornton’s case the Church of England) is the means by which one experiences the Godhead, then the shift from ‘belonging’ to ascetic practice is a very small one. For Thornton if one seeks asceticism then the most successful way to strive for asceticism is through the devotions and sacraments practised by the church.

Although Pastoral Theology is quite clearly meant as a theological reflection of clerical life, it is particularly interesting because of its conclusion regarding asceticism. It is very clear from the writing that belonging to the remnant of the Church involves the acceptance of certain ascetic practices. In Thornton’s case this is predominantly liturgically based whereby sacramental practice and observance of times for prayer, particularly using the daily office, are his primary focus, but it would not be difficult to conclude from this that the religious life is one of self-denial and regulation.

For Thornton a vital part of the religious life is one of experience rather than imposed regulation. Indeed he states in English Spirituality that ‘Anglican direction is traditionally empirical rather than dogmatic or authoritarian’. One finds the sacred through art and music, but also through self-denial and religious discipline. Thornton expects rather than requires ascetic control. It is not through a set of externally required regulations that holiness is found but rather through the desire of the individual. Clerical life for Thornton is one of devotion in prayer and sacramental observance but one embraced through a desire for holiness not one imposed by the authority of the church. True holiness is sought through self-discipline not through an adherence to a set of rules.

Thornton moves asceticism away from Daly’s criticisms of the church which sees asceticism as an abuse of power to a practice of individual devotion leading to holiness. Thornton’s self-regulatory asceticism also moves us away from the legal language of Issues in Human Sexuality. Although Thornton does not address the question of clerical sexual practice, what he does acknowledge is a choice of the individual to seek holiness. It is the choice of sanctity by the individual which is not expressed in the legal language of Issues in Human Sexuality. Thornton replaces legal adherence with individual devotion. By contrast, Issues in Human Sexuality relies only on an asceticism of boundary and legal adherence.

The problem with Issues in Human Sexuality prohibiting sexual activity for homosexual clergy in terms of boundary and legality only, is that it ignores a desire for holiness found through sexual abstinence. Holiness through sexual abstinence is a state associated directly with the term ‘celibacy’. Celibacy embraces something much wider than legal imposition and for some is a positive expression of holiness rather than a legal boundary. In fact Issues in Human Sexuality does not use the term ‘celibacy’ at all, confirming an adherence to legal practice rather than devotional desire for holy living. Seeking to move forward from an asceticism of imposed boundary to a desire for individual holiness I now consider some definitions of the term celibacy.

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47 Thornton, Pastoral Theology, 249.
5 Definitions of celibacy

The Catholic priest and writer Donald Cozzens sees celibacy as a gift and blessing at his ordination. He states that ‘Charismatic celibacy is indeed a blessing for the Church. As a freely bestowed gift of the Spirit, it deserves to be released from canonical mandate as a condition for ordination. The time has come to set celibacy free.’ 49 John Boswell also outlines in his study of sexuality that ‘many men and women undertook celibacy on their own in response to personal convictions about the superiority of celibacy as a reaction against the new ascetic view of marriage’. 50 This view of celibacy too becomes something of a liberation where a self-found calling is one that liberates as much as the freedom of sexual permissiveness.

Carl Orlson too expresses celibacy as ‘commonly understood as entailing a vow to abstain from all sexual relationships.’ 51 For Orlson, celibacy is defined as ‘part of the process of becoming holy, complete and clean’, 52 but also an ‘embodiment of power’ 53 which means that ‘by agreeing or choosing to be celibate because, for example, one is entering a religious position, such as the priesthood, that demands celibacy as a prerequisite, a person is making a type of decision that is ascetic.’ 54

So, although sexual abstinence for homosexual clergy is a requirement of Issues in Human Sexuality the particular term celibacy as a conscious life choice is a means by which people may demonstrate a desire for the ascetic life and exercise some element of freedom of choice within that. Celibacy is linked directly with a desire for holiness, not one necessarily imposed by an institution.

Yet because of this link with a desire for holiness rather than a legal form of imposition of conduct, celibacy has been open to more radical interpretations. Vincent Lloyd, an American theologian from Syracuse University, uses celibacy in a very different way to the outlined traditional definition. In his article on what he terms ‘radical celibacy’, Lloyd seeks to challenge the assumption of sexual abstinence by offering an alternative definition of what celibacy may mean. Rather than reflecting on the practical nature of stable relationships, he asks

What does the view of Christian sexuality that has just been developed mean for the (too) much-disputed possibility of homosexual marriage in the Church? To take a side on this question would be like a Christian pacifist arguing whether a certain military conflict is a just or unjust war. In a world of violence, of oppression, of inequality, the Church ought to be disengaged from the economy of desire just as it ought to be disengaged

54 Orlson, “Celibacy and Religious Traditions”, 5.
from the economy of violence. It ought to provide a community that nurtures the intimacy of spiritual friendship and to provide a culture not of controlled eroticism but one in which the erotic is not manufactured. The individual Christian, whether she is married or not, thinks of herself as gay or straight, can and ought to join in this vision of a peaceable, loving community. A radical monotheist, who is radically orthodox, must also be radically celibate.\footnote{Vincent W. Lloyd, “Radical Celibacy: Towards a Christian Postmodern Sexual Ethic” in \textit{Wiley Online Library} (2003): accessed March 30, 2015.}

This sense of community is one that Lloyd takes directly from John Milbank who sees the role of the Godhead as being an integral part of the Christian community: it is through community that God is manifested. Membership of the church community is of vital importance. It is rather through sharing in the church’s mission and belonging to the church community that celibacy is expressed rather than through sexual abstinence. He states ‘if Christians ask ‘what is God like? Then they can only point to our ‘response’ to God in the formation of community, the community is what God is like’.\footnote{John Milbank “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism”, \textit{Modern Theology}, 7:3 (1991): 228.} Lloyd sees celibacy, not as a constraint but rather as a means by which one belongs to the church community, irrespective of sexual expression. In fact Lloyd sees celibacy as being present ‘not in a culture of controlled eroticism but in the vision of a peaceable, loving community’.\footnote{Lloyd, “Radical Celibacy”, 240.}

For Lloyd, the church defines celibacy as being connected directly with sexual activity rather than a desire to live in community and thus uses the term celibacy to justify the enforcement of sexual abstinence. Where this is particularly interesting in relation to this study is that Lloyd seems to suggest that the word ‘celibacy’ too has a diversity of definition which may not necessarily demand sexual abstinence. His definition of celibacy outlines a variety of meaning beyond sexual abstinence. His celibacy reflects sexual freedom with a desire to live in holy community and thus also becomes in one form ascetic. Celibacy becomes a definition of belonging to the church community, not one of sexual abstinence. Like Thornton, for Lloyd it is belonging to community that is important and not denial of sex. Celibacy and asceticism become linked through the establishment of church community rather than sexual abstinence.

This is a very interesting argument, whereby it is the sense of belonging to community that becomes important rather than an absence of sexual contact. What is difficult to ascertain is exactly where this may lead us and Lloyd himself is not specific about this. In asking for clarification regarding his argument Lloyd suggested that ‘the problem is attributing excessive, quasi-divine significance to human-made categories. Race, gender, sexual orientation - and, I want to argue, eros - still are used in life in the world and by worldly institutions, but they must be treated as contingent, historically and culturally specific. We should be able to envision a world where they don't exist, even if it's eschatological.’\footnote{Lloyd email message 13 May 2015.}

Lloyd’s argument makes celibacy a worldly rather than a kingdom based concept and therefore celibacy itself becomes a matter of diverse interpretation. However, this becomes
particularly relevant in suggesting not only that celibacy is a choice, but that the boundaries of celibacy are also interpretable in different contexts. His definition of celibacy is particularly useful to this study because it certainly reflects a desire for holiness through celibacy, but it is celibacy itself that becomes diverse. It is not merely a term for sexual abstinence imposed by an institution, but rather a more radical interpretation of sexual freedom, or perhaps sexual indifference where sexual abstinence may or may not be important, but rather belonging to the church is important. If celibacy is linked with asceticism then being ascetic becomes a far wider interpretation of holy living, which is to suggest that, if celibacy is a term of diversity, it would follow that asceticism is also.

Having established a definition of celibacy which relies on church community rather than sexual abstinence to define priestly holiness, the question that arises from this is if radical celibacy embraces freedom, how far should this freedom extend? If *Issues in Human Sexuality* is to be reformed because of its reliance on legality and boundary rather than holiness, what then does this mean for the lives of homosexual clergy?

In this section I have sought to establish some initial definitions of the word asceticism and to link this with *Issues in Human Sexuality* which relies only on the legality of boundary rather than a direct link to holiness. I have outlined an Anglican definition of holiness and explored varying definitions of celibacy and their relationship with holy living. The question that this now raises is if an element of freedom of desire is introduced, where does this lead to in respect of holiness and ascetic discipline?

**6 Permanent Faithful and Stable**

One argument that extends freedom of choice but still seeks to embrace holiness is that relationships irrespective of sex should reflect some form of marriage or, a relationship that reflects the term *Permanent, Faithful and Stable*. *Permanent, Faithful and Stable* is primarily outlined in the writing of Jeffrey John, the Dean of St Albans, in his pamphlet of the same title. John argues for a particular sanctity which is reflected in monogamous relationships irrespective of sexual preference as he states 'I have argued that for homosexuals who are not called to celibacy, faithful monogamous partnerships is the ideal.'

The conclusion of *Permanent, Faithful and Stable* which argues for monogamous relationships moves away from the ascetic boundary of imposition used in *Issues in Human Sexuality* into an ascetic freedom of choice to seek for a life of holiness. The holiness of permanent relationship is encountered through a direct reflection of what is conventionally termed the sanctity of marriage. The union of heterosexual couples blessed by the Church is extended to include people of the same sex and reflects the ascetic freedom of monogamous relationship but also the boundary of sexual continence limited to one person.

John’s short book, written only two years after the publication of *Issues in Human Sexuality* challenges the conclusion of sexual abstinence and offers a brief theological basis for a shift from abstinence to sexual continence. However, the proposition of some form of sexual

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60 John, *Permanent, Faithful and Stable*, 46.
activity for homosexual clergy offered by John means quite a theological shift from the traditions of the church. It is therefore necessary to explore the theological context which underlines the concept of Permanent, Faithful and Stable homosexual relationships. If ‘permanent relationships’ is a means by which clerical asceticism can be practiced it is then important to outline, if only succinctly, the theological position which underlies this assertion.

For this purpose, I use the writing of Eugene Rogers who is Professor of Theology at the University of North Carolina. He suggests initially that the theological argument for permanent relationships rests primarily on a particular understanding of the body. In Sexuality and the Christian Body\textsuperscript{61} he states that ‘Christians have always been debating some practical issue about the body’.\textsuperscript{62} Rogers sets out the arguments regarding particularly the homosexual body and how this is reflected in biblically conservative arguments as well as more open discussions regarding the freedom of sexual expression. Rogers begins by suggesting the two main strands of thinking are ‘liberals accuse conservatives of misleading Biblical narratives’\textsuperscript{63} and ‘misplaced literalism’.\textsuperscript{64} In contrast to more liberal interpretations of scripture he outlines the Roman Catholic position where ‘a homosexual person suffers an objective disorder which always leads to a moral fault should he or she exercise that disposition, since there is no possibility of procreation’.\textsuperscript{65} He suggests that for conservative non-Roman Catholic Christians ‘the Bible is at stake’,\textsuperscript{66} and then finally asks ‘given that lesbian and gay people are part of the Church, how much should it allow their bodies to mean?’\textsuperscript{67}

Having asked this particular question Rogers defines the use of the body and a theology surrounding permanent, faithful and stable relationships by using the writing of Rowan Williams. For Rogers, Williams’ argument is a complex one, but his assertion is that sexuality is ‘more like race than class’.\textsuperscript{68} Using the analogy of race rather than class, Williams suggests that you are born into a race but not necessarily a class. Race is therefore a state that cannot change, whereas class may be something that is more transient. If one accepts, as Rogers does, Rowan Williams’ definition, then sexuality is something one is born with not developed through societal classification or influence.

Rogers, however, justifies Williams’ approach to the definition of the body by returning to biblical and Pauline texts in which the racial contrast is made between Jews and Gentiles in Galatians, and Gentiles are accepted into the church without having to be circumcised, the mark of the race of Judaism. Thus using Williams’ definition of race, Rogers suggests that being Gentile ‘proves no barrier to God’s grant of holiness’.\textsuperscript{69} Rogers therefore seeks to argue that much of the Pauline writings regarding the body have been misunderstood.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} Eugene Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body} (London: Blackwell, 1999)
\item \textsuperscript{62} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 18.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 18.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 21.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 23.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 27.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 42.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 53.
\end{itemize}
Rogers states that the ‘baptismal formula requires openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in overturning the frequent religious arguments’.\textsuperscript{70} As the religious arguments of the early church were in regards to the inclusion or exclusion of gentiles, so today arguments in the church regarding inclusion or exclusion because of sexual expression reflect these early tensions. Rogers argues that Paul in the New Testament challenged the established order of the religion of Christian foundation, namely Judaism, and sought to reform it. In suggesting that race for Paul was not an issue in the New Testament’s understanding of Judaism, so Rogers argues that gays and lesbians should also transform the establishment of the current church using the same argument. Gentiles were outside the early church of Judaism and lesbian and gay people are outside the traditional church of today.

If then lesbian and gay people are to be accepted as modern ‘gentiles’, that is, accepted as members of the church community both as laity and clergy, what form should their acceptance take? \textit{Issues in Human Sexuality} is clear on the boundary of acceptance, particularly for clergy, who are only accepted if they refrain from sexual contact. If inclusion of lesbian and gay people is to be within the church as priests, should their inclusion be only in terms of permanent, faithful and stable relationships? Rogers suggests that this should be the case.

Having outlined a position of supporting permanent relationships Rogers returns again to the writing of Rowan Williams who suggests that ‘marriage, gay or straight, is a kind of ascetic practice, a communal structure that frees the body to become a means of sanctification’.\textsuperscript{71} He argues himself that ‘if holiness is available to gay and lesbian couples it will not mean anything goes’.\textsuperscript{72} ‘Monogamous, committed gay and lesbian relationships are also gifts of grace ... (and a)... means of sanctification’.\textsuperscript{73}

This sanctification too is further expressed in relation to celibacy where Rogers argues that ‘God may turn homosexual desire, as God may turn heterosexual desire, directly to the love of God; this we learn from the celibate mystics’.\textsuperscript{74} Yet for Rogers it is not always through celibacy whether by heterosexual choice or homosexual requirement that one finds the Godhead. He states that ‘immediately through covenant with another person, to make that covenant with the bodies God inscribed with God’s own desire for the partner’.\textsuperscript{75} This desire is further blessed by God, described by Rogers as ‘a grace in which God can cause marriage to participate’.\textsuperscript{76}

The understanding of ‘grace’ is a theme continued by Rogers and returns to his original proposition that being Gentile in Pauline terms involves the removal of the physical commitment of circumcision; and so the bodily commitment to Judaism is removed as a requirement of being Christian, then the state of the body, whether Jew or Gentile, is acceptable in the eyes of God. For Rogers this means that the state of the physical body is

\textsuperscript{70} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 65.
\textsuperscript{71} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 71.
\textsuperscript{72} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 72.
\textsuperscript{73} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 85.
\textsuperscript{74} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 232.
\textsuperscript{75} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 233.
\textsuperscript{76} Rogers, \textit{Sexuality and the Christian Body}, 236.
part of God’s acceptance rather than something to be changed to become acceptable; so, in Pauline terms, a physical operation to remove skin from the body is not a requirement of God’s salvation. Rogers uses this Pauline formula to argue that if one can still be loved by God and be uncircumcised then changing of the body to gain salvation is not necessary. The homosexual body for Rogers becomes part of salvation, not one that requires altering. As he states ‘bodies are made to be saved’.  

In this recognition of the sacramental nature of the body, so marriage too becomes sacramental as it celebrates the human body: whether it be heterosexual in coupling or homosexual in coupling, the sharing of the body of another human being becomes part of the sharing of Trinitarian life. He argues that the celebration of sexuality is one that represents the ‘wedding feast that God celebrates in the life of the Trinity,’ and in celebrating a wedding ‘weddings represent the Trinitarian life’. As the Trinity is joined in mystic union so couples irrespective of being male or female are also joined in mystic union with each other.

However, Rogers does suggest that there is a danger with this argument in that if one places so much emphasis on the Trinitarian connection between the body of a human being and the equality of sexual expression it somehow validates only a Christian understanding of relationship. He justifies his position by arguing clearly that ‘I do not mean to say that only the church can justify same-sex love’. However what is clear from Rogers’ writing is that for him there is a sanctification of same sex marriage. There is a sanctity for Rogers attached to permanent, faithful and stable relationships reflected through Williams’ theology of the human body.

Establishing through Rogers an acceptance of the body as being something that is holy and reflective of the Godhead, it is then possible to accept lesbian and gay relationships which still embrace the sanctity or holiness of the body. For Rowan Williams, the holiness of the body expresses an ascetic definition which embraces monogamous relationships for people of the same or opposite sex. For Rogers, holiness becomes something practiced within a marital agreement, where through faithfulness and stability the Holy Spirit is manifested. Sexual practice is then for pleasure or the exercise of physical desire, but also as a symbol of commitment and faithfulness. Thus the body remains sanctified not through sexual freedom but through sexual control and monogamous relationship. Holiness is found through permanent, faithful and stable connection. Robert Song also further emphasises the importance of permanent relationships by suggesting that for him the body is to be enjoyed as part of creation. He states that ‘but for us as embodied beings with the bodies we have in this life, sexual, genital relationship is an entirely appropriate form of expression’.

What is also offered by the definition of Williams, Rogers and Song regarding the human body is the sanctification of a particular form of relationship which reflects some freedom of choice. In contrast to *Issues in Human Sexuality*, monogamous relationships require the

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78 Rogers *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, 244-5.
80 Rogers, *Theology and Sexuality*, 235.
choice of individuals to enter into that relationship and also to agree to abide by the choices that are made through monogamous commitment. Thus for Rogers, Williams and Song, asceticism reflects the choice of individuals to embrace the holiness of a monogamous relationship. In using the body for sexual activity it leads to a fuller understanding of holiness. Sexual expression in a monogamous relationship becomes a means to holiness rather than a denial of holy living.

Permanent relationships also rely on an understanding of freedom of choice rather than enforced control. Individual partners are chosen and through this there is an acknowledgement of a sexual identity which may also be permanent. Holiness is found both through permanence and through the ascetic discipline of monogamy. The pursuit of holiness is practiced through an asceticism where permanent relationships are honoured, but not promiscuity. Sarah Coakley argues that ‘the witness of gay couples choosing to make public vows, and thus cutting not once, but twice against cultural expression, demands of us all a deeper reconsideration of the meaning and costliness of such vows in a world of rampantly promiscuous desires’. To live a holy life for Coakley as for Song and Rogers, involves giving up promiscuous desires and forming a permanent relationship.

This form of asceticism does indeed allow the boundary of sexual practice to be moved from one form of asceticism, that of sexual abstinence, to another, that of permanent committed relationships. Rogers, Coakley, Williams, Song and John all seek for a sanctity found in the asceticism of committed relationships. However, what this highlights is a desire for holy living, an ascetic choice which confines sex within the sanctity of a one step removed heterosexual marriage. Yet is this simply a re-aligning of desire to almost sanitise homosexual relationships into an holy covenant which may in the future be acceptable to the church? It is a simple proposition: The Bible teaches marriage is a sacred covenant, in Protestant thought a sexually active marriage is acceptable for priests; some priests are by nature homosexual, so a covenant sexually active relationship can be sanctified in the same way as heterosexual marriage. Asceticism or desire for holiness still establishes a boundary for right practice and Issues in Human Sexuality might then be “re-written” to accommodate this.

‘Permanent relationship’ embodies asceticism certainly, but it also emphasises rather than diminishes an asceticism of boundary. Membership of the church is established through adherence to a form of controlled asceticism: that of permanent relationship. One boundary is replaced by another. The church imposes monogamous relationship using the same understanding of boundary as Issues in Human Sexuality. The church in Issues in Human Sexuality sanctifies permanent heterosexual relationship but nothing else. However, Rogers, Coakley and Song desire to seek an inclusion into the church, particularly for homosexual clergy. Such an understanding of sexual inclusion establishes ascetic boundaries, and particularly sexual boundaries which offer an alternative lifestyle to the sexual abstinence of Issues in Human Sexuality. In doing so there is a legitimisation of the homosexual human body whereby sex becomes part of a marriage agreement irrespective of sexual identity. The

act of sex celebrates the homosexual human body given by God. Rogers uses the Westminster catechism, where the body is made ‘to glorify God and enjoy him for ever’.84 Yet this all seems just too convenient an argument. Sex is good in some circumstances but not others. In a heterosexual context, marriage limits sexual activity to one partner, blessed and hallowed by God in the words of the marriage service. Sexual practice means the activity which is enjoyed by two individuals and in their sexual pleasure they find God. Homosexuals are welcome into the church fellowship in the modern era, so homosexual desire is the same as heterosexual desire. In this desire the homosexual finds God in the same way as heterosexuals do in representing the ‘mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his church’. 85 Sexual activity is in the context of traditional marriage ideals. Therefore homosexual marriage is the means by which homosexuals participate fully in the membership of the church community as laity and priests.86

The problem with this argument is that I suggest that it does not deal with many forms of sexual diversity. Monogamous heterosexuality is extended to monogamous homosexuality and sexual activity is confined only within this framework. Condemnation is reserved for any other forms of sexual expression which fall outside the model of two people in a permanent relationship. Even Rogers suggests that in the Bible God uses ‘irregular’87 sexual unions for God’s own purposes and acknowledges that in the Old Testament genealogy of Jesus there are adulterous relationships such as David with Bathsheba and in the history of Israel, redemption by Rahab the prostitute. What this would then appear to suggest is that God accepts the use of these irregular relationships in certain circumstances, but that an ideal for Rogers is a mirror image of heterosexual marriage. In making this connection Rogers, I suggest, simply advances the boundary of sexual practice in one form to embrace the ascetic discipline of sexual continence. The boundary simply moves places. So the question I ask is- if asceticism in some form is good, or reflective of the Trinity, or acceptable to Pauline teaching, then why should what is usually termed ‘permanent faithful and stable’ relationships be the only means by which sexual activity can be practised?

In seeking to move forward from Issues in Human Sexuality to establish a definition of asceticism which embraces holiness and choice, I have sought to outline how permanent, faithful and stable relationships do reflect both holiness and some element of choice. Using the definitions of choice and holiness, permanent, faithful and stable relationships are certainly ascetic but as Coakley suggested, rather more counter-cultural than what would be determined as what some gay men may want or desire.88 Song particularly recognises that

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84 Rogers, Theology and Sexuality, 236.
85 The Book of Common Prayer (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1662,) 301
86 This is certainly current thinking in other parts of the Anglican Communion in Canada for example.
87 Rogers, Theology and Sexuality, 235.
88 Michel Foucault for example identifies himself as being gay but his expressions of sexuality do not necessarily reflect monogamous relationship. Although it is impossible to analyse with any sense of justice, Foucault’s philosophies, it is important to acknowledge his understanding of sex. Foucault’s understanding of humanity is directly associated with the pursuit of pleasure. He suggests that
‘the willingness of individuals to avow publicly their sexuality and sexual activity has risen, as has the fascination with previously marginalized forms of sexual behaviour’. Although Song continues that ‘the assumption that marriage is intended for life remains largely intact’, there is an acknowledgment that for many people sexual monogamy is not desired or expected. Thus for Coakley in particular, gay priests accept a counter cultural norm and demonstrate to wider gay groupings a church-based relationship. But is this the only form of clerical holiness? Is imposing a heteronormative relationship on gay clergy reflective of gay people? Do gay clergy embrace simply another form of enforced asceticism though a permanent relationship?

If asceticism involves holiness as well as boundary then it is possible to acknowledge that there may be a theology that engages more directly with a wider understanding of holiness rather than relying only on boundary. In an attempt to explore holiness rather than constraint one particular strand of thinking that has emerged is what has become known as queer theology.

7 Queer Theology

In beginning to engage with queer theology it is important to understand that there is no definitive statement that is identifiable as ‘queer.’ Queer theology is rather a collection of individual theologians who either identify themselves as queer or are identified as such by other people. Susannah Cornwall explains that ‘to be queer is to be contested as well as to contest, since queer insists that all identity and ideology is provisional and unfinished...queer theology deals not with certainty but with suggestion.’ There is no uniting belief structure, nor organisation to belong to, but rather a collection of writers who identify themselves or are identified by others as queer theologians.

In his introduction to queer theology Radical Love, Patrick Cheng further emphasises the lack of definition by stating ‘doing queer theology is not simply a matter of advocacy or determining the ‘right’ answer. Rather it is the engagement with the four theological sources

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89 Song, Covenant and Calling, 95.
90 Song Covenant and Calling, 95.
91 Susannah Cornwall, Controversies in Queer Theology (London: SCM, 2011,) 39
92 In fact Mark Jordan suggested in an email that ‘As for my label... I pause not because I refuse to be called either “queer” or a “theologian,” but because I have begun to wonder about the future of that phrase. I have begun to think of it as too limiting. Perhaps we should call ourselves theologians simply? That being said, I am happy to wear whatever label seems most apt in your argument. Received 28 November 2014
of scripture, reason and experience and reflecting deeply on how LGBT people talk about
God.'

He argues that ‘Christian theology is, at its core, a queer enterprise’.

What Cheng particularly offers through his understanding of queer theology however, is an
understanding of holiness. He states that ‘the second mark of the church is holiness...where
the divine meets the human, or where God’s grace is manifested on earth.’ A queer
definition of holiness reflects the writings of Thornton and a desire for holy living. Thus what
emerges from queer theology is a desire both for sexual freedom and some identity with a
quest for holiness. Queer theology also extends the boundaries of asceticism into the area
of sexual freedom rather than sexual restraint. It offers an understanding of sexual freedom
but also reflects a desire for some form of holiness.

However, if queer theology is not creedal nor is there a united body of queer theologians the
problem arises as to how exactly to engage with queer holiness. It is also impossible to
create a singular definition of queer asceticism. In an attempt to explore understandings of
boundary, holiness and freedom within some form of queer theology I have concentrated on
the work of three individual theologians. The three theologians I have chosen for this
purpose are James Alison, Mark Jordan and Marcella Althaus Reid. Although they offer a
diversity of opinions they are united either by their own admission or by the understanding
of others to be writing within the understanding of ‘queer’.

James Alison is a more conservative theologian who wrestles with his sexuality within the
Roman Catholic Church: he identifies himself as ‘queer’ and also seeks for a greater sexual
freedom but also has a desire for holiness within that freedom. He would seek to hold to a
traditional view of Roman Catholic teaching but not in the area of condemning homosexual
activity.

Mark Jordan has rejected the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church to which he once
belonged, and seeks to place sexual practice in an historical framework and concentrates on
a desire to trace homosexual practice in particular throughout Christian history with a
continuing desire for a diversity of sexual expression. This acceptance of diversity leads to a
desire for sexual freedom which may or may not reflect an ascetic discipline.

Finally I cite Marcella Althaus-Reid, a radical post-feminist theologian who challenges both
sexual identity and sexual practice but also seeks to explore some form of godhead or desire
to live some form of holy living whilst wishing for sexual liberation. Her writings are perhaps
those most closely identified with the foundations of queer theology, although they express
a radicalism that would fall outside what may be termed conventional Christianity.

94 Cheng Radical Love, 22.
95 Cheng Radical Love, 140.
96 Cheng Radical Love, 108.
97 Indeed one may argue that if one did create a definition of asceticism which was queer then the
very fact it was a definition would un queer it.
8 Conclusion

So in conclusion to this chapter I have suggested initially that definitions of asceticism reflect two distinct elements: boundary and holiness. Using boundary and holiness to define asceticism I have identified an inadequacy with *Issues in Human Sexuality* because the only definition of asceticism used in its conclusions is an asceticism of boundary. There is an absence of holiness reflected in the legal language used and in the imposition of a sexual abstinence for homosexual clergy. Such imposition is not reflected in a definition of celibacy either, a term which is missing completely from *Issues in Human Sexuality*. Celibacy would express a form of holiness even if the boundary of abstinence was the same. However, Lloyd concludes that celibacy, like asceticism also should reflect a quest for holiness rather than simply an imposition of sexual abstinence.

In an attempt to establish a definition of holiness, the writings of Thornton suggest holiness is found through priestly devotion to the community in which the priest serves. It is through sacramental observance and through a life of prayer that holiness is explored. For Lloyd celibacy is reflected in community rather than sexual abstinence. Thornton and Lloyd both seek for holiness but through the life of the church not through a definition of sexual practice or denial.

In seeking an understanding of asceticism that embraces holiness rather than legal imposition, I have sought to explore extending the boundary beyond sexual abstinence. In considering a theology of ‘permanent, faithful and stable’ the boundary of sexual abstinence is extended to include a permanent monogamous relationship for both homosexual and heterosexual clergy. An understanding of permanent relationships embraces an asceticism which desires holiness but still reflects boundary through sexual continence. The body becomes a means to holiness through sexual activity. Yet the sexual activity is confined only to a monogamous relationship. For Rogers, Williams and Song it is through the purity of such a relationship that not only is holiness explored but pleasure as well. Monogamous relationships become the means of true fulfilment and therefore the fulfilment of priestly ministry.

Having established that holiness is found through permanent and faithful relationships, I now wish to explore further whether ‘permanence’ is the only form of sexual ascetic practice. If asceticism is the desire for holiness, then is asceticism to be found just in sexual abstinence or monogamous sexual relationships? I therefore wish to explore a definition of asceticism which embraces a greater sexual freedom than that offered by either *Issues in Human Sexuality* or permanent relationships.
Chapter Two James Alison

1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I have established a definition of asceticism that relies on two particular premises, namely an establishment of ‘boundary’ and ‘desire for holiness’. *Issues in Human Sexuality* establishes a boundary for clergy which requires sexual abstinence, but not necessarily through a quest for holiness. Moving from the boundary imposed on clergy by *Issues in Human Sexuality* I have then explored the asceticism surrounding permanent relationships which includes the boundary of monogamy. Sexual expression is confined within one relationship but unlike *Issues in Human Sexuality* embraces a quest for holiness. Holiness is sought through respect for the body but also an adherence to a church model of relationship, that of marriage.

Arguing that the definition of asceticism is intertwined with boundary as well as holiness, it is clear that, in seeking to explore a relationship between asceticism and *Issues in Human Sexuality* membership of the church is of crucial importance. If the absence of holiness in *Issues in Human Sexuality* is to be challenged it is important to continue to explore the understanding that holiness is sought through membership of the church. Thornton in seeking an Anglican holiness and Lloyd in his definition of celibacy have both identified the importance of belonging to a church community. Therefore in seeking to explore a wider understanding of sexuality and church membership, I have chosen to engage with the writings of James Alison.

Alison, a former Dominican Roman Catholic monk, writes from the position of being gay but also wishing to remain within the Roman Catholic Church. He asks for example, ‘Why do any of us become Catholic and remain Catholic?’ 98 He argues that ‘now is not the moment to be despairing of the Church’. 99 In not despairing, Alison wishes to establish a theological position which could be adopted with regard particularly to the acceptance of lesbian and gay people within the church.

Alison distinctly wrestles with the issue of being a priest and being gay. Alison seeks primarily to reform the Roman Catholic Church to include in particular the acceptance of lesbian and gay people into the church community both as laity and priests. However, Alison’s viewpoint is one that speaks directly to *Issues in Human Sexuality* because both Alison’s writings and *Issues in Human Sexuality* seek to acknowledge the presence of lesbian and gay people within the church and also the presence of gay people within the priesthood. Alison writes from the particular standpoint of identifying himself as gay and owning that identity to write theologically with regards to this.

Yet Alison’s theology is traditionally Catholic in many forms. Indeed, Alison states emphatically that he is ‘a somewhat conservative Catholic, for such do I consider myself to be’. 101 In beginning to identify his theological perspective towards sexuality it is important

100 Unfortunately there are not lesbians within the Roman Catholic priesthood.
to see his wish to be part of the church as being a distinct part of his thinking. His writings engage with a theology that is wider than the issue of sexuality. His quest to embrace a traditional theology yet still acknowledging his sexuality as a gay priest is best illustrated by his book Knowing Jesus.\textsuperscript{102} The book is a study of the life of Christ in a distinctly devotional way. He talks in terms of ‘a unity of all humanity reconciled with each other, and by definition, with God, so the internal dynamic of the presence of the self-giving victim is always universal’.\textsuperscript{103} The language he uses in this book is certainly one of a Church theologian, admittedly one that wishes to extend the boundaries of conservative thought, but one that lies certainly within the doctrinal teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Another example of his traditional theological outlook is his theology of the crucifixion of Jesus where he comments that ‘making us Holy is identical with making us part of the new Israel of God’.\textsuperscript{104} ‘...and ‘Everything that I have said so far about the presence of the crucified and risen Lord can legitimately be taken as referring to the Mass’ \textsuperscript{105} These phrases seek to emphasise that for Alison the wrestling and writings regarding his sexuality are not to exclude traditional theology but rather to embrace it and through it be part of the church community. His theological writing represents his own struggles with belonging to the church and being part of the priesthood and being gay. Alison suggests that ‘knowing Jesus...is the discovery of being fed by the making present of the victim...in the life of the Church and the sacraments, involving a constantly critical re appraisal of our ways of belonging’.\textsuperscript{106}

Therefore his challenge to the church should be seen within the context of a theologian who writes, particularly in this book, for what is often termed the encouragement of the faithful. Knowing Jesus is not a book challenging the church regarding sexuality; it is a group of devotional writings for those wishing to explore holy living or a desire for holiness.

Consequently this makes Knowing Jesus a very important part of this study of Alison. It reflects his desire for holy living and therefore his asceticism. For Alison, like Thornton, holiness is found through the sacraments and devotion to church practice. Alison seeks for holiness and outlines this quest by confirming his belief in the importance of belonging to the church. Although much of his writing focusses on the desire for lesbian and gay people to be accepted into the church and consequently means for him an association with some form of queer identity, it is this book that defines him as being a theologian who addresses more than sexual inclusion and one who seeks holy living. Much of his writings do focus on his attitudes towards sexuality and inclusion within the church but this must be seen in the wider context of his greater output. Knowing Jesus places him within the framework of a devotional theologian and one that expresses this devotion by a desire for holiness. For Alison the Mass is central and ‘becoming disciples’ \textsuperscript{107} is a vital part of his thinking. The church is of crucial importance to a quest for holiness. If asceticism reflects holiness, then

\textsuperscript{102} James Alison, Knowing Jesus (London: SPCK, 1983).
\textsuperscript{103} Alison, Knowing Jesus, 79.
\textsuperscript{104} Alison, Knowing Jesus, 80.
\textsuperscript{105} Alison, Knowing Jesus, 85.
\textsuperscript{106} Alison, Knowing Jesus, 113.
\textsuperscript{107} Alison, Knowing Jesus, 113.
asceticism is found through the sacraments of the church and belonging to church community.

2 The Question of Sin

However, what is also interesting is that Alison’s desire for holiness is reflected and possibly judged by a theology which expresses a broadly traditional view of the notion of sin. He states that ‘knowing the Father means becoming aware of how God does actually relate to the world by loving it and sending his Son to be the expiation of our sins’.108

Yet Alison does distance himself from the more traditional views of sin and redemption by wishing to state that the ‘view of original sin—whose crude version is “the world is in a mess, Christ is the solution” is seriously inadequate’.109 Alison continues his particular view on sin in his book ‘On Being Liked’110 by suggesting that despite everything, God likes us111 and this has ‘nothing to do with whether we are bad or good’.112 His more radical approach to sin is also extended in his development of sinfulness through theories of atonement. For example, Alison attempts to justify his theory of the atonement where he dismisses at first a God who was ‘remote and angry, remained remote and angry but created an exception for those who were lucky’.113 Alison challenges the view that God is judgemental by still working within traditional boundaries of sin and redemption, particularly as he states that we are in a process of ‘being able to be forgiven’.114

Yet Alison suggests that he is ‘unsatisfied’115 with the more conservative view of salvation, creation and the fall and he seeks to outline his own understanding of the atonement but still within the more traditional framework of Catholic teaching. Alison begins by first accepting created order which is a ‘victory over chaos’116 but then challenges what he sees as ancient Judeo Christian creation narratives and suggests that they tell not a tale of destruction but rather that there is now a ‘growing understanding that God has nothing to do with human violence’.117

Alison seeks rather to see the redemptive process of God through Jesus as ‘participating in divine life, by being created’118 and ‘participate in God’s creative act’.119 Yet in this creative act Alison sees the true relationship between humanity and the Godhead as being bound up with ‘forgiveness’.120 This forgiveness ‘is our access to creation’121 and our access consequently to the freedom found in being part of creation but also being part of the

108 Alison, Knowing Jesus, 111.
110 Alison, On Being Liked.
111 Alison, On Being Liked, 15.
112 Alison, On Being Liked, 15.
113 Alison, On Being Liked, 22.
114 Alison, On Being Liked, 27.
115 Alison, On Being Liked, 47.
116 Alison, On Being Liked, 52.
117 Alison, On Being Liked, 55.
118 Alison, On Being Liked, 57.
119 Alison, On Being Liked, 58.
120 Alison, On Being Liked, 59.
121 Alison, On Being Liked, 59.
creator. Yet Alison is not suggesting that we are part of the Godhead who is ‘a bounteous strength which is massively prior to us’\textsuperscript{122} but rather that we participate in ‘opening horizons of much greater dimensions’.\textsuperscript{123}

Having opened the possibility that greater dimensions may play a larger part in a theology of sin, in the continuing chapters of \textit{The Joy of Being Wrong}, Alison continues his definition of sinfulness and redemption. His understanding is somewhat complex, making a statement that ‘there is in fact no unitary understanding of sin in the Old Testament’.\textsuperscript{124} He argues that sin has differing interpretations through history but his conclusion at the end of the chapter is that sin involves a ‘mythical relation’\textsuperscript{125} which moves to his statement that ‘there is nothing solid about original sin, nothing on which anything can be based’.\textsuperscript{126} He continues that ‘at the root of Israel, as of all societies, is foundational murder, so Jesus reveals the fact by allowing himself to become a victim, and thus the critique of Israel is complete’.\textsuperscript{127} This is concluded with the writing that ‘there is no need, then, to decry the traditional insistence that baptism removes original sin’.\textsuperscript{128}

Alison’s writings on original sin and the redemption found through the sacramental life of the church further emphasises his commitment to belonging to the church community. Holiness is found through belonging to the church. Where Alison’s writing becomes more radical is when he wishes to express his identity as being a gay priest. He does this by acknowledging the existence of being a ‘victim’. Victim status becomes important for Alison because it is through being a victim that the lesbian and gay person enters into the theology of the atonement. If we are to have an understanding of Alison’s desire for the acceptance of lesbian and gay people into the ministry of the church then it is important to consider at this stage his understanding of ‘victim’.

3 The ‘Gay Victim’

The concept of victim for Alison echoes the Christ figure where the lesbian and gay person becomes part of the church as an outsider or a prophet. The lack of freedom imposed by the church on gay people is crucial to Alison’s thinking. Lying within Alison’s expression of traditional doctrine is the understanding for Alison of Jesus himself being a victim expressed already through his theory of atonement. For Alison the victim status is then further extended where, as Christ is the supreme victim so lesbian and gay people reflect the person of Christ through being victimised by the church. Alison states that ‘the intelligence of the victim is not a simple illumination, but a creative and constitutive revelation, creative and constitutive of a new way of being human’ but then returns to a more traditional and possibly distinctly Roman Catholic statement that the ‘victim Jesus’ and ‘a belief in the resurrection, automatically implies belief in Jesus founding one unique church and of the

\textsuperscript{122} Alison, \textit{On Being Liked}, 63.
\textsuperscript{123} Alison, \textit{On Being Liked}, 64.
\textsuperscript{124} Alison, \textit{The Joy of Being Wrong}, 137.
\textsuperscript{125} Alison, \textit{The Joy of Being Wrong}, 161.
\textsuperscript{126} Alison, \textit{The Joy of Being Wrong}, 170.
\textsuperscript{127} Alison, \textit{The Joy of Being Wrong}, 178.
\textsuperscript{128} Alison, \textit{The Joy of Being Wrong}, 185.
church as something necessary universal...the self-giving of the victim is not accidentally but essentially linked to the historical institution which it brought into being’.\textsuperscript{129}

Nevertheless, this concept that gay Christians have a particular role within the Church is not one that is new or peculiar to Alison. The Christian writer Jim Cotter in his memorial address to the then ‘Gay Christian Movement’ in 1984 calls its members to be ‘spies of God’\textsuperscript{120}, where gay men were seen as being herals of the new kingdom echoing the language of the fall of Jericho and the prostitute Rahab in Joshua.\textsuperscript{131} Alison though continues his theme of seeing the person of homosexual orientation as being someone who is a particular victim who ‘has to carry his cross every day’.\textsuperscript{132} He sees the fact that if gay people wish to be honest with themselves and with the church then the church reacts by wishing to ‘despise, calumniate and crucify them’.\textsuperscript{133} The idea of rejection and symbolic crucifixion for Alison is a very difficult process to overcome, as he writes, ‘for in a dialogue, who will represent the closet? Cannot this only be done by someone who isn’t in it?...because speaking out would be coming out’.\textsuperscript{134} It is more for him the possibility that ‘we have to rework Catholic moral theology in such a way as to make it capable of unbinding the consciences of people who fear, at a very deep level, receiving the conscience of a child of God’.\textsuperscript{135}

Alison’s own experiences of rejection too echo his sense of persecution and victimhood. Recounting his appointment at a theological institution in Latin America, he outlines a process where objections made to his ‘militant homosexuality’\textsuperscript{136} meant a time of insecurity and his uncertainty before becoming ‘surprised and grateful to find myself, the place of the much loved queer.’\textsuperscript{137} This position though is not one that is embarked on lightly, as he suggests that ‘the experience for many gay people is that the church in some way or other, kills us. Typically in official discourse we are a ‘they’, dangerous people whose most notable characteristics is not a shared humanity but a tendency to commit acts considered to be gravely objectively disordered.’\textsuperscript{138}

Yet this victim status is one that certainly leads to his understanding of the position of lesbian and gay people in the church to which he belongs. This is outlined by his statement that being gay and Christian means a ‘challenge not for gay people to learn to tell a different story but to find ourselves to be able to tell the same story, the Christian story’\textsuperscript{139} and belong to the same church body.

For Alison it is the task of gay people within the church to identify with Christ the victim. Through this victimhood he seeks to create what he terms a fraternity with Jesus to build a New Jerusalem by challenging the acts of cowardice in denying freedom to a particular

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{129} Alison, \textit{The Joy of Being Wrong}, 91.
\bibitem{130} Jim Cotter \textit{The Other Country, Spies of God} (London: GCM, 1985)
\bibitem{131} Joshua 2
\bibitem{132} James Alison \textit{Faith Beyond Resentment} (London: DLT, 2001), 52
\bibitem{133} Alison, \textit{Faith Beyond Resentment}, 53.
\bibitem{134} Alison, \textit{Faith Beyond Resentment}, 54.
\bibitem{135} Alison, \textit{Faith Beyond Resentment}, 55.
\bibitem{136} Alison, \textit{Faith Beyond Resentment}, 36.
\bibitem{137} Alison, \textit{Faith Beyond Resentment}, 41.
\bibitem{138} Alison, \textit{Faith Beyond Resentment}, 45.
\bibitem{139} Alison, \textit{Broken Hearts and New Creations}, 48.
\end{thebibliography}
sexual orientation. So what Alison establishes is that lesbian and gay people in the church have a particular status of being a Christ-like victim, who, being persecuted by the church, reflects the suffering of Christ. Thus, gay priests too reflect particularly the status of victim as they are within the church but, if they remain, are not permitted to sexually active. Although Alison writes from the perspective of a gay Roman Catholic priest his writings challenge Issues in Human Sexuality because he seeks a desire for a gay priestly identity to be acknowledged and celebrated, not persecuted or denied sexual expression.

Alison therefore challenges the church to change its viewpoint on issues of sexuality, but not to abandon completely some traditional understanding of redemption and atonement. He argues to maintain a traditional emphasis on theological study within conventional Catholic teaching but wishes for a wider acceptance of sexual expression. Wrestling with this very question, Alison states that ‘I don’t want to hold a dissident opinion at all’ and sees for himself the danger of leading people astray into what he would regard as heresy if he challenges the traditional teachings of the church. The idea that his theology may bring him into conflict with the teachings of the RC Church is one of great self-searching, where ‘either it is true to affirm that the homosexual inclination is objectively disordered, or it is not’.

However, Alison justifies his position by arguing that in challenging the church one challenges not the church itself but rather the temple structure which the church represents. Alison states that ‘the point of the Pope and the Vatican is not that it is the temple but that it is Peter. And the whole point of Peter is that he is not something splendid, heroic and imposing, but something weak and unheroic and vacillating.’ He suggests that even if the whole structure of the traditional temple were to collapse (‘suddenly they aren’t there’) then it is up to the individual then to be ‘seeking to make available a gift to others’. This removal or development of Papal authority is a theme which continues through Undergoing God where he suggests that ‘my view is that the Pope’s job is to be the figure of unity by being the last man off the sinking ship. It is only when everyone else has moved on, has accepted that change has happened irreversibly and is happy with it, that the Pope can leave the old world behind...then Peter can declare that whole episode over.’

Certainly the fluidity of papal authority is crucial in understanding Alison’s view of theological change and his wish for lesbian and gay acceptance within the church. The Papal figure for Alison represents an authority on sexual activity which is not helpful. Despite the current softening towards the issue of homosexual acceptance, it is still the official view of the Pope that homosexual activity may be considered sinful. But for Alison the Papal authority regarding homosexuality is removed, because the church has removed itself from such authority through common consent. The Pope leaves the metaphorical sinking ship and

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140 Alison, On Being Liked, 82.
142 Alison, On Being Liked, 126.
143 Alison, On Being Liked, 128.
144 Alison, On Being Liked, 129.
145 Alison , Undergoing God, 175.
individual Christians rejoice in their discovered freedom. The Pope for Alison represents a figure of unity in the church. If the wider church accepts homosexuals and homosexual priests then the Pope should reflect the desire of the body of Christians. It is Alison’s understanding that the ‘common consent’ amongst Catholic Christians is that homosexual people should be accepted by the church. The Pope should therefore accept homosexuals also. Homosexuals become members of the church through acceptance by the church community not by papal edict.

Alison continues his justification for homosexual people by suggesting that ‘the church has got something wrong in its understanding of the gay question, I don’t think we are dealing with a question of doctrine’.  He sees doctrine as relating to the Godhead and not to humanity and so the human condition is who individuals are, rather than a statement about God. This means that for Alison there is ‘such a thing as being gay and that it is simply a fact of life’.

4 Persecution by the church for being gay

So for Alison the gay person and especially the gay priest has a particular role as being the victim and in doing so reflects the life of Christ, the supreme victim. He outlines his own victim status by expressing the view that the Church gives the transformation of life into two categories, similar to an opera in two acts. He sees how an opera moves from the plot at the beginning to revelations or transformations into different characters at the end, where a disguised prince or ruler makes themselves known at the end of the opera and in doing so comes to the rescue of any situation.

Alison suggests that this is similar to the transformation expected by the church from one style of living to another and returns us to his writings regarding the nature of redemption and the quest for holiness. However, for Alison the transformation through baptism to redemption becomes a problem when this change happens to lesbian and gay people. He states ‘it is quite clear that being gay or lesbian belongs to a mirage of false meaning proper to act one and that any of our desire that is gay or lesbian will be left behind’. It therefore suggests that ‘the possibility of our being involved in act II depends on us being forgiven for being gay (and that) accepting ourselves as gay and lesbian it was only part of act I’. His conclusion to this is that the church is still holding on to the idea that being gay or lesbian is something that needs transformation rather than inclusion, an inclusion that Alison sees as reflecting the breakthrough which is the Christian Gospel. If the common consent of the church is that homosexuals should be accepted and not rejected then the homosexual is redeemed as part of the church. The whole church is redeemed together irrespective of any individual’s sexual orientation. Homosexual people are included as part of redeemed creation not redeemed from their sexual orientation.

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147 Alison, On Being Liked, 83.
148 Alison, On Being Liked, 86.
149 Alison, Broken Hearts and New Creations, 109.
150 Alison, Broken Hearts and New Creations, 121.
151 Alison, Broken Hearts and New Creations, 121.
However, for Alison holding to a position that involves a transformation from rejection by the church to one’s own acceptance of being homosexual comes at a cost. The church becomes something of an enemy. His own thoughts battling with the sense of forgiveness and yet wanting to demonise the ‘hierarchs of the church as evil caricatures’\textsuperscript{152} where the temptation is to dismiss the church as being anti-gay because of the words of some of its spokesmen. Alison also illustrates his frustrations with the hierarchy of the Church who seem to both accept and control homosexual activity using the illustration of several scandals in the United States where the most vehement of anti-gay propaganda is often put forward by people who have been involved in gay scandals themselves such as the Senator Larry Craig.

Alison’s sense of outrage against the hierarchy of the RC Church is continued as he cites one Catholic US Archdiocese ‘that was perfectly happy to take part in an ecumenical gathering among Christian denominations which deny such things as the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist…but when the Metropolitan Community Church, whose members tend to have a rather Catholic friendly understanding of basic Christianity, but is predominantly gay in its composition, was admitted to the group, the Archbishop ordered the ecumenical links to be broken’.\textsuperscript{153} But it is within this sense of outrage that Alison still seeks to dialogue with the RC Church and yet feels too a sense of futility in doing so. He suggests that ‘this attempt of mine to speak in the midst of the church is no more than an attempt by a drunk driver to show the traffic cops that he is able to walk in a straight line…and to take this as a sign of good faith and to treat it as some sort of cry for help’.\textsuperscript{154}

Although Alison sees an important change in emphasis, where the RC Church has begun to recognise that ‘people with the common and recognisable characteristic of a lasting and stable emotional attraction towards members of their own sex’\textsuperscript{155} he does state that Catholic teaching still holds to a less than positive outlook on lesbian and gay people. He states that ‘let us not delude ourselves here the person whose inclination is towards those of the same sex is a defective heterosexual’.\textsuperscript{156} The status of the gay and lesbian person in the church is one for Alison one to be celebrated not denied as being something which is wrong or unholy. Holiness is found through acknowledging one’s sexuality and being proud of it, even if this means rejection by mainstream Catholic theology.

Homosexuality is ‘merely a normal occurrence within created matter, with its own tendency of flourishing’.\textsuperscript{157} Alison further illustrates his argument for complete acceptance and inclusion by using the example of alcoholism. The acceptable use of alcohol would be seen as part of human living whereas alcoholism may be seen as putting the wellbeing of a person in danger. The rejection of an individual homosexual’s natural desire of some people may damage ‘health and flourishing…leading into danger’.\textsuperscript{158} The acceptance of homosexual

\textsuperscript{152} Alison, \textit{Broken Hearts and New Creations}, 174.
\textsuperscript{153} Alison, \textit{Broken Hearts and New Creations}, 273.
\textsuperscript{154} Alison, \textit{Undergoing God}, 145.
\textsuperscript{155} Alison, \textit{Undergoing God}, 147.
\textsuperscript{156} Alison, \textit{Undergoing God}, 149.
\textsuperscript{157} Alison, \textit{Undergoing God}, 152.
\textsuperscript{158} Alison, \textit{Undergoing God}, 152.
desires by individuals is to be celebrated not rejected. The rejection of individual people by the church because of their sexual orientation leads to danger and not flourishing.

Alison continues his theme of rejection where the individual ‘queer’ becomes ‘not so much a theoretical possibility as one of praxis’. The ‘queer’ is faced with the praxis choice of accepting the paternity of the Church which seeks to crush and undermine sexuality or to encourage a system of duplicity. The person who remains silent within the closet will have no problems, the one who is ‘out’ ‘deserves the problems that befall him, and so no legislation should protect him’. It is the traditions of the church that persecute and demand an adherence to sexual abstinence or the duplicity of the closet. Membership of the church community involves a denial of sexual identity not a celebration of it.

5 The desire for holiness

So for Alison the gay Christian and specifically for him the gay Catholic Christian is rejected by the church or required to remain in the closet. The problem that arises from celebrating homosexuality rather than denying it is that it places Alison in a very difficult position. I have already established that Alison, like Thornton sees the desire for holiness as belonging to the church community. If the church rejects homosexual activity then holiness becomes complex. How for Alison is holiness found within the church and whilst being a gay priest?

The question returns the argument to Alison’s understanding of ‘victim’. Through the rejection by the church the lesbian and gay person becomes the victim. In becoming the victim the lesbian and gay person becomes holy. Holiness is found through the church, not through being accepted but rather through identity with Christ the victim. If the church requires sexual abstinence or a sexual closet then in seeking a positive homosexual identity the individual becomes the Christ-like victim. For Alison a desire for holiness is expressed through being victimised. Alison sees holiness as reflecting the life of Christ, not through sexual denial but by the persecution of the church. As Christ is holy and Christ is the victim, so if the gay person or the gay priest becomes the victim, so the gay priest becomes holy. Positive homosexual identity rather than sexual abstinence creates the victim. Thus if ‘victim’ leads to holiness then homosexual identity becomes part of that holiness. Homosexual identity becomes a positive expression of holiness rather than a negative one. If asceticism is a desire for holiness and homosexual identity is a part of that holiness, in some form the sexual identity becomes holy.

Where Alison’s argument is significant is that he establishes a link between homosexual identity and holiness. In the arguments for ‘permanent, faithful and stable’ relationships there is a positive suggestion that homosexual identity and homosexual sexual activity are linked with holiness. This is not the case in Issues in Human Sexuality. Where Alison moves the argument forward from ‘Permanent Faithful and Stable’ is that he still seeks holiness, but his writing regarding sexual identity is specifically in relation to gay people. Gay people become holy because they are gay not in spite of it.

159 Alison, Faith Beyond Resentment, 47.
160 Alison, Faith Beyond Resentment, 52.
Somewhat surprisingly, I can find no direct reference at all as to what Alison regards as acceptable sexual activity, but only an understanding of freedom for lesbian and gay people which comes at the risk of being victimised. I conclude from this, that Alison advocates some form of sexual freedom which is not directly compatible with either *Issues in Human Sexuality* nor permanent relationships but something else, not specifically defined but relating to having a gay identity. Alison’s personal position is somewhat ambiguous as he suggests in *Undergoing God* that he is an ‘unpartnered gay priest,’¹⁶¹ but he writes in the same paragraph that this is with a sense of regret rather than decision. What is defined however is a desire for freedom of sexual identity and a desire to rejoice in that identity even if this means embracing the victim status of Christ.

So, Alison’s desire for holiness is important because it identifies lesbian and gay people as being holy without defining their sexual practice. His understanding of holiness unites a positive homosexual identity with belonging to the church. He achieves this, not by outlining a code of conduct by which people can remain in the church, but by wishing to celebrate rather than deny that gay and lesbian people exist. Furthermore to understand that homosexual expression is not a sin. For Alison gay and lesbian people should be accepted by the Church because they are part of creation, part of the church and then as he defines, part of God.

Alison sees the presence of lesbian and gay people within the church as being a significant part of the church as a whole. In fact Alison in *On Being Liked* takes this even further and suggests that it is the role of lesbian and gay people to challenge the church particularly. He sees that a challenge to the church establishment by ‘anyone in ministry’¹⁶² is part of the continuing development of the church. Homosexual priests challenge the church and therefore are a positive influence rather than a negative one.

The question that remains in Alison’s writing is what he determines the ‘praxis’ of homosexual identity, or more specifically what is permissible sexual activity. Both *Issues in Human Sexuality* and those who argue for ‘permanent, faithful and stable’ are specific about what forms of sexual activity lead to holiness and what forms do not. The choice is abstinence or sexual continence in a monogamous relationship. So is there any boundary that Alison suggests for sexual activity? If he does not define sexual practice in particular terms, what does he rely on to establish some form of sexual boundary? I suggest that Alison establishes boundaries by relying on a concept of ‘desire’ where good and bad desires become the reason for specific actions.

### 6 Desire

Alison puts forward a theology of desire where ascetic practice becomes the temperance of desire. For Alison true Christianity is found in this quest for right desires, as he states in *Broken Hearts and New Creations* that ‘love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you comes as the mid-point , the point of the passage, between these two different patterns of desire: the first pattern of desire, in which our identity is given to us and grasped onto us

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¹⁶¹ Alison, *Undergoing God*, 189.
by imitative creatures as we mirror each other in reciprocity: and the second pattern of desire, in which our identity is given to us by someone moving us entirely independently of being moved by us. The instruction is not to be one about being a doormat, but one about how to be free. 163 Desire is a matter of choice to be controlled or to express freedom.

Alison is particularly keen on a theology of desire and in his book The Joy of Being Wrong devotes a whole chapter to differing forms of desire, in particular in relation to Augustine of Hippo. His conclusion on the nature of desire is summed up by him in his statement that ‘humans are consistently and mimetically interdividual 164 and that the moment a human culture of distorted desire is formed, this will automatically mean that every human brought into being is formed from within, from the moment of conception, by distorted desire’. 165 There is ‘good desire’ and ‘distorted desire’, good choices and distorted choices. Alison cites in the very first chapter of The Joy of Being Wrong ‘the roots of violence in our envious desire’. 166 Envious desire is a bad desire.

For Alison, the practice of Christian living is one of good desire. It is a life that involves loving your enemies or cultivating right desires towards other human beings. One then orders one’s life to reflect this desire. Alison’s expression of desire is not directly related to a definition of ‘acceptable’ or ‘unacceptable’ sexual activity; it is the expression of right desire and good choices. It is a desire for goodness at the expense of pure pleasure. One is to love one’s enemies even when the situation becomes difficult. This would clearly lead to a situation where choices and right desires become intertwined with denial of pure pleasure or pure instinct. Right desires would involve a quest for holiness where choices are made between ‘loving your enemies’ or ‘hating them’, for example.

Such desire though is for Alison fraught with danger where ‘your own needs and desires, including your reactions to the crowd, are enmeshed in your long-term making of yourself good’. 167 Desire can lead to many differing choices for many differing reasons. For Alison it is a desire which leads to holiness which is directly connected with right choice. Desire for Alison is not a desire ‘formed in reciprocity’ 168 but one that is relational, both with others and with God. He states that ‘what we have is an intrinsically relational self which is inducted into us by the relationships which surround us’. 169 Desire for Alison is something that is not universally created but rather something that develops in relation to other people. Thus desire becomes not ‘something called morals, (but) something available (as) an anthropology of desire, and one that presupposes an understanding of who we are’. 170 God’s desire is ‘being creatively for the other without being defined over and against the other in any way at all’. 171 Desire relies on interaction with others but is not defined by the morality

163 Alison, Broken Hearts and New Creations, 166.
164 This is Alison’s word—what I take to mean that every human being is both independent but also reliant on the presence of other human beings to function.
165 Alison, The Joy of Being Wrong.
166 Alison, The Joy of Being Wrong, 11.
167 Alison, Broken Hearts and New Creations, 167.
168 Alison, Broken Hearts and New Creations, 167.
169 Alison, Broken Hearts and New Creations, 162.
170 Alison, Broken Hearts and New Creations, 164.
171 Alison, Broken Hearts and New Creations, 168.
of other people. It is the individual quest for holiness that leads to right desires, even if the right choice leads to persecution.

For Alison denial and desire have a complex relationship, because as already stated Alison still wishes to hold on to a definition of original sin which as he suggests means that in political terms we ‘are dealing with the ungovernable world of human desire, no grand schemes which fail to take account of desire will ever work’.172 There are good human desires and there are bad ones. In Alison’s view it is the quest of humanity to be able to ‘find the truth’.173 The quest for truth is a good desire. Alison is not looking for an abandoning completely of the RC understanding of sinfulness which relies on following either good or bad desires, but rather to assert his position that human redemption is possible even to the point that ‘politics can be redeemed’.174 There is redemption in following good desires even in the sphere of political choices. Yet Alison’s understanding of desire is one that reflects the victim status of the individual rather than a grand political scheme. Alison admits that to explain political theory is ‘a task for which I am not qualified’175 and so his allusions to political change are not bound up with governmental reform but rather that individuals in reacting to persecution should show ‘signs of forgiveness’. Forgiveness is a good desire and one that leads to holiness.176 It is the ‘victim’ response to express good desires by offering forgiveness.

So for Alison his understanding of desire and the choices desires offer reflects the traditional understanding of sinfulness as involving a choice between ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Desire offers an understanding of sin which does not reflect a theology of judgement, but rather that in following good desires there is a quest for holiness. Alison continues his use of ‘victim’ to illustrate his understanding of good desires. For people who are persecuted are victims, the victim has the power or the means of forgiveness and through this forgiveness counteracts original sin. The victim again becomes the Christ-like figure who forgives his persecutors and, in that forgiveness, brings the redemption of the world. Good or right desire for Alison is the giving of that forgiveness, by the persecuted. He uses an example of a woman who is falsely accused but forgives her accusers. In this forgiveness she creates a ‘new self with her (own) active participation’.177 She remains the victim but also creates right desires by that forgiveness.

Therefore using Alison’s understanding of desire, where desire becomes the choice for good, then good choices lead to holiness. If asceticism embraces holiness then ascetic practice for Alison becomes the embracing of good desires. The good choice of offering forgiveness is an ascetic choice for good desires. The gay victim is given the good choice of forgiving the church. The ascetic practice that such desire advocates is that of assuming the place of being victim and being forgiving. It is therefore possible to conclude a link between good desire and asceticism and that good desires rely on membership of the church community. Having

172 Alison, The Joy of Being Wrong, 308.
173 Alison, The Joy of Being Wrong, 305.
174 Alison, The Joy of Being Wrong, 309.
175 Alison, The Joy of Being Wrong, 309.
176 Alison, The Joy of Being Wrong, 309.
177 Alison, The Joy of Being Wrong, 60.
established a relationship between holiness and good desire in the broader theological arena of sin and redemption, the question that remains is what is seen by Alison as good and bad specifically sexual desire.

7 Sexual Desires

Where Alison’s definition of desire becomes particularly relevant is when considering what the following of good desires means to the question of sexual expression. It is clear that the term ‘desire’ is often linked with sex (sexual desire) but Alison uses desire in a wider context of doing something good or bad. The question that this diverse definition of desire returns us to is the complexity of specifically sexual desire. If good desires are crucial to Alison’s thinking then the question that arises is whether sexual desire is good desire. Alison begins to answer this question by stating that ‘one of the major problems we face as gay and lesbian Catholics is that we live in a puritan society. By a puritan society I don’t mean one which is morally restrictive, I mean one which is morally schizophrenic. It is a world where good is boring and where naughty is fun.’ Yet even in acknowledging indirectly that ‘naughty’ may refer to some form of sexual expression or activity his conclusion as to what may or may not be naughty is still ambiguous. The only suggestion as to Alison’s broadening of sexual boundary is that in Faith Beyond Resentment he points out that he has engaged in conversation with people in ‘gay clubs, in dark rooms and bath houses’. What Alison is concerned with is accepting gay identity and being able to rejoice in this. He suggests that the task of the individual is to ‘learn how to respect and love each other as gay and lesbian people’. His desire is for a greater understanding not only within the church to gay and lesbian people, but that gay and lesbian people should respect each other. The inclusion of lesbian and gay people fully into the church is a good desire.

Yet this respect comes with mutuality, particularly in relation to priesthood, where in contrast to the Anglican Church, heterosexual priests also are called to celibacy. If one desires sexual activity it is not limited in Alison’s view to homosexual clergy but to all clergy. What is important for Alison is a ‘virtue of chastity, which is a singleness of heart, and which I take to be an indispensable part of what the reception of salvation looks like...it is my body given for you rather than your body taken from me.’ For Alison, the true desire of a priest is to have singleness of heart rather than practice sexual abstinence. Good desire is the desire for God, not the denial of sex. Sexual desire is in one form immaterial if the good desire of following Christ is paramount. It is the desire for God, the desire for good and the desire of forgiveness that is the ascetic choice for priests (and indeed all members of the church) rather than the denial of sexual pleasure.

So for Alison the style of asceticism that is present within his writings is expressed through desires and that these desires promote good or bad actions. For Alison, diverse sexual desire

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178 Alison, Undergoing God, 186.
179 Alison, Faith Beyond Resentment, 206.
180 Alison, Undergoing God, 188.
181 I realise that there are exceptions to this, and the debate of heterosexual clerical celibacy within the RC Church is a complex one, but it is nevertheless the case that for most clergy in office celibacy is required.
182 Alison, On Being Liked, 97.
would appear to be something that is good rather than something that is bad. The Roman Catholic Church’s teaching is that only certain types of sexual desire are good and in that, good for only the laity. Homosexual desire in both *Issues in Human Sexuality* and Roman Catholic teaching reflect Alison’s observations of ‘defective heterosexuality’. Even if *Issues in Human Sexuality* acknowledges a wider understanding of homosexual laity, the underlying theme is one of tolerance rather than celebration. In contrast to this, Alison asserts that being homosexual is ‘good’ rather than ‘bad’. If being homosexual is ‘good’ then it would therefore follow that homosexual desire is also ‘good’. If homosexual desire is a good desire then good desires lead to holiness. Asceticism reflects a desire for holiness. Homosexual desire is good, therefore homosexual desire becomes ascetic.

For Alison ascetic boundaries lie within exploring the traditional teachings of the church on sin and redemption but not with a descriptive expression of sexuality or sexual activity. Alison’s asceticism certainly includes boundaries but it also includes both choice and holiness, a holiness which is found through the choice of good desires. Alison’s holiness is clear it is through the devotions and membership of the church, where good desires are sought. Such membership involves being part of the victim status of Christ. Where Alison’s writings are particularly helpful in challenging the ascetic assumptions of *Issues in Human Sexuality* is that Alison relies on a particular definition of people to identify as having good desires. Gay people are good not bad; they have good not bad sexual desires. *Issues in Human Sexuality*, identifies particular people but denies in Alison’s terms, the good homosexual desires of clergy. The church challenges the freedom to practice sex, particularly within an Anglican context the freedom for homosexual clergy to practice sex. In contrast, Alison seeks to argue for a definition of holiness which involves the freedom of sexual identity but within the context of theological understandings of sin and redemption.

Although Alison does not identify specifically gay sexual practice as being good he sees being gay as good. Alison’s writings acknowledge the particular place of gay people and gay clergy especially in the life of the church. The identity of gay people is so important to Alison that they have a specific understanding of the victim status of Christ. Gay people also reflect a particular understanding of good and bad desires and good and bad identities. In establishing for Alison that gay identity is important the question that arises is what does ‘identity’ mean for Alison in terms of asceticism?

8 Alison and identity.

Having established an asceticism that relies on freedom of sexual choice yet still desiring holiness, what is very clear in Alison’s writing is the question of sexual identity. Throughout much of his writing, Alison identifies himself as gay and writes particularly for the liberation and freedom of lesbian and gay people. For *Issues in Human Sexuality* it is the identity of what the document terms ‘homophile’ that the asceticism of abstinence is required. For Alison though, what is crucial is a positive identity and a rejoicing in being gay. The good desire that Alison relies on for holiness agrees with the process of division and categorisation of individual people. Both *Issues in Human Sexuality* and Alison use identity and categorisation as being important to their argument but their conclusions are very different. Alison sees his own identity as a gay priest as something which is positive, whereas
it is difficult to see how *Issues in Human Sexuality* sees ‘homophiles’ as a positive expression of a sexual identity, yet both use the terms ‘gay’ and ‘homophile’ to identify a particular group of people.

What then unites both Alison and *Issues in Human Sexuality* is a distinct understanding of sexual desire and homosexual desire especially. Individual people, gay or ‘homophile’, have a particular desire towards the same rather than the opposite sex and this desire identifies them as something in particular. Indeed it could be argued that Alison’s whole ‘victim’ theology relies on this identity. As already outlined, if one is lesbian and gay one becomes ‘victim’ and as such is part of the redemptive process. Therefore if it is through a particular sexual desire that one defines an identity then identity itself becomes important. For Alison, identity is particularly important. He states in *On Being Liked* ‘that there are certain human beings, who for reasons which are not clear to anyone, are, irrespective of cultural differences, and of social mores, principally attracted at a profound emotional and erotic level to members of their own sex’. In fact, Alison defends his conclusions regarding a particular identity by suggesting that ‘it is almost impossible to discover that there is such a thing, normally, as being gay, because of the grotesquely distorted relationships between males in general (demonstrated in) the modern American penitentiary system, with its effective institutionalisation of male rape’. For Alison, there is a clear conclusion and identity of what it is to be gay and it is one that requires a particular identity. It is not the sexual act that creates that identity but rather a particular physical attraction to people of the same rather than the opposite sex.

In fact Alison argues that gay identity is such a positive thing that ‘in some cultures, by giving a special positive status to gay people, such that they were more likely to become the magic men or the priests.’ Gay identity for Alison is something that can be sacred, and this returns him to the status of victim where gay people in the church have a positive role which may be reflected in a distinct vocation to the priestly life. It is in complete contrast to *Issues in Human Sexuality* which creates a gay identity and a priestly identity to impose a particular rule of sexual abstinence. For Alison the gay priest has a particular identity and one that is distinctly holy. There is then a double identity, that of being gay and of being a priest.

However, despite the very positive conclusion which Alison offers, he also suggests that the labelling of these desires in relation to particular people rather than sexual activity has meant that the church and society has been able to condemn these desires. He states that the history of the western world ‘as far as I know has been one of unremitting hostility towards gay people’. The desires of people towards members of their own sex identifies them as being gay or lesbian and this identity has led to their persecution both by historical society and by the church. Whatever the future position of the church may be towards gay priests, the identity of a gay priesthood still leads to particular impositions placed upon those who are identified as gay.

183 Alison, *On Being Liked*, 84.
184 Alison, *On Being Liked*, 86.
185 Alison, *On Being Liked*, 86.
Therefore what Alison’s writings do is to give a basis for gay holiness. Holiness is sought through asceticism and so there is a definition of a gay asceticism. What Alison’s gay asceticism relies on is gay identity to establish the crucial notion of victimhood. Although Alison’s theology is helpful in challenging *Issues in Human Sexuality*, it operates within the same language of identity. Alison uses the same language as the arguments for permanent relationships because their advocates also operate by identifying particular people as being gay. Alison and ‘permanent relationships’ challenge the conclusions of *Issues in Human Sexuality* but they all rely on identifying gay people. *Issues in Human Sexuality*, the advocates of permanent relationships and Alison all rely on gay identity for ascetic definition. *Issues in Human Sexuality* uses identity to impose boundary, as does ‘permanent, faithful and stable’. Alison uses identity to reflect an asceticism which defines holiness through embracing the homosexual person and the homosexual priest as being holy. Specifically gay identity leads to holiness. Gay identity through a desire for holiness becomes ascetic. Gay identity becomes part of asceticism.

9 Conclusions drawn from Alison’s writing

For Alison being gay is a positive identity and one that leads to a particular asceticism of holiness. Holiness is sought through being both the victim and so Christ-like, but also through holding a particular place in society, that of the good, holy person. Using the work of Alison the argument has moved forward, not only from *Issues in Human Sexuality* but also from permanent relationships as well. Alison sees holiness as connected particularly with being gay. Using a definition of asceticism that requires holiness, being gay itself can be seen as embracing some form of an ascetic life. For Alison gay identity outlines a particular theology. Alison offers the ascetic freedom to explore a sexual identity outside the confines of both celibacy and permanent relationship. Alison does this, not by outlining any form of what that sexual practice may or may not be, but rather the freedom to acknowledge ‘good’ sexual desires. Where ‘good’ desires become ambiguous is where Alison suggests that Jesus found his place within society with those who were ‘bad’ rather than good. Christ found His place with prostitutes rather than Pharisees. Alison states that ‘Jesus seemed to think that God’s goodness was to be found in other ways...goodness was far more easily to be found by those who inhabited the ‘bad’ part of the picture than those who inhabited the ‘good’. Desires are not limited for Alison to a permanent relationship but identity with Christ the victim who sought to live with people with ‘bad’ sexual desires.

Thus, *Issues in Human Sexuality* offers an asceticism of enforced abstinence; permanent relationships offers an asceticism of controlled sexual practice but Alison offers asceticism through making gay desires holy. It would therefore be possible using Alison to draw a final analysis of an ascetic theology for gay people and gay priests. There is a development of a freedom not expressed in either *Issues in Human Sexuality* or necessarily in permanent relationships. What is offered by Alison is the freedom to embrace gay identity which reflects an asceticism of holiness through ‘good’ desires but not necessarily through sexual abstinence. The boundary of abstinence or continence is extended further by Alison to

celebrate a gay identity. *Issues in Human Sexuality* legislates gay identity but it does not rejoice in it. Alison finds a place for the gay priest in the church and celebrates that inclusion.

However for some theologians a specifically gay identity is called into question. The assumption of identities is challenged and in this challenge speaks a completely different language to that of *Issues in Human Sexuality* but also to Alison. Alison relies on his gay identity for his theology, but the acknowledgment of a particular identity is not the basis of all theology regarding sexual expression. Returning to the writing of Susannah Cornwall she seeks to explore what she terms queer theology, in her book titled *Controversies in Queer Theology*, which questions the notion of specific identity. She states that ‘as we have seen, it is, in some respects, problematic to conceive of claiming a queer identity since queer upsets the very concept of identity as concrete’.

For some ‘queer’ theologians specific identity is not necessarily a positive concept but one to be challenged.

The language of *Issues in Human Sexuality*, permanent and faithful relationships and the theology of Alison all speak to an asceticism that relies on gay identity. People are identified either by themselves or by others as being gay and particular theological statements are constructed around such identity. Gay clergy are to abstain from sex, or to have monogamous relationships or in Alison’s terms to assume the role of ‘victim’. Where I wish to move in the next chapter is to explore further a definition of asceticism which does not rely completely on identity, or more specifically the identity of gay people. The question of identity moves us further away from *Issues in Human Sexuality* because it challenges not only what particular groups of people within the church should and should not do, but rather who those people actually are.

For the purpose of exploring some form of fluidity of identity I have chosen to engage particularly with the writings of Mark Jordan who engages directly with asceticism and some forms of sexual activity but who challenges the concept of identity. He moves away from Alison by wishing to lose a sense of identity rather than rejoicing in specifically being gay.

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188 Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology*, 21.
Chapter Three Mark Jordan

1 Introduction

Having established a form of asceticism that relies on celebrating gay identity through the writings of James Alison, a question that has emerged is how much an asceticism of freedom relies on the concept of a specific identity. For Alison his identity is clear; he is a gay priest who wishes to be a member of the church and specifically the Roman Catholic Church. His asceticism of being ‘victim’ relies particularly on his gay identity. However, if an asceticism of freedom is to be explored further, then some engagement with ‘identity’ is important.

For the purpose of exploring ‘identity’ I have chosen to engage with the writings of Mark Jordan who is the Reverend Priscilla Wood Neaves Distinguished Professor of Religion and Politics at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University. He has spent much of his academic career studying how the history, particularly of gay sex, has been recorded and how the perceptions of those who are gay and sexually active have both been included in church history but also actively excluded as well. He comments if ‘the gay Christian wants to be a figure of zealous reform...this figure can only speak in the space of the sodomite’s retreat’. 189

At the beginning of any study of Jordan, particularly his earlier writing it is important to note his use of the term ‘sodomite’. Sodomite is usually term associated with Biblical condemnation for example in the book of Deuteronomy. ‘There shall be no whore of the daughters of Israel, nor a sodomite of the sons of Israel’. 190 Jordan uses sodomy to embrace a particular sexual act in his exploration of Christian history. In searching for the sodomite in the lives and writings of Christian figures, he explores how they may have lived their lives in contrast to the normative Christian perspectives of their era. Use of the term ‘sodomite’ also places Jordan’s writings within the field of male sexual activity and in doing so seeks to shed light on a quest for holiness within the wider context of losing a particular sexual identity. Jordan moves away from specifically gay identity and uses the particular term of ‘sodomite’. The choice of ‘sodomite’ rather than ‘gay’ is an interesting one. It removes from the term ‘gay’ Alison’s identity as victim. A sexual act may embrace a particular identity, but equally it may not. The term sodomy describes a particular sexual act, but not necessarily a sexual identity. In exploring an asceticism of freedom the fluidity of identity embraces a greater freedom than that offered by Alison. Alison relies on identity for his freedom and his quest for holiness found through ‘victim’. Jordan challenges not whether gay men should embrace freedom but rather whether identifying as being gay, or indeed identifying as anything at all, is important.

Jordan’s desire for a fluidity of identity which may lead to a wider concept of freedom is traced by Jordan throughout church history. In his opening chapter of The Ethics of Sex, he begins the task of seeking an historical background for his use of sodomy by analysing the writings of St Augustine. He states that ‘preaching against sex may be the most familiar Christian speech of all....people who know nothing of Christian creeds or scriptures can

190 Deuteronomy 23.17
recite the most notorious Christian sexual prohibitions...Christianity can figure as nothing more than a code of sexual conduct’. In choosing one of the early Christian Fathers, Jordan begins his understanding of sodomy by returning it to the question of desire. Desire for Alison has also been important but Alison has argued for good and bad desires which rely on identity. There are ‘good’ gay desires. For Jordan, he acknowledges from the earliest of Christian writings that desire but not necessarily identity exists and in particular the desires of sodomy. It is the desire for a specific sexual act rather than a labelling identity which is discovered. The act of sodomy is performed for pleasure not as the expression of a specific gay identity.

In his book *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* Jordan defines the presence of sodomy as a sexual act throughout Christian history and how the desires associated with it have led to individual persecution within the church and yet also an acceptance within certain boundaries. He begins *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* with the story of St Pelagius, a young martyr of the church still hailed today in the church’s calendar, if somewhat obscurely. For Jordan the story of Pelagius’ martyrdom has distinctly sexual overtones as he states ‘he not only recognises the gesture as sexual, he recognises the sexual script from which it comes’. The king in the story is seen as desiring the young Pelagius who refuses his sexual advances and is martyred for his refusal to turn from Christianity to the courtly same-sex practices.

Yet for Jordan this story has a very distinctive purpose. Despite the rejection elements contained within the story, there is an acknowledgement by Jordan that the nature of the desire for sodomy exists and that it is dealt with in a Christianised context. He states that ‘same sex desire has to be invoked and then contained, made possible but implausible’. However this also seems to imply that in celebrating this story Christianity begins to associate same sex acts with wrongdoing.

Jordan continues his initial theme of condemnation for sodomy by using the preaching of Peter Damien. Damien for Jordan is identified as the author of the first set of writings that explicitly talk about same sex activity, and in the fiercest of condemnatory terms. Jordan refers to his writings as ‘colourful calls for repentance’. However, this for Jordan seems to be confused with a struggle for power rather than a sexual identity. It is for Damien the concern that sodomite priests create an environment of secrecy, whereby confessions are heard and sins forgiven or covered up by other sodomites. Jordan explains in a later chapter that ‘the penitent will come to feel a kinship with others guilty of the same sin’. For Jordan, Damien’s preaching against sodomy is bound up with a condemnation of the secrecy and abuse of confession as much as a condemnation of a particular sexual act. Any form of identity is not specified. Rather, it is the act of sodomy that is condemned and condemned through confusion with secrecy and abuse of the confessional.

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If then, being specifically gay is not necessarily the driving force for the act of sodomy, for Jordan it raises the complex issue of how the temptation to commit this particular ‘sin’ arises. He states ‘how attractive this allegedly repulsive act of Sodomy is’.\textsuperscript{197} He argues that if something is so abhorrent to the Christian faith, then why are the descriptions of sodomy outlined in the most graphic of terms bordering on the pornographic? Jordan suggests that it is the fear of this desire that permeates the writings of both Damien and Robert of Flamborough, for example. He argues that ‘we see again the anxiety that sodomy is in fact not repulsive—that it is immensely attractive’.\textsuperscript{198} The act of sodomy is a pleasurable act which is to be avoided by everyone, not specific people.

\textbf{2 The emerging contrast in history of sodomy being both evil and attractive}

So for Jordan sodomy is attractive and therefore the early church labelled it as sinful. It is not an individual group of people that are condemned but the act itself. The act of sodomy removes the identity of individual gay people so important to the arguments of Issues in Human Sexuality and ‘permanent, faithful and stable’. Sodomy is a sexual act, not an identity. Jordan goes further to argue that even the concept of desire in the writings of the early church is open to question. He suggests that there is not necessarily a link between the act of sexual penetration and the desire that leads to this particular act. Admittedly Paul of Hungary, according to Jordan,\textsuperscript{199} describes effeminate men as ‘Sodomites’ but despite this it appears that such a sexual act is a temptation to all men. For Jordan even the outlining of the temptation of sodomy is to be avoided. Confessors are advised not to mention sodomy at all for fear of enlightening the faithful as to how they can be tempted. If sodomy is to be avoided it is because it is attractive or pleasurable.

However for Jordan the denial of pleasure is something that has existed as part of Christian thought from the earliest of writings. Denial is not confined specifically to the avoidance of sexual pleasure but many differing forms of activity that bring pleasurable experiences. Jordan quotes Clement of Alexandria who states that Christians should avoid what is illegal, unjust, irrationally disordered.\textsuperscript{200} Jordan perceives that for Clement a rule which encourages the denial of pleasure is adhered to because it leads to an ordered society or an ordered Christian community. Membership of the church is maintained through the denial of pleasure.

Yet the denial of pleasure is not confined in church history simply to an adherence of Christian order. Jordan argues that it is pleasure itself that has been condemned. Jordan suggests that the medieval theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas condemns pleasure whatever form that pleasure takes. In The Ethics of Sex Jordan begins by stating that ‘one of the most famous and influential teachings on natural law can be found in Thomas Aquinas. His texts retain considerable authority for church teaching on sex, and not only for Roman Catholics’.\textsuperscript{201} Jordan explores the difference outlined by Aquinas regarding the ‘self-

\textsuperscript{197} Jordan, The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology, 100.
\textsuperscript{198} Jordan, The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology, 107.
\textsuperscript{199} Jordan, The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology, 102.
\textsuperscript{200} Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 116.
\textsuperscript{201} Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 86.
indulgent excess of pleasure’ and ‘chastity which is the virtue of temperance’. For Aquinas, according to Jordan, it is the denial of any form of pleasure that leads to holy living and an asceticism of abstinence becomes the primary force in Christian calling. Jordan states that for Aquinas ‘most of the observed range of human sexual activity is against nature’. It is not that homosexual practice is against nature that is the issue for Jordan, but rather that Aquinas’ definitions of what would be seen as right sexual practice are so narrow that whether this includes sodomy or not becomes less important. In fact Jordan states that ‘Thomas seems to have replaced this figure (the sodomite) with that of the person that suffers the vice of luxuria’. Aquinas ‘quite deliberately replaces more specific and lurid sin-identities with more general ‘vice-identities’.

It is not necessarily sodomy in particular that Aquinas opposes but rather a conglomeration of many different forms of pleasure which should also be resisted in the pursuit of holy living. It means that what Aquinas says about sodomy is definitive, being ‘the vice against nature’ or any ‘violation of the fundamental purposes of human reproduction’. Who is not defined is the sodomite, the person who desires a particular sexual activity. It is the pursuit of pleasure Aquinas condemns whatever that pleasure may be, sexual or not.

Therefore for Jordan, Aquinas’ view of Christian living or living within ‘divine law’ requires that being devoted to Christ prohibits any human practice which echoes luxury. Aquinas’ requirement for Christian living is not a prohibition only on sodomy but it is an attack on the pursuit of any human pleasure which leads the follower of Christ away from the divine pathway. Sodomy may be pleasurable, so it is condemned.

3 Sex in the Reformation era

Continuing his analysis of identity and pleasure, Jordan suggests that through the Reformation, particularly with the writings of Luther, the boundaries of sexual practice change. Sexual pleasure is permitted, but only within the context of marriage. In Luther’s terms, ‘sex in marriage is not necessarily a sin, so long as it is done in moderation which is the decisive qualification’. Jordan suggests that such moderation is extended by the Reformation tradition in the sermons of Calvin. Jordan states that ‘the Christian must be ever vigilant not to commit adultery within the marriage, with her or his own spouse. Marriage covers sex only so far. Marriage is not to be a bordello. It is not a license for all sorts of sexual activity with one’s spouse’.

The Reformation changes the emphasis from celibate living to the virtue of continent marriage. The view of the reformers is not an abandoning of pleasure but rather an embracing of it, but in a different form, that of marriage. Luther and Calvin in the Reformed tradition move the boundaries of medieval asceticism away from complete denial of (in this context sexual) pleasure to the continence of marriage, where sex is permitted but within

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202 Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 86.
203 Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 87.
204 Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 89.
205 Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 89.
206 Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 87.
207 Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 119.
208 Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 122.
particular boundaries. Sodomy as pleasure is still condemned but heterosexual sexual activity within marriage is not. There is not an identity of sexual preference, merely an understanding that sexual activity is only permitted within marriage.

4 Post Reformation and the quest for power

As the historical context of sexual practice moves from the immediate Reformation era Jordan suggests that it is not only a move from celibacy to marriage that occurs but also a shift in the balance of power held by the sexual constraints enforced by the church. He states there has been ‘a transfer of power over sex, from churches to states’. 209 It puts the church in the position of ‘still wanting to play the old role of Teacher of Christian Sexual Ethics’. 210

In the historical shift of power from church to state, societal morality, particularly with relation to sexual practice, becomes less prescriptive. What Jordan argues is that the church clings to its hold over sexual morality by introducing a concept of shaming. Jordan suggests that despite a lack of official power the church holds some form of power both in society and amongst its members by claiming the morality of ‘shame’. 211 He states that ‘most of our basic words for sexual activities carry the charge of Christian shaming’. 212 The church may not have the political power it once did but it still claims in many ways the defining moral code which embraces the controlling structure of public shaming as its weapon. The church seeks to control sexual pleasure by shaming those individuals and denying them membership who practise sexual activity outside the church’s perceived boundaries.

It is the church’s desire to cling to power that Jordan sees as controlling sexual ethics not necessarily the regulation of sexual activity itself. It is specifically clinging to power that is important not the policing of sexual acts. He states that ‘Christians should now reexamine the relations between sexual ethics and sexual politics’. 213 Jordan further justifies his argument by suggesting that the church, and specifically the Roman Catholic Church, has sought to cling to power by covertly ignoring forms of sexual activity that fall outside its ideal for sexual behaviour.

Jordan acknowledges that gathering information regarding the practice of RC clergy in relation to any form of sexual activity is one that is unlikely to be accurate or reflect in any way the actual practice of the RC church or of its priests. He argues ‘it would be astonishing if anyone were able to tell the truth about sexuality in so cramped a format as a survey’. 214 However despite this Jordan observes young novices to the priesthood for example ‘wearing khakis and polo shirts of various shades…walking arm in arm down the hill’. 215 He quotes further that ‘later around 1994 and in another house, there was a disturbance in the refectory where two novices discovered they were both sleeping with the novice master,

211 Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex*, 152.
212 Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex*, 152.
apparently on alternate nights’. It is clear for Jordan that both overt camp clothing and sexual activity were present in the seminaries of the 1990s. The church relies on the covering up of particular sexual acts rather than acknowledging a homosexual identity within its clergy.

Even within the context of wider society and not specifically the Roman Catholic Church, Jordan acknowledges that sexual practice or preference does not necessarily reflect identity. He suggests, ‘how many men, gay or straight ... leave the bed wanting to forget what happened on the way to their now cooling pleasure’. This is a very good point, because Jordan deals with the actual practicality of a particular sexual act, the sexual act of sodomy not the identity of the people who perform the act. Jordan does not use sexual practice to define homosexuals. He defines only the sexual act. The diversity of sexual activity without specific identity is particularly relevant in current thinking where sexual diversity and experimentation lead to a blurring of identity.

Therefore Jordan establishes that throughout Christian history and in current thinking sexual identity is fluid. It is the sexual act that is named rather than identifying specifically the people involved by a collective term, other than one connected directly with the sexual act itself, ‘sodomites’.

5 Asceticism and boundary

Accepting Jordan’s understanding of identity, what impact does the fluidity of identity have on the definition of asceticism? Using the understanding that asceticism is concerned with boundary and holiness, Jordan highlights particularly the flexibility of boundary. What emerges from his study of Christian history and contemporary culture is an acknowledgement of a boundary established by the types of sexual activity which are permissible. For the medieval scholars the boundary of all sexual activity is one of strong limitation where anything that leads to luxury or pleasure is to be condemned. The boundary of church membership is moved in the Reformation to include sexual activity within marriage which for Luther is pleasurable, but for Calvin caution is required if the pleasure becomes excessive. As the church in the post Reformation era loses power and control of morality then it relies on a moral code of shaming where sexual activity is limited by acceptability in society. The boundaries of acceptable sexual behaviour are maintained by the shaming of individuals to conform to a boundary of sexual continence. Jordan also suggests that the requirements made by the boundary of sexual continence are not necessarily observed, particularly by clergy and so a culture of secrecy emerges. Jordan acknowledges a diversity of boundaries between what may actually be clerical sexual activity and official church teaching.

216 Jordan, The Silence of Sodom, 143.
218 James Dean in his study of the attitudes and practices of gay men in America, for example, states that in his survey of sexual activity in New York ‘the four straight men at this end surrendered their straight privilege and blured boundaries by allowing themselves to be viewed as gay at times’. The sexuality of the individual was unimportant it was the publication of the magazine that became the primary focus. James J Dean, Straights. Heterosexuality in Post-Closeted Culture (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 265
Where an understanding of boundary becomes complex is when it is related to the fluidity of sexual identity. Jordan proposes that what may happen in a sexual encounter may not define a sexual identity, merely the sexual act itself. A lack of identity both creates and destroys a boundary. The act of sodomy is condemned by the church and so a boundary is created through avoiding pleasure. The boundary of sexual continence for clergy is established at the Reformation and the boundary of clerical church marriage is accepted. The blurring of identity removes a boundary because it creates a fluidity of identifying sodomy with a particular group of people. Jordan states that ‘homosexuality is not …a fixed identity that stands unchanged throughout history’. For Jordan, identity is linked with a particular historical context which makes no distinction between a sexual act and a sexual identity.

Thus if asceticism relies on boundary only then asceticism becomes the means by which boundaries are established. The understanding of an asceticism which promotes a boundary would certainly be present in Jordan’s analysis of church history, where patterns of particular behaviour are outlined. However, if asceticism relies on holiness as well as boundary, how does the fluidity of identity impact on an understanding of holiness?

6 Identity and holiness

The relationship between holiness and blurring of identity is a difficult one. Permanent and faithful relationships rely on holiness present through finding God in counter cultural sexual continence. Holiness is found in the writings of Alison through belonging to the church. The quest for holiness without identity is difficult. Indeed the fierce critic of queer theology Peter Sanlon argues that queer theology is confused by identity. He suggests that ‘gay marriage is not the similarity to heterosexual marriage …rather the basis for their case is a radical form of freedom and autonomy. This is the very thing that leads a Queer writer to argue for gay marriage in one publication and freed from gay marriage in another’. Sanlon perceives that because of a fluidity of identity any judgement regarding the equality of gay relationships is impossible.

What is interesting is that Jordan too acknowledges the conflict which particular identities bring to a desire for holiness. In his book Recruiting Young Love, he describes in some detail the beginnings of the Metropolitan Community Church. The MCC defines itself in a way that completely reverses a blurring of identity. Jordan’s description of the testimony of how the church came to be though the poor experiences of an evangelical pastor and his struggles to unite his faith with the denomination he has left to provide a place for homosexuals to meet and feel welcome. The Pastor, Troy Perry, states that ‘I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I was homosexual’…being homosexual is a matter of nature, which is to say of creation. The question of identity for the Metropolitan Community Church is distinctly aligned with sexual identification as its web site states: ‘As a global church, we

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221 Jordan, Recruiting Young Love, 117-119.
222 Jordan, Recruiting Young Love, 118.
share the foundational calling (mission) for a specific and intentional outreach to/with homosexual, bisexual, and transgender people’. 223

The emphasis of the MCC is very clear: it sees LGBT people as an identifiable group and seeks actively to encourage membership within this distinct group. If holiness is found through membership of the church then as conventional church groups reject homosexuals, a church is created by homosexuals to welcome each other. However, as Jordan states, relying on a distinct identification to belong to ‘church’ is not without its critics. He quotes the gay activist Ray Broshers: ‘MCC is trying to ghettoize the homosexual by creating a homosexual church’. 224 It is an argument that reflects both the question of identity and also the arguments which relate to boundary and holiness. The argument which the testimony of Perry relies on is: one is homosexual, one accepts that identity and yet wishes to remain within the church. The church to which one wants to belong rejects one’s identity as homosexual and so one forms a church where homosexuals are accepted. Returning to Alison, such a notion to him would be abhorrent. He is a member of the Roman Catholic Church and would seek to remain so. The founding of a new church is not required. Jordan’s argument is different. He argues that the founding of such a church encourages the labelling of a specific identity, something he is keen to avoid. Yet what Alison and the MCC do seek together is membership of the church. It is through the church that holiness is explored. The gay person involves themselves in a church which identifies them and then either accepts them or rejects them.

Jordan rejects the authority of the church to label specific identities and as a consequence redefines not the church but holiness. Jordan suggests that his writings offer a ‘new holiness’225 which does not rely on a specific identity. He is concerned with a quest for holiness, but not one that would be necessarily conventional. His outlining of ‘sodomite’ means that the identity Jordan creates is one related to sexual activity not gay identity. ‘New holiness’ is not related to being gay. The question that then arises is what Jordan’s ‘new holiness’ is? As asceticism relies on holiness then a definition of ‘new holiness’ could offer a new asceticism.

7 Jordan and ‘new holiness’

If identity is something that is fluid rather than specific, it would suggest that ‘new holiness’ would also embrace the idea of fluidity with regards to sexual identity. For Issues in Human Sexuality, permanent relationships and Alison, holiness has had some connection with what may be termed ‘right living’. Issues in Human Sexuality demands a very specific right living by clergy which is sexual continence through marriage or abstinence. Permanent relationships also demand right living through devotion to one partner. Alison too has some concept of right living, through observing the sacraments of the church and being a member of church community. Jordan’s concept of holiness, however, appears to avoid forms of regulation for right living. Instead, his work challenges the Church’s hold on sexual morality and the

224 Jordan, Recruiting Young Love, 120.
225 Jordan, Recruiting Young Love, introduction xx.
church’s outlining of a specific holiness through self-perpetuating dogma which creates only regulations.

To illustrate the quest for ‘new holiness’, in his book *Recruiting Young Love* Jordan uses the novel *City of Night* by John Rechy. The novel is set in the style of an autobiography and recounts the life of the writer as a young man who visits various places associated with what could be called gay culture of the 1960s, New York, New Orleans and San Francisco. The characters in the novel are larger than life. They assume the roles of extreme drag queens and leather fetishists whose sexual activities are described in details enough to understand that particularly in the 1960s their sexual expression would be marginalised and secretive.

The writer enters this secretive world as a hustler or male prostitute and makes a living through the various sexual encounters described in graphic detail in the novel. The book is intertwined with redemptive themes reflecting a desire for some form of holiness, but what is interesting is the final chapter. The hustler seeks redemption through confession to a Roman Catholic priest, and in the penultimate page the assumption of the conclusion is the return to the original life the writer had experienced before his journey into prostitution. The reader waits in anticipation for an embracing of conventional holiness through confession and redemption.

However conventional redemption is not the final paragraph. It is rather the last sentences that suggest that it is not the church’s concept of holiness that is sought but rather a continuation of the life the writer has enjoyed as a hustler. Jordan also concentrates on the character of Miss Destiny, a black young transvestite who is always seeking a husband. Her quest is always futile because whenever she finds the security she wants, she then rejects it and the men who offer such security. The fluidity of sexual encounter is reflected too in the character of the writer whose many offers of wealth and security are constantly rejected, even when the supposed ideal of a permanent relationship is found in the penultimate chapter of the book. The book ends with two characters in bed with each other and the words ‘were we indeed strangers, or had we known each other too intimately...I leaned over and kissed him on the lips, and I was thinking: yes maybe you’re right. Maybe I could love you. But I won’t. The grinding streets awaited me.’ It is not the permanence of relationship that ends the novel but rather the grinding streets of New York and a life embracing a variety of sexual encounters.

In *City of Night* it is the use of sex for diverse purpose and the pursuit of sex that dominate the characters of the book. Sex is the means to a financial security without emotional investment. Sex is the entry into a lifestyle of brief encounter and constant rejection where relationships are transient and based on equality of gain rather than pursuit of what Alison may term ‘good desires’. It is neither the basis of permanence nor the establishment of relationship.

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226 John Rechy, *City of Night* (New York: Grove, 1963)
227 Rechy, *City of Night*, 351.
So, in citing this novel, is Jordan suggesting that this is the form of sexual expression that should be adopted? He writes of the ‘benediction’ of the world inhabited by the novel characters. The characters are blessed despite their sexual activities. Jordan goes even further and suggests that it is the type of characters that inhabit City of Night who truly represent the holiness of the church. He states that ‘however much it chases after the ideology of the modern state, Christianity remains the repository for archaic, transgressive characters of desire and gender. The transgressive characters are regularly brought to life in Christian worship, its liturgy and its sacraments. I have recited descriptions of rites yet to come, the benediction of the French Quarter in City of Night. I now claim all of these rituals for Christianity.’ The novel expresses ultimate sexual freedom, the choice of partners and the use of sex for self-advancement, and the control of one’s own destiny by having the freedom to use a sexual act in any way one may choose.

Holiness and therefore asceticism is explored not through regulation but through claiming the diversity of desire celebrated, according to Jordan by a diversity of sexual encounter. Jordan describes his vision for the church as a ‘Christian community that could form erotic relationships’. Indeed Jordan wishes to ‘bring this already blessed sodomite to the baptismal font’ and through baptism membership of the church. Jordan sees his ‘new holiness’ as embracing a sexual freedom to use the act of sodomy for pleasure. Yet the pleasure may not necessarily be the sex itself: it may be the means to financial gain. Jordan brings the blessed sodomite to the font not to impose regulation on sexual activity but to liberate him from the guilt of erotic relationships. New holiness embraces a sexual freedom without claiming a gay identity and without expecting an adherence to a specific sexual regulation imposed by the church.

8 Jordan’s understanding of freedom

So for Jordan what does freedom mean? Is it a rejection of any form of control in the pursuit of physical sexual pleasure? Does it abandon the asceticism of boundary all together? Jordan is certainly seeking a new holiness as a means by which the church can accept freedom at the expense of boundary. His writings express a desire for holiness, and so reflect a definition of asceticism, even if his definition is in stark contrast to traditional views of denial of the body in the pursuit of sanctity. Acknowledging that Jordan’s desire for freedom reflects some form of holiness and so some form of asceticism, the question that arises is how far should this freedom extend? Jordan suggests that ‘the erotic has a much larger role in our spiritual life than we ordinarily admit. For example the mystical experience can produce sexual arousal’. He argues that ‘the highly erotic language of mysticism has often been excused or dismissed’. According to Jordan there is a blurring of boundaries between what is sexually erotic and what occurs in Christian worship. He argues that erotic pleasure is difficult to define and that the church also seeks pleasure through liturgical acts. Jordan

228 Jordan, Recruiting Young Love, 213.
229 Jordan, Recruiting Young Love, 213.
230 Jordan, Recruiting Young Love, 213.
231 Jordan, Recruiting Young Love, 214.
232 Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 165.
233 Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 165.
states that ‘the event of worship is full of physical pleasures’. He describes the luxury of vestments and the mystery of ancient practices which all bring pleasure. It is in stark contrast to a more traditional form of asceticism which expects abstinence of many forms of luxury, such as food, warmth or even types of clothing. However Jordan is cautious about his argument. He writes for example that ‘I don’t mean to suggest all bodily pleasure is identical, that there are no morally significant differences between hymn singing and sexual intercourse. Of course there are. My point is rather that we have well developed speeches in Christianity through which physical pleasures are both approved and elicited. We ought to consult those speeches, and not the calumnies of moral theology, if we are to speak convincingly about sexual pleasure.’ Holiness is found through the embracing of pleasure rather than the rejection of it.

To illustrate a diversity of pleasurable encounter Jordan uses the example of sadomasochism. He outlines firstly ‘sadomasochistic acts seem to pose a decisive challenge even for liberal Christian ethics of sex...how could a theologian possibly approve them without abandoning fundamental gospel precepts?’ Jordan accepts that ‘sadistic elements are not present in most sexual acts’ but that for some people sadomasochism is pleasurable. Jordan goes further to suggest that even sadomasochism has a connection with types of Christian worship. He argues that ‘many Christian traditions have prescribed austerities of various kinds to those who want to pursue God in prayer. Some of these austerities have exactly resembled the rituals of sadomasochistic sex. Flagellation, bondage and cutting or piercing have all been practices of Christian asceticism...sadomasochism lies closer to many of our purely religious experiences than we might have supposed.’ Jordan states that ‘Catholics need to remember, because it is so easy for them to forget, that Catholic spiritual traditions have long required practices of physical self-punishment—what we diagnose as “masochism” in any other setting. It was only in the mid-1960s that many American religious houses abandoned such “disciplines” as weekly whippings or the wearing of devices intended to pinch, chafe or cut the skin.’

Jordan embraces a wide diversity of sexual activities in the pursuit of the erotic and through the desire for pleasure, seeks a wider definition of holiness. His understanding of sadomasochistic sex returns us to Mary Daly and her suggestion that Lawrence of Arabia rather sought the attention of his torturers to evoke his erotic pleasure. Sadomasochism becomes both a denial but also a pursuit of pleasure. Yet the relationship between sadomasochism and spiritual encounter is one that is far beyond this current writing. However what the example of sadomasochism seeks to illustrate is an acceptance by Jordan of a wide understanding of sexual freedom and a broad definition of boundary. Whatever forms the desire for the erotic may take, for Jordan the parameters are very wide indeed.

234 Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 170.
235 Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 170.
236 Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 167.
238 Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 168.
240 ‘most horrifying to him was the fact that he found the mingling of sexual assault and pain to be pleasurable’ Daly, Pure Lust, 42.
What Jordan embraces is a definition of holiness where eroticism and sanctity become confused and interchangeable. Using the example of sadomasochism Jordan suggests that erotic pleasure and desire for a particular type of holiness both engage the same activities. Thus holiness embraces for Jordan a wide variety of sexual encounter. Therefore Jordan does not make divisions between sodomy and masochism but rather uses the labelling by the church of perversions to argue for a new interpretation of holiness.

9 A return to the question of identity.

Having established an understanding of holiness which relies on a wide boundary and a blurring of ‘perversion’ Jordan continues to explore his understanding of holiness by returning to identity. Jordan has established that for him individual people’s sexual identity is one of fluidity. Through exploring the history of the sexual act of sodomy rather than gay identity Jordan moves away from labelling individual people. Instead Jordan chooses to discuss particular sexual acts. Through the characters in City of Night sexual acts are used for purposes of self-advancement or pure pleasure. Using the example of sadomasochism Jordan suggests a freedom of sexual expression which embraces a diversity of acts performed for sexual pleasure.

These individual acts depicted by Rechy reflect a diversity of sexual activity where sex is performed for pleasure, financial gain or in the case of sadomasochism, an embracing of a confusion of pain and pleasure for gratification. Removing the identity of individual people, Jordan continues his argument against identity by further challenging the labelling of particular sexual acts. He states that

‘the problem in it is not in the end with the incoherence and instabilities of ‘unnatural’...The troupe of varying Christian sex-identities rescued theology from stuttering through analyses of unnatural acts...When we try to pull these acts away from the identities, we find they don’t make much sense. Of course they don’t. They never did without identities.’

Jordan moves his argument forward by suggesting that the church has relied on labelling of identity not only of individual people but also of sexual activity, to determine what is acceptable behaviour and what is not. Any understanding of sexual perversion relies on identifying particular sexual acts and labelling them as either good or bad. For Jordan it is the very labelling of the act that makes it a perversion not necessarily the act itself. The Christian Church, Jordan argues, relies on labelling and identity for condemnation because having labelled something one can then condemn it. Issues in Human Sexuality does exactly this. It identifies homophiles and then requires abstinence from sexual activity, identifying both the people and the act. Jordan blurs identity not only from people but also from the various acts of sexual encounter.

Jordan’s argument is a powerful one. If one fails to embrace a specific sexual identity then sexual expression embraces a far wider understanding of freedom. If the identity of particular sexual activity is also removed then sexual encounters in all kinds of differing

241 Jordan, The Ethics of Sex, 106.
circumstances are not condemned. Jordan began with his statements suggesting that the early fathers of Christianity condemned the act of sodomy and it was without sexual identity that this condemnation occurred. It is with the affirmation of identity that a particular group of people are identified, and through that identification they are required by the church to observe constraint. If one blurs the identity of a particular sexual act one embraces a freedom of sexual activity not constrained by labelling. The act of sodomy does not necessarily define gay people; the engaging in sexual activity for financial gain does not necessarily define the person who pays or the person who receives payment. The person who practices sadomasochism is not labelled ‘perverted’.

Jordan then removes the boundaries of pleasure and sexual perversion and labelling, and in doing so removes the division between pain and pleasure. It becomes immaterial what the sexual act is sodomy or otherwise; it is the ability to embrace a freedom of sexual choice that becomes important. Identity is a constraint on sexual freedom and a means by which the church imposes control. Not defining identity removes control and embraces freedom. New holiness becomes the pursuit of freedom, not the imposition of restraint. The church uses labels both to identify people but also to identify what it sees as sinful or wrong. Jordan argues for a freedom which abandons such labels and identities.

10 The challenge of a wider understanding of freedom

The problem that Jordan’s argument presents is that the concept of freedom he offers is far removed from any church thinking. The removal of identity for both people and sexual acts is an attractive proposition because it embraces sexual freedom in the most extreme of forms. It reflects asceticism in the desire for new holiness, but it is an asceticism far removed from anything so far presented.

The removal of identity challenges the very basis on which Issues in Human Sexuality is written. In identifying homophiles the church can then impose a particular lifestyle and identify exactly what that lifestyle should be. Returning to the distinction that Issues in Human Sexuality makes between laity and clergy it may then be argued that the very process of ordination too contributes to identity. Priests are given identity through the sacrament of ordination. Thus homosexual clergy are also given identity through being homosexual and being ordained. The term ‘homosexual’ and ‘clergy’ invokes a double identity and consequently boundaries of behaviour are imposed.

Permanent and stable relationships also rely on the identity of sexual preference but it is only Song who even remotely attempts to describe a sexual act, ‘to touch, to hold, to feel, to need: the vulnerability of baring one’s body to another’. It is far removed from the descriptions of sexual activity described by Jordan. Jordan removes identity, thus removing the distinction between homosexual clergy and heterosexual clergy. Sodomy becomes a choice of the individual which, relying on the novel of Rechy, can be used in many different ways to achieve many different goals. Sodomy is used to achieve monetary wealth through

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242 Admittedly the sacrament of ordination in a Church of England context is a complex one and has varying degrees of theological diversity, but it is clear that for Issues in Human Sexuality there is a distinction between one group of people and another, that of lay and ordained.

243 Song, Covenant and Calling, 61.
stealth or to seal a friendship alliance. Sodomy is an act which does not identify an individual nor even a sexual preference but is rather an act performed by many different people in varying circumstances.

Through a lack of definition, Jordan seeks for a new holiness and through it challenges the church’s stance not only on the act of sodomy but any form of luxurious activity which brings pleasure. What Jordan argues is that despite the traditional asceticism of boundary which denies pleasure, the church has sanctioned pleasure in other forms. The wonder of music and art bring pleasure which is encouraged and not sanctioned. It is only sexual pleasure that is denied or regulated and even this is confused. Commenting on the writings of Augustine, Jordan expresses that even in Augustine’s writings there is the ‘sensual carnality of divine appreciation’. 244

It could therefore follow that holiness can be found in pleasure rather than denial. If one then blurs a definition of pleasure, or more precisely blurs the boundaries where pleasure can be experienced then sexual pleasure may also be a pursuit of holiness. Sexual pleasure becomes identifiable with holiness and therefore identifiable with asceticism.

Where the argument for the delight in sexual pleasure leads us is to a definition of asceticism but it also returns to the question of identity. Identity for Jordan brings constraint and not freedom. Freedom is found through a loss of identity and through a blurring of boundary. Yet Jordan’s understanding of sexual pleasure is not a conventional one but rather echoing his desire for freedom. Jordan’s pursuit of pleasure is not confined by identity either, or constraint. Jordan expresses his understanding of sexual pleasure as being a diversity of sexual activity by individuals. There is the act of sodomy, there is sadomasochism and there is sex that leads to the gratification of financial reward. As sexual expression is diverse and individual then Jordan’s new holiness embraces a sexual pleasure with far wider boundaries. It would therefore follow that if boundary becomes less important than pleasure, then an understanding of asceticism emerges that embraces pleasure rather than denies it. An asceticism that advances pleasure relies on a definition of holiness, but it is Jordan’s ‘new holiness’ that makes a definition of an asceticism of pleasure.

Jordan seeks to undermine a traditional view of medieval asceticism but his desire for a new holiness reflects a desire for some form of ascetic practice involving that new holiness. What form the new holiness takes is not prescriptive but this is not surprising. If identity is fluid and sexual expression is embraced in all kinds of diversity where the sexual act becomes the means of achieving something else, power or influence for example, sodomy becomes neutral rather than expressive of either an identity or a particular permanent relationship. It would therefore follow that as the boundaries of traditional medieval asceticism are challenged and a new holiness emerges, the holiness too is not prescriptive but rather fluid in identity. It would then be possible to conclude that if sexual identity is fluid, then holiness also becomes diverse and through this asceticism adopts a wider definition.

If asceticism leads to holiness, then new holiness, which embraces freedom, moves the boundaries of the definitions of asceticism also. If holiness is not necessarily found through

244 Mark D Jordan, Seducing Augustine (New York: Fordam Press 2010), 126.
sexual constraint then asceticism does not rely on this constraint either. New holiness involves some form of sexual freedom, whatever that freedom may mean, which is not defined by the church but by the individual.

It is not an easy argument, because as Jordan has argued that for the church throughout its history the relationship between holiness and sexual pleasure has been very complex. Jordan’s new holiness is so far beyond the conventions of conventional thought that it does not reflect even the language of *Issues in Human Sexuality* or the concepts of permanent relationships.

But despite this, it is a very interesting argument. Asceticism relies on holiness rather than boundary. New holiness embraces sexual freedom and therefore asceticism can also embrace sexual freedom rather than boundary. It is freedom that becomes important and in relation to sexual activity, a freedom to embrace a lack of identity. New holiness also allows a definition of pleasure which embraces diversity rather than constraint. If holiness defines asceticism and pleasure is found in new holiness then pleasure also reflects a definition of asceticism. Thus asceticism becomes the reverse of initial definitions where pleasure is sought rather than denied. It is pleasure rather than the imposition of boundary that becomes a definition of asceticism.

However, where the argument for pleasure over boundary becomes particularly complex is where the use of boundary ends. If one embraces sexual freedom completely, is it freedom and pleasure that become the absolute goals? Are there no sexual boundaries at all? *Issues in Human Sexuality* exists only to specifically define sexual boundaries, permanent relationships establish one form of boundary over another, but does that mean that new holiness or asceticism has no boundary?

To begin to explore further the question of boundary I move from the writings of Mark Jordan to Marcella Althaus-Reid who, through particularly a feminist or post-feminist viewpoint, considers sexual boundaries. Her writings are similar to Jordan’s in their desire for sexual liberation, but where Althaus-Reid becomes particularly interesting is through her challenging of boundaries and her attempt to establish both freedom and protection of the vulnerable and exploited. Through her writings I seek to explore the limitations of freedom, and how far they exist. If ascetic freedom is possible then an exploration of the limitations of freedom is necessary.
Chapter Four Marcella Althaus-Reid

1 Introduction to complete liberation or freedom.

Through this study I have identified an understanding of asceticism that has relied on boundary and holiness. Through Alison and Jordan I have acknowledged a shift in boundary towards a greater understanding of sexual freedom: however, the freedom that I have established has been particularly in relation to either being gay or some definition of ‘sodomy’. The question that has emerged particularly in relation to freedom is how far should freedom extend? Is there a limitation to freedom or is there a possibility of accepting asceticism or a quest for holiness that abandons boundary completely? Is there a point at which you can have complete freedom and if so can this freedom still be part of asceticism?

One particular theologian who wished to explore the boundaries of freedom is Marcella Althaus-Reid whose post-feminist theological standpoint seeks to find liberation initially for women, but in later writings freedom for all sexual expression. It places her understanding of boundary beyond the study of Alison’s gay freedom or the liberation proposed by Jordan through his understanding of ‘sodomy’. It is particularly through her understanding of the liberation of the female body rather than the male one that her concept of freedom is understood. Her use of the body is broader than the experiences of Alison and Jordan whose freedom of the body is male and whose sexual desires may be towards males predominantly. Although the liberation of the female body is not directly relevant to arguments surrounding homosexual clergy, Althaus-Reid’s writings express an understanding of freedom that is important to engage with. Her own cultural heritage of Latin America is a constant theme throughout her writing.

For Althaus-Reid it is the female body in particular that becomes the point at which purity or holiness becomes a crucial issue. It is not difficult even at these early stages of looking at her writing to understand the connotations with the female body in particular and purity. Althaus-Reid begins her analysis of female purity by challenging traditional definitions of the female body. She suggests that there is a particular understanding of the woman’s body that would be difficult for her as a post-feminist to accept. She states that ‘women’s bodies, with judicial regulations about a woman’s body and hormonal processes, which result in making an object of a human being. ..the discipline of bodies.’ It is the discipline of the body that for Althaus-Reid becomes crucial in her thinking, whereby what happens with and to the body determines not purity but some form of freedom. She argues for a freedom of the body which for women has always been difficult. The boundary of what may be labelled ‘right behaviour’ for women has throughout history been very narrow. Althaus-Reid challenges particularly the boundary of female sexual freedom but also the liberation of the female body beyond sexual activity.

2 The Virgin of Guadalupe and the freedom of the female body.

The development of a theology that moves away from the traditions of asceticism which establishes the boundary of ‘right behaviour’ to sexual liberation begins unsurprisingly with

245 Marcella Althaus-Reid From Feminist to Indecent Theology (London: SCM, 2004), 57.
an analysis of the Mother of Christ, the Virgin Mary. For her the figure of the Virgin Mary in the church is traditionally virginal and submissive. The traditional image of the pure Virgin makes women into the objects of decency. In being a part of society, women are expected to behave and act in certain ways. She describes in particular the ‘Virgin who does not walk’\(^\text{246}\). The traditional images of the Virgin Mary all convey a view of women as the perfect mother and very often too the perfect white mother. Althaus-Reid states that ‘Mariology (is the)...instrument of a colonial project’\(^\text{247}\) where Mary herself becomes not the embodiment of liberation and feminism but rather the symbol of colonial oppression and oppression of all women.

Althaus-Reid sees in a particularly western depiction of the Virgin Mary as being part of the colonial process which has oppressed especially the women of her native Argentina: the Virgin is ‘a woman who oppresses women’\(^\text{248}\). Her book *From Feminist to Indecent Theology* outlines the traditional role of the Virgin Mary as ‘the rich white woman’\(^\text{249}\) where she is depicted as a demure silent figure paraded on the shoulders of men. What is particularly significant is that she sees the western Virgin as changing the place of women in the indigenous society of Latin America to something reflecting a European Christian viewpoint.

In contrast to western ideals, Althaus-Reid uses the visions of pre-Christian conquest where ‘WOMAN’\(^\text{250}\) is the forerunner to the arrival of the western Virgin Mary. WOMAN\(^\text{251}\) is a figure who protects the vulnerable and the downtrodden rather than the symbol of ‘purity’ associated with western understanding.\(^\text{252}\) She is neither pure nor demure. Althaus-Reid argues that the traditional image of the ‘Madonna who does not walk’ is a boundary that is being challenged especially in Latin American culture by the re-emergence of more traditional pre-colonial images. Her argument relates particularly to the Virgin of Guadalupe who in her eyes reverses the trends of traditional Roman Catholic depictions of the Virgin as completely sexless and submissive to God.

Yet it is important to note that the original documentations of the vision of Guadalupe depict an image of purity and virginity in the most conservative of terms.\(^\text{253}\) It is a conventional image and vision of purity and devotion which has been used by successive generations of Mexican people and re-interpreted through each generation. As the writer

\(^\text{246}\) Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist to Indecent Theology*, 87.
\(^\text{247}\) Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist to Indecent Theology*, 39.
\(^\text{248}\) Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist to Indecent Theology*, 41.
\(^\text{249}\) Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist to Indecent Theology*, 31.
\(^\text{250}\) Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist to Indecent Theology*, 34.
\(^\text{251}\) Althaus-Reid uses capitalisation to label the complex image which precedes the more traditional colonialist depictions of the Virgin Mary
\(^\text{252}\) Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist to Indecent Theology*, 39.
\(^\text{253}\) Stafford Poole describes the vision by the Mexican farmer Juan Deigo: ‘On a Saturday in early December 1531 he passed the hill of Tepeyae where he heard the sound of birds singing. Overwhelmed by the beauty of their song he thought he might be in the earthly paradise his ancestors had told him about. When the birds ceased he heard himself summoned to the top of the hill by a woman’s voice. On the hilltop he saw a resplendent vision of the Virgin Mary who identified herself as the Mother of the great Deity of God, the giver of life, the creator of people the Lord of the Universe.’

Stafford Poole *Our Lady of Guadalupe* (Arizona: University of Arizona 1995) 26
Stafford Poole suggests, ‘Guadalupe still remains the most powerful religious and national symbol in Mexico today. The symbolism however does not rest on any objective historical basis. Despite this it will probably endure, if only because it can be interpreted and manipulated by succeeding generations to meet the needs of the Mexican people.’

For Althaus-Reid, however, her interpretation of the vision and understanding of its depictions challenges the traditional beliefs in the Virgin Mary. She uses the image of Guadalupe which as Poole states, has adapted to change in Mexican society. Yet the Virgin of Guadalupe is not an image which is particular to Althaus-Reid’s understanding of liberation but is present also in the writings of Mary Daly. Daly uses the post-colonial image of the Madonna of Guadalupe in *Pure Lust* where she suggests that the Black Madonna of Nuestra de Guadalupe ‘reflects efforts to assimilate indigenous traditions of female power and divinity.’ The Virgin of Guadalupe for Daly and for Althaus-Reid embodies a much wider understanding of the boundaries imposed by traditional views of the Virgin Mary. Guadalupe is something reflecting a definition of freedom rather than oppression. The oppression is one which is both colonial and conforming to the traditional western societal view of the place of women. Althaus-Reid uses Daly’s analysis of the Virgin of Guadalupe by suggesting that as God is male by traditional definition, so the Virgin in colonial church tradition is used by the male for his patriarchal purpose.

However, the Virgin for Althaus-Reid and for Daly is not the meek figure but rather a uniting of pre-colonial understandings of divinity. The Virgin becomes an image of complexity, both male and female and more especially a symbol of sexual desire. For Althaus-Reid the possession of legs means the Virgin is capable of walking. The Virgin is no longer carried about by men as a symbol of meekness and subjection, but rather a symbol of empowerment for women. WOMAN is also not sexless, she is not ‘the decent white woman’ she is the ‘poor native whore woman,’ the ‘woman who is not white and rich and is longing to walk.’

For Althaus-Reid the liberation theology of the Latin American theologians of the 1980s extends further to include the liberation of the Virgin of Guadalupe and in doing so empowering the liberation of sexuality. The Virgin becomes a symbol of freedom not of oppression. Interestingly, in more modern terms this reinvention of the Virgin of Guadalupe has become a symbol of sexual freedom for gay men too, reflected particularly in the artwork of Tony de Caro. His less traditional portrayals of the Virgin are dramatic both in terms of colour and emphasis. The bodily form and gender of the Virgin becomes intertwined with a blurring of sexual boundaries and freedoms. The Virgin is at first glance

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254 Stafford Poole  *Our Lady of Guadalupe* (Arizona: University of Arizona 1995) 225
255 Daly, *Pure Lust*, 117.
256 Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist to Indecent Theology*, 37.
257 Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist to Indecent Theology*, 43.

62
dressed in traditional Latin American costume, but the beard, naked torso and central to the picture, a depiction of white Y fronts are all symbolic of a more permissive gay culture.259

3 Freedom to embrace indecency

It is for Althaus-Reid through the liberation of the Virgin of Guadalupe, that the female body becomes a representation of a particular a theological understanding of freedom. She sees the history of Christianity as being bound up with a notion of the female body which has impacted particularly on how Christianity has traditionally imposed boundaries on women. She sees that even the figure of Christ has a ‘phallocentric perspective’260 whereby Christ portraying the Godhead as male neither suffers nor experiences the nature of the feminine. She goes even further to suggest that in the gospels even the natural bodily functions of women are given a priority to show weakness rather than strength and to unmask the traditional Virgin as ‘ the white upper class woman who has made of us passive supporters of a patriarchal system’.261 Menstruation is seen as being cleansed by Christ as the woman seeking healing in the gospels kneels at the feet of Jesus and is restored to health. Althaus-Reid challenges the image of women in the gospel narrative and church culture by suggesting that ‘now it is the poor women who ask Jesus ‘who do you think we are?’’262

However, what is particularly relevant for this study is that her approach to redefining the Virgin is not one that is confined to the more traditional liberational theology models of focussing on the poor, but that rather her emphasis is one of extending the boundaries of sexual expression. For Althaus-Reid, it is sexual expression that leads to a true sense of liberation. She sees that traditional Christianity has avoided completely the nature of diversity in sexuality. She states that ‘the chaotic nature of sexuality does not belong to the sphere and interest of theology-except to condemn it’. 263

Her illustration of how sexual oppression is seen particularly in Latin American culture is expressed by her example of the transvestites of Argentina. They are often seen as being beyond the normality of society and are treated badly by their families and particularly by the police. She states that ‘The transvestite suffers in life many deaths by ostracism, being abandoned by her family, by being denied a job, by being denied the right to her own identity and love, and to have a good life with dignity.’264 Society shuns forms of diverse sexual behaviour and condemns their practice. It is not difficult to see parallels between her descriptions of the oppression of transvestites and the ‘victim’ status of James Alison. Freedom comes with some form of cost which for Althaus-Reid is the cost of family and status.

Yet for Althaus-Reid it is the reverse of such culture that is important. The oppressed transvestite becomes the embodiment of who God is ‘the representation collectively of the world of people’s unruly affections...re locating the discourse of the family into a wealth of

259 Image enclosed. See page 87
260 Althaus-Reid, From Feminist to Indecent Theology, 45.
261 Althaus-Reid, From Feminist to Indecent Theology, 47.
262 Althaus-Reid, From Feminist to Indecent Theology, 46.
264 Althaus-Reid, From Feminist to Indecent Theology, 169.
relationships in love and transition, impermanence and reciprocity.  

For Althaus-Reid sexual expression in its many forms is a representation of freedom rather than something to be condemned. The freedom of sexual expression becomes a representation of the godhead. For her as well as Alison there is a distinct connection between freedom and victim status. However, for Althaus-Reid true freedom comes with the liberation of all sexual expression irrespective of what form that expression takes.

She further expresses her understanding of sexual freedom by returning to Latin American culture where the Carnivals with their overt portrayal of saints are for her a means by which sexuality finds a place in religion. The culture of diversity is expressed not only through the Virgin of Guadalupe, but also through the carnival tableaux which accompany religious festivals. She uses the example of ‘Christ accompanied by Mary Magdalene dressed as a drag queen and kissing his wounds’266 as being something radical and truly in the spirit of liberating sexual expression. Althaus-Reid’s liberation becomes not only ‘God’s option for the poor but also the Christmas of the indecent’. 267 If the church is to champion liberation, it is through not only embracing the poor but rejoicing in diversity as well. Freedom from oppression is not only freedom from economic oppression but also the liberty to pursue sexual freedom. The liberation theology of freedom from poverty becomes also the liberation of the sexually oppressed or the sexually marginalised, the transgender and the transsexual. So an ascetic definition which embraces freedom, for Althaus-Reid would involve liberation from poverty, but also liberation from sexual oppression.

4 The widening of boundaries and the writing of the Marquis De Sade

But how far can this liberation go? Althaus-Reid poses: ‘What is wrong with excessive freedom?’268 Is there a boundary at which liberation does not pass? To answer this question, Althaus-Reid attempts to justify her abandoning of boundaries and the embracing of freedom by seeking the most extreme manifestation of sexual liberation. She attempts to find a theology within the writings of the Marquis de Sade. The writings of de Sade even in modern translations are extreme in their content.269 Their descriptions of sexual activity are probably the most graphic and nauseating accounts of acts that in most civilisations would be considered illegal. They represent the extremes of sexual liberation but are not wholesome reading. De Sade’s descriptions of mass orgiastic activities and the grooming of young men and women purely for sexual gratification represent an extreme of sexual expression which is difficult to justify. Yet Althaus-Reid suggests that de Sade is a writer of fiction rather than a narrator of actual sexual encounters. It is the reader that becomes involved in a voyeuristic capacity rather than performing the extreme acts of sexual activity described. It may be argued that the acts described are so extreme that they could only exist in the realms of sexual fantasy rather than reality.

265 Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist to Indecent Theology*, 165.
266 Althaus Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 25.
269 De Sade 120 days of Sodom, Accessed 10 February 2016

64
So Althaus-Reid sees sexual liberation not in the actions of the characters but rather in the voyeuristic mind of the reader; she states that ‘in Sade, the only voyeur is in reality the reader’. It is the people that are reading the novel who experience the gratification through the actions of fictional characters. Many of the characters of the Marquis de Sade are controlling, domineering and predominantly predatory heterosexual males where freedom in sexual expression is not freedom at all but rather a means by which control can be exercised. Indeed Althaus-Reid states that in de Sade ‘there is an absolute absence of romanticism in the libertine narrative, there is no chivalry…covenants are pacted and agreements are made’. Sex becomes something ordered and contracted. Althaus-Reid’s argument becomes complex, because the relationship between sex and contract is not entirely condemned by her. She expresses rather an underlying freedom where sexual acts become of less importance and it is freedom that is sought in the ‘libertine epistemology’ of sexual gratification. The Sadean sexual expression of domination and control seeks to subvert sexual constraint by seeking personal gratification whatever the cost.

Yet it is in Althaus-Reid’s analysis of de Sade where she sees some form of political as well as physical upheaval that becomes important. The ‘debasement of class and social order, made of bodies stretching themselves inside and outside the constraints of totality’ means that social as well as sexual norms are challenged. It is almost as if there is a double contrast whereby in some ways the sexual acts of violence and orgiastic excess are on one very basic level classless and thus liberational. The sexual act on one level is the meeting of bodily flesh naked and without trappings of power or status. It is perhaps in its literal term ‘base’, not aligned with human constraint of class or structure, but purely animalistic pleasure, as Althaus-Reid states ‘what we should like to organise here theologically is the libertine body as presented in Sadean literature’. The body becomes free through lack of constraint; the body becomes pure pleasure rather than a definition of status and class. The body is holy, not as Rowan Williams argues through devotion to the individual, but rather through sexual liberation, even in its most extreme forms. However, Althaus-Reid acknowledges that despite the liberation of the body in one form there are huge dangers of taking literally de Sade’s novels as a lifestyle code. It is rather the illustration of the freedom of sexual expression that is important not the practical reality of performing the sexual acts described in a de Sadean novel.

5 Althaus-Reid’s re-construction of holiness and identity

Having established that Althaus-Reid expresses a desire for complete sexual freedom, even if the freedom is only in terms of voyeuristic pleasure rather than actually participating in orgiastic sexual acts, the question that arises is how a de Sadean description of sex relates to holiness. Althaus-Reid in her understanding of holiness uses the writer Georges Bataille.

270 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 39.
272 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 27.
273 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 27.
274 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 25.
275 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 26.
whose novels, although similarly sexual in content to de Sade, seek to engage the reader with the characters in the novel rather than as voyeuristic bystanders. It is through the complexity of characters offered by Bataille that holiness is encountered. The sexually promiscuous Marcelle and Simone in Bataille find liberation and freedom eventually through death, but also through the struggles of survival in extreme circumstances. Althaus-Reid states ‘the presence of the divine in a particular strategy’, a strategy found in liberation. It is through the image of prostitution, the non-reproductive use of sex, that God is found. Like the expressions of Bataille’s characters it is through the darkness of the pleasure of consummation that leads to God. Althaus-Reid states that ‘Bataille has a vocation or call to voyeurism’. It is Bataille’s descriptions of sexual libertarianism and voyeurism that for Althaus-Reid are the quest for holiness. Indeed for Althaus-Reid theology is ‘to scandalise’ or promote a reaction. It is through offering the opportunity to explore practice that is at the boundary of sexual freedom that holiness is encountered. ‘If holiness has a characteristic it may be its un-representability.’ There is no prescriptive holiness only a desire for freedom of sexual expression.

The continuation of this disruption of conventional holiness and the diversity of sexual expression in her writings is strongly illustrated through her analysis of the more conservative traditions of the church. Althaus-Reid seeks to define how sexuality can be present in many different styles of liturgical acts and that traditional holiness becomes blurred. To illustrate her argument Althaus-Reid uses the traditional sacramental act of confession and converts it into an exploration of sexual encounter. Althaus-Reid argues that the bodily positions during the act of confession, people kneeling and sitting, become a form of sexual expression, where ‘the persuasive power of sexual re-representations, achieved in positional confessions …kneeling down on the cold church tiles.’ Confession ‘signifies positions of power but sexual positions too…kneeling in relation to the priest’s genitalia.’ The very act of confession involved ‘two genitally defined and theologically threatening bodies of desire.’ Thus for Althaus-Reid asceticism becomes allied with pleasure even at the most extremes of traditional church practice.

The explicit bodily positions which are required by confession mean that people using this rite ‘understand themselves according to these’ positions. The symbolism of the confessional for Althaus-Reid belies a sexual act. Two bodies assuming positions so easily associated with sexual activity make the confessional a symbol of sexual liberation. The proximity of the priest brings with it a sexual tension which appears not to be condemned but celebrated; it is through desire and ‘interchanging affections’ that holiness is manifested.

277 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 99.
278 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 39.
279 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 35.
280 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 154.
281 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 13.
282 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 17.
283 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 17.
284 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 17.
285 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 17.
Through the sacred nature of the confessional where the sanctity of the priest and the humility of the penitent are used as the means by which sexual freedom may occur, a traditional sacrament becomes a means of sexual diversity. It is on one level the ultimate taboo, the violation of the sacred space of confession. Yet for Althaus-Reid it is the very violation that both shocks and challenges the perceptions of human desire. The confessional symbolises a traditional ascetic discipline, arguably one of its more potent symbols, yet even in this the confessional itself is perhaps ‘queered’ whereby its outward appearances of domination and power are used as the means by which sexual freedom may be found.

But for Althaus-Reid it is not only the sacramental act but holiness itself that has a complex understanding. It is a reversal of conventional definitions of holiness and one that subverts and challenges the order and structure of the church. She states that ‘to be holy is not to become retentive, but disruptive of the law.’\textsuperscript{286} It is the sexual desire that becomes holy as ‘the effects of holiness which come from our bodies are affective, political, theological and belong to the economic order.’\textsuperscript{287} Even the doctrine of the Trinity becomes ‘orgiastic’\textsuperscript{288} where the relationships between the Trinity become sexual. ‘Jesus and leather S/M practices may have deeper roots than previously thought. Jesus is a site of pain and pleasure, in the ambiguity of what is consensual and what is not.’\textsuperscript{289} The crucifixion is where the patriarchal figure inflicts pain and suffering on the willing victim of the son in an image of sadomasochism. The cross is a ‘category of impurity that has always functioned as a theological force fulfilling its role as the canvas of redemption.’\textsuperscript{290} The traditional canvas of redemption becomes something else, a sexually charged image of impurity.

The primary sacrament of the church, the Eucharist also becomes a diverse means of holiness where encounters between individuals in a sexually diverse way fulfil a style of Eucharistic devotion. ‘God is what you eat, the fetish of bread and wine.’\textsuperscript{291} Fetish gear replaces the traditional communion cups and God becomes part of sexual diversity rather than conventional thought. Althaus-Reid states that ‘I still prefer motorbike boots standing in my wardrobe to a set of communion cups on my bedside table’.\textsuperscript{292} ‘God becomes chaos, the smell of our bodies when making love, our fluids and excretions, the hardening of muscles and the erectness of nipples.’\textsuperscript{293} For Althaus-Reid, holiness is found through the sexual act not by condemning it, whatever form that act may take. Holiness is sought through the diversity of sexual practice where sexual activity becomes a means to holiness.

Althaus-Reid challenges the whole nature of the Godhead where God becomes ‘not an Orwellian policeman, but a dialogic God, whose identity is dependant somehow on people’s own loving relationships.’\textsuperscript{294} God becomes the sodomite: the non-productive but

\textsuperscript{286} Althaus-Reid, \textit{The Queer God}, 143.
\textsuperscript{287} Althaus-Reid, \textit{The Queer God}, 142.
\textsuperscript{288} Althaus-Reid, \textit{The Queer God}, 143.
\textsuperscript{289} Althaus Reid, \textit{Indecent Theology}, 109.
\textsuperscript{290} Althaus-Reid, \textit{The Queer God}, 37.
\textsuperscript{291} Althaus Reid, \textit{Indecent Theology}, 92.
\textsuperscript{292} Althaus Reid, \textit{Indecent Theology}, 92.
\textsuperscript{293} Althaus Reid, \textit{Indecent Theology}, 92.
\textsuperscript{294} Althaus-Reid, \textit{The Queer God}, 43.
encountering Godhead who becomes incarnate though the act of love and self-giving. ‘God is a Sodomite since the non-productive and non-profit orientated sexual structure of the Sodomite culture is a much more appropriate location in which to name God than the site of the heterosexual continuum.’ 295 ‘God avoids submission’ 296 and in doing so encounters humanity in true pleasure. Holiness through encounter with the Godhead becomes a place of diversity and pleasure and in particular sexual pleasure.

The physical act of sex for Althaus-Reid brings holiness and an encounter with God. In one form the beauty of sexual encounter is similar to the understanding of Rowan Williams where holiness is found through the sexual act. Where Althaus-Reid diversifies from Williams is that for her the sexual boundary is not with the holiness found in monogamous relationship but rather embracing a wide diversity of sexual expression. God is found through sexual encounter but the sexual expression can embrace so many different forms, including the fetishes of motorbike boots and sadomasochistic crucifixions.

6 Holiness through identity with the poor.

However for Althaus-Reid, the desire for holiness embraces a sexual freedom but does not abandon completely her roots in liberation theology. She sees holiness as an engagement with the poor and the downtrodden but dispensing with a conventional understanding of sexual purity. The poor are liberated from poverty but embrace a sexual freedom. Althaus-Reid uses the language of Jordan and embraces the concept of the ‘sodomite’ but for her the identity of the sodomite is combined with the identity of all who are seen as marginalised and downtrodden. The sodomite becomes more than a particular sexual act, but is rather a term for those who are marginalised. She states that ‘the metaphor of God the Sodomite is offensive: in reality it should not be more offensive than to represent Christ as a Bolivian miner or a black Christ from Jamaica’. 297 The use of sodomite may embrace the lack of sexual identity which Jordan advocates but in doing so creates a new identity, that of the poor and marginalised. The term sodomy for both Althaus-Reid and Jordan acknowledges a diversity of sexual encounter and embrace that diversity but for Althaus-Reid the holiness of the sodomite lies with poverty. It is the liberation of the poor from poverty that Althaus-Reid seeks as well as sexual liberation.

Althaus-Reid uses as her example in The Queer God ‘two boys from a Buenos Aires slum whose lives ‘were accustomed to violence’. 298 They are addicted to glue sniffing and the implication of their lifestyle is that they embrace any form of sexual encounter or theft to feed their addiction. She states that the boys are ‘Recatado, a word with sexual implications.’ 299 The boys are not pure and demure but willing to use their bodies to fulfil their habit. However Althaus-Reid seeks not to ‘redeem’ them in traditional Christological terms but rather to accept their condition and in this condition to see the face of Christ, ‘apart from the bullets in their bodies distributed like crucifixion nails, they also had plastic

295 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 108.
296 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 52.
297 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 108.
298 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 144.
299 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 145.
bags on their heads, as if mock crowns of thorns had been given to them’.  

The glue sniffing boys of the street are not converted, but rather in their suffering and seeking for liberation by whatever means they can, and through the liberation the image of Christ is portrayed in them.

For Althaus-Reid the image of Christ is one of liberation and the cross continues in her writings as a symbol of freedom. But the cross appears to have a dual purpose. She uses it as a sadomasochistic image, but also one more traditionally as an example of oppression. The rent boys of Buenos Aries in their poverty and glue sniffing lifestyle also symbolise the cross. They are downtrodden and poor and so the cross becomes a symbol of human suffering. She argues in her article ‘Queering the Cross’ that another element of theology is that of ‘multiple layers or oppression’ where for theology to be true to itself there is a unifying factor in the images of crucifixion. She argues that particularly in Latin America there are individual crucifixions, both literally where people will as a religious devotion seek to act out a form of crucifixion, but also as an image liberation theologians use to challenge the established authority. The oppression and persecution of the poor is for Althaus-Reid a symbol of crucifixion. She states that ‘the amount of people sacrificed by the Global Capitalist system is on such magnitude in terms of suffering and numbers that it can only be compared to the suffering of a tortured God dying on a cross’. Althaus-Reid continues by suggesting that the capitalist system is part of a debt culture which pervades our view of redemption and she states that ‘the inhumanity of the economies of debt in the Global Market may help us to reconsider our theological doctrines, using more appropriate economic metaphors to understand the love and constant presence of God amongst the marginalised.’

Thus for Althaus-Reid the cross has a duality of purpose. The cross is both a sexual image, but also an image which embodies the suffering of the marginalised. However, for Althaus-Reid the two images are not mutually exclusive and there is a somewhat complex pairing of the two understandings she has of the crucifixion. She argues that ‘it is the body of the poor and its sensuality which is excluded from a dialogue with Christianity.’ Althaus-Reid’s understanding of a theology of the cross addresses the state of the poor not only in relation to their poverty, but also in that poverty a freedom of the use of the body. Sexual freedom and diversity of sexual activity means the body becomes liberated from oppression, not only the oppression of a governmental structure ‘the corporatist agenda… such as the police’ but also the oppression of those who seek to condemn particular sexual acts. There is a uniting of poverty and sexual expression. She states that ‘homosociability “solidarity with

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300 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 146.
302 Althaus-Reid “Queering the Cross,” 294.
303 Althaus-Reid “Queering the Cross,” 299.
304 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*.
305 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 146.
the poor” or “made in his image and likeness” is about constructing God as part of same sex desire’. 306

Where the use of the body and financial transactions become interactive is particularly in the role of the prostitute. Money is exchanged for sex. For Althaus-Reid, prostitution has a complex understanding. There seems little evidence that she seeks to condemn the act of prostitution. She states that ‘the value of the prostitute is in her use’ 307 so the prostitute exchanges the use of her body for financial gain. In liberationist terms, people exchange the use of their bodies in the workplace for financial reward and this is regarded as socially acceptable. When the sale of the body is the selling of sex the prostitute is condemned and marginalised. It is in selling of sex that women are objectivised as items to be bought and sold in a system controlled by debt and oppression. Yet it is not the sexual act in particular that should be condemned but rather a system that controls the use of the body for whatever purpose not only sex. Prostitutes therefore become part of the process of ‘a sainthood which is part of economic processes, in a context of structural sanctity in opposition and tension to the sainthood processes of globalisation’. 308

This makes the act of sex itself not the primary concern, but that rather in selling sex prostitutes enter into the system of debt and payment which Althaus-Reid sees as the major problem with particularly a globalised society. Holiness or sainthood is found through being part of the crucifixion of the poor.

If sex is not the primary concern, but rather poverty, then this means that for Althaus-Reid how the act of sex is performed is secondary to the change needed in society. True liberation comes through freedom, however this freedom is seen, whether it be freedom from poverty or freedom to explore sexuality in whatever form it takes, the liberation not only from sexual tensions but also the liberation from a ‘globalisation commercial criteria’. 309 Thus for Althaus-Reid ‘what is urgently required is not the improvement of a current theology through some addenda such as gender or sexual equality, but a theology with a serious Queer materialist revision of its methods and doctrines.’ 310

Althaus-Reid sees the liberation of women as being not only sexual but financial. The independence of women to explore their own sexuality means that the church has failed to liberate women not only in hierarchical terms but also in terms of self-expression. Women seek liberation and are constrained in this seeking not only by their gender but by their economic situation. Sex becomes a means by which economic stability, if only for the briefest of moments is secured, ‘prostitution as an economic category.’ 311 Thus in receiving financial reward prostitution ‘works by obscuring options that women have from the economic and religious times in which they live’. 312 Prostitution becomes a means by which to live, but it is also an abandoning of decency. Althaus-Reid suggests that women who are

308 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 146.
311 Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist to Indecent Theology*, 90.
312 Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist to Indecent Theology*, 91.
not prostitutes are ‘ignorant in sexual matters and that ignorance was considered “decent”.
The discovery of a woman’s own body is a lengthy and difficult process. It makes difficult the process of doing Feminist Theology which may deal with issues of embodiment from a community of women who do not know what their bodies feel or that their bodies are good.’\textsuperscript{313}

Althaus-Reid’s understanding of the freedom of sexual encounter means that for her, to explore holiness the church has to address the issue of indecency. Indecency labels particular sexual encounters and makes one woman holy and another not. Women, particularly prostitutes, and none more so than in current Latin America, are in her eyes deeply religious, the sense of devotion offered by them is far beyond the middle class acceptability of the conventional church, describing ‘their spiritual, affective and intellectual richness’.\textsuperscript{314} For Althaus-Reid it is through the prostitute and through the downtrodden that the Queer God is found, the woman who ‘lives without wearing underwear, thus revealing the reality of being a woman at prayer and at meal times, and at the moment of sexual pleasure as well.’\textsuperscript{315} She suggests that the Church has sought to control freedom of sexual expression in women ‘God becoming the puppet of heterosexual ideologies’.\textsuperscript{316} She uses the example of pornography, where traditionally this is seen as the objectifying of women’s bodies, and yet for Althaus-Reid it is not the images themselves that objectify women, but rather that women are objectified by status. The ‘domestic drudgery of life’\textsuperscript{317} in her eyes objectifies women as much as any formal image of the body. The so-called pure woman the ‘poor ignorant but faithful Christian mother’\textsuperscript{318} is objectified by society as much as the pornographic image. The identity of woman is fluid where virtue produces poverty and prostitution produces wealth. Poor virtuous women are expected to follow ‘patterns of obedience, good behaviour and rewards’.\textsuperscript{319} It is through the abandoning of the constraints of decency that women become truly liberated. Liberation is found through indecency not through conventional virtuous living. Holiness is not obedience or good behaviour, but rather a liberation of the individual sexually and financially. However, for Althaus-Reid the constraint is colluded with by the church and the church controls holiness through virtuous living. Society controls through wealth and church controls through extolling ‘virtue’. These are the true constraints on the freedom of women.

It is the liberation of both wealth and virtue from a financially controlled globalisation which the church supports that Althaus-Reid desires. She challenges both the church and the whole of westernised globalisation. ‘Christian theology needs to consider how, by stopping the systematic calumny against hedonist love (non-profitable love), the monopolistic thinking of the churches can give way to a real materialist body theology, delinking the revelation from the logic of global brands, and thus liberating holiness.’\textsuperscript{320} True holiness is

\textsuperscript{313} Althaus-Reid, From Feminist to Indecent Theology, 91.
\textsuperscript{314} Althaus-Reid, From Feminist to Indecent Theology, 93.
\textsuperscript{315} Althaus-Reid, From Feminist to Indecent Theology, 94.
\textsuperscript{316} Althaus-Reid, From Feminist to Indecent Theology, 97.
\textsuperscript{317} Althaus-Reid, From Feminist to Indecent Theology, 98.
\textsuperscript{318} Althaus Reid, Indecent Theology, 34.
\textsuperscript{319} Althaus Reid, Indecent Theology, 34.
\textsuperscript{320} Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 161.
the liberation of the body not only sexually but financially. The body becomes free from the constraints of a society controlled by the wealth of financial globalisation. For Althaus-Reid the church oppresses the female body, not only sexually through a desire for sexual purity but also financially as well by honouring the virtue of poverty.

Althaus-Reid argues in her chapter in *The Sexual Theologian* that ‘pleasure costs and we are not left unaided in our choice of pleasure’. Pleasure is controlled by financial status and so called right living is rewarded. She states that ‘it is no accident, we think, that a form of Christianity so based in family values is also wedded to a consumption and financial reward for holy lives’. Choices are made by the church to endorse holiness and the holiness the church advocates is the wealthy woman not the prostitute. For Althaus-Reid it is the devoutness of the prostitute not the collusion of the wealthy woman with oppression where true holiness is seen. Holiness is encountered in all freedom both sexually and financially.

Holiness is encountered through sexual act, in whatever style the act takes place. The sanctity of the sexual act in diversity rather than monogamous fidelity challenges the very core of conventional Christian thought. Althaus-Reid states ‘the margins of sexuality in theology are constitutive parts of the polarisation of the logic of salvation and the disruption of real, dissident holy praxis of the church’. The freedom of the body is for Althaus-Reid the abandoning of a westernised obsession with materialism where Christianity is seen as ‘the most materialist of all religious systems’.

Althaus-Reid’s freedom does not offer right practice or a code of conduct. It offers instead liberation and in that liberation seeks liberation for the poor and the oppressed, be that women or any group of people on the margins of society. It is liberation from constraint whatever that constraint may be, including theological constraint. Althaus-Reid offers no creed or statement of belief; instead she puts forward the suggestion that the role of the church has been to oppress and control those on the margins of society, be they prostitutes or rent boys sniffing glue in Mexico. This oppression comes in the form of condemnation and in a desire to impose an ascetic constraint for holy living. Her freedom is not one of rules, or even anti-rules where freedom itself becomes the ultimate goal, it is rather than in abandoning ascetic constraint it gives the space to explore freedom and freedom not for all society, but freedom for the individual. It is freedom to embrace the body and to embrace the pleasure that the body brings be it financial reward or sexual gratification.

7 Holiness through identity with the sexualisation of the body

The question that follows from Althaus-Reid’s liberation of the body in sexual and financial terms, as Lisa Isherwood in her tribute to Althaus-Reid suggests, is ‘what F-ing difference does it make?’. For Althaus-Reid there is, as Isherwood suggests, a need to ‘face the reality of sex in order to correct and counter some of the most deadening and limiting forms

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325 Lisa Isherwood and Mark D Jordan, *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots* (London: SCM, 2010), 68.
Althaus-Reid’s view of sexual liberation is not one of prescription at all but rather it is one of emerging and developing sexual freedom. It is therefore with good cause that Isherwood asks the question ‘What does indecent theology look like then? What indeed, dear sisters, what indeed?’ Isherwood’s solution is to offer the following, ‘it is a way of putting bodies back into theology, and most particularly, of putting the sex of women centrally in the creation of theological discourse and understanding them as the real presence of the divine’.

Holiness becomes directly connected to the use of the body. Indecent holiness reverses the negative context of the denial of the flesh. It is freedom of the body that brings liberation or access to God, not the denial of desire but the embracing of it. Isherwood challenges us ‘theologically to find an honest voice…the vicar is coming to tea, get out the bondage gear’. There is a rejoicing in the bodily function of sex, there is an abandoning of sexual denial in favour of liberation. Indecent holiness makes the use of the body the means of finding God ‘looking for God in the arse of her male friends’, as Isherwood suggests. The voyeuristic Sadean understanding of the body becomes a means to holiness not the conventional denial of sexual pleasure in the pursuit of sanctity.

The traditional view of the body is that it is through denial that God is found, through ascetic practice, through saying no rather than yes one becomes both part of the church and part of the salvation process. If Isherwood’s analysis of Althaus-Reid is correct, it is through the functions of the body that God is found. Sexual expression is a means to God, and it is through the diversity of this sexual expression that God is found. The body becomes both the liberation and also the means by which true freedom is expressed.

For Althaus-Reid it is the body in all its forms where holiness is encountered. The crucifixion and suffering of the glue sniffing boys and the exploitation of the prostitute for financial gain, somehow also become part of the human bodily condition. Susannah Cornwall suggests that in whatever context the body is found there is a quest for holiness. Even ‘the horrors of torture, rape, abuse, starvation and death, all the worse things that human beings can do to one another, do not go on outside theological talk but are integral to it’. The body is the means by which God is manifested and that manifestation is a God that, in the words of Andres Serrano ‘actually died and bled and suffered and this is offensive and grotesque and difficult-and part of what it is to be human’. Sexual liberation is a means to holiness and the suffering of the human condition also embraces sanctity. The suffering of the body and the freedom of the body both encounter holiness. Both suffering and freedom reflect a definition of asceticism.

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326 Isherwood and Jordan, Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots, 69.
327 Isherwood and Jordan, Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots, 77.
328 Isherwood and Jordan, Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots, 78.
329 Isherwood and Jordan, Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots, 77.
330 Isherwood and Jordan, Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots, 77.
331 Susannah Cornwall in Isherwood and Jordan, Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots, 99.
332 Andres Serrano in Isherwood and Jordan, Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots, 100.
8 Asceticism and boundary

Althaus-Reid has an understanding of both holiness and freedom which reflect ascetic desire. In her writing, holiness and freedom are interconnected where for her true holiness is found through freedom. She has a strong definition of alternative holiness thus making her theological understanding ascetic in some form.

However where asceticism involves boundary Althaus-Reid becomes more complex. She wishes to abandon boundary to the extent of advocating the extremes of sexual pleasure. She wishes to abandon the boundaries imposed on women by the acceptance of middle class ‘virtue’ and liberate women sexually and financially.

Even her understanding of suffering has a complexity of boundary. Returning to the initial outlining of medieval asceticism, suffering is encouraged as a means to explore holiness. For Althaus-Reid her understanding of suffering is through societal position. The poor suffer not through choice but through circumstance and governmental control. Althaus-Reid and Cornwall’s definitions of the suffering of the body are imposed through external circumstance rather than choice. The circumstances of poverty or the mistreatment of the poor by a particular form of state create poverty. It is not the choice of the individual to suffer. There is an element of denial of the body, through poverty or societal oppression but not a boundary that is self-imposed. The boundary of suffering is one that should also be abandoned rather than constrained. The liberation of women from suffering is through the abandoning of boundary not the embracing of it. The church imposes the boundary of virtue and through that boundary controls freedom. Society imposes the boundary of poverty and through that boundary controls the place of women in that society.

The language of the Church imposes boundary and in consequence abandons freedom and particularly sexual freedom. Issues in Human Sexuality is for homosexual clergy the example of a church imposed boundary. It is the definitive statement regarding what one should and should not do with regards to the sexual act.

For Althaus-Reid the imposition of such boundaries is ‘church that we do not know’ which imposes constraint and marginalises individuals in a control of virtue. She speaks to Issues in Human Sexuality not to demand a revoking of particular ascetic constraint but rather that the very form of writing such constraint, challenges the very making of the document in the first place.

Althaus-Reid challenges not the document’s content, but its very foundation. As Patrick Cheng suggests ‘according to Althaus-Reid queer theology should shock people out of their complacency and help them see theology in a new light’.

Boundary for Althaus-Reid is primarily imposed by circumstance and not by choice. Issues in Human Sexuality represents that boundary and a boundary imposed through circumstance by the church. Althaus-Reid’s writings speak to Issues in Human Sexuality but not to affirm its stance. Her theology seeks for an abandoning of church ‘boundary’ not its imposition.

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333 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 165.
334 Cheng, Radical Love, 9.
Indeed Ivan Petrella suggests that ‘liberation theology’s brightest future lies in the direction Marcella pointed. It lies outside the church and outside theology narrowly understood’.  

What is equally interesting is that her abandoning of boundary challenges ‘Permanent, Faithful and Stable’ as well as Issues in Human Sexuality because it extends sexual freedom into the realms of prostitution and sado-masochism. As already stated permanent relationships offer an alternative to Issues in Human Sexuality which operates within the realms of conventional theology. Althaus-Reid challenges the boundaries of sexual expression completely even to the point of almost advocating prostitution. Her understanding of a God found in the motorcycle boots of the Eucharist and the sexual encounter of the confessional challenge the very order of the church’s sacraments.

Yet it is all too easy to dismiss such writing as extreme and so far outside church culture that it bears little significance to any document which would seek to outline guidance of sexual conduct, particularly for clergy. However, it is here that boundary becomes so important. I have already argued that boundary establishes the basis of Issues in Human Sexuality’s expectation of sexual abstinence. Boundary is also important to monogamous ‘permanent relationships’. What is significant is that Alison too embraces a boundary of adherence to church doctrine. The question that arises from such eradication of boundary is not how far the theology of Althaus-Reid abandons boundary, but rather how far any change to Issues in Human Sexuality would cling on to it.

Althaus-Reid offers a theology almost without boundary and so challenges the church so much that those who seek to follow her find themselves outside the church and not within it. She argues that ‘the problem is that when genuine theological reflection comes, even if it is grass rooted, it cannot determine if the ecclesiastical product is appropriate or not’.  

If Issues in Human Sexuality is to be reformed does the church remain within its tradition of controlled ascetic boundary or consider embracing a wider understanding of the erotic? Does the church abandon any understanding of sexual freedom and if so abandon anything that does not fall within its walls?

Natalie Watson states that ‘one of the things Marcella taught us is that theology, indecent theology happens on the street, in salsa bars, in the lives, front rooms and work places of transvestites and prostitutes, and that there is no separation between sacred and unholy places’.  

Althaus-Reid suggests that the ‘crisis of the church is reduced to a challenge for chartered accountants’. She continues that ‘theology needs to be a people’s praxis without the expectations of the theological market…the church will not need theology, nor vice versa, but people defining needs and relationships in their own terms and from the margins.’

If the church continues to rely only in an asceticism of boundary and not engage at all with freedom and particularly sexual freedom, does church theology as Althaus-Reid suggest rest...
only on an ordered form of monetary dependence for its survival? Althaus-Reid does not abandon church completely but rather sees church emerging in a different form, found in both sacred but also ‘unholy’ places. Althaus-Reid does not disengage with church practice but rather seeks to redefine church functions in relation to freedom and sexual freedom in particular. Communion cups become fetish boots and celebrations of the Virgin Mary become pageants of sexual liberation.

Returning to the Church of England, it is difficult to conclude that even within the most conservative of understanding Issues in Human Sexuality is only concerned with the economic survival of the church. However, it is also possible to see that Althaus-Reid’s theology is abandoned at great cost to the traditional structures of the church. If any reform of Issues in Human Sexuality is to be considered it must surely engage with a radical understanding of freedom. It is clear that Althaus-Reid seeks for holiness, and so desires some form of asceticism, even if her understanding of holiness is concerned with freedom rather than imposition. What Althaus-Reid offers is an alternative to boundary and sexual abstinence through the embracing of freedom, both economically and sexually.

So, in conclusion, Althaus-Reid offers a theology of freedom with an abandoning of boundaries and an embracing of holiness. Through freedom and holiness she offers a definition of asceticism that relies on freedom rather than boundary. She challenges the church to embrace that freedom. It is a theology which is about ‘liberating society from a multi-dimensional system of ideological and socio-economic oppression’ 340 as Rosemary Radford Ruether expresses it. An asceticism of new holiness for Althaus-Reid embraces a sexual freedom which challenges not only Issues in Human Sexuality but church structure as a whole.

In the final chapter of this study Althaus-Reid’s understanding of complete sexual freedom moves an understanding of asceticism which is at the extreme of theological expression. The argument has moved from a boundary of abstinence through a boundary of fidelity and an abandoning of identity to sexual freedom. The final question that remains is whether these collective definitions of asceticism are helpful in discerning a code of practice for homosexual clergy, whether embracing a wider understanding of holiness can influence the debates surrounding the rewriting of Issues in Human Sexuality.

340 Isherwood and Jordan, Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots, 262.
Chapter Five Conclusion

1 Introduction

When this study commenced in 2014, the Church of England was engaged in a series of what it termed ‘shared conversations’. The aim of the Shared Conversations was that the diversity of views within the church would be expressed honestly and heard respectfully, with the hope that, in so doing, individuals might come to discern that which is of Christ in those with whom they profoundly disagree. The disagreement in question was particularly the diversity of opinion regarding sexuality and sexual expression. Such conversations clearly led to discussions regarding the future of the document *Issues in Human Sexuality*. The conversations were concerned with the question, ‘given the significant changes in our culture in relation to human sexuality, how should the Church respond?’

The result of these conversations in 2017 has been that the House of Bishops has affirmed the content of *Issues in Human Sexuality*. However their affirmation was rejected by the House of Clergy in General Synod. The rejection has once again opened the possibility of reform of the 1991 document.

In an attempt to move forward to a wider theological understanding of sexual activity and its regulation within the church I began to explore what theological principles regarding asceticism *Issues in Human Sexuality* was based on. I commenced by examining the diversity of opinion over sexual expression that had led the House of Bishops to prepare a particular statement outlining what they determined as church teaching on sexuality. The document particularly sought to answer the variety of opinion that had been expressed on homosexual activity since its decriminalisation in 1967. Using the writing of Harry Williams from the 1980s I outlined a diversity of understanding that had arisen as to acceptable guidelines for the sexual activity of homosexual clergy. Williams advocated a freedom of sexual expression which incorporated the joy of anonymous sexual encounter. With the publication in 1991 of *Issues in Human Sexuality* what emerged as Anglican guidance on homosexual activity was a document that outlined a differing code of behaviour for laity and clergy. Clergy who identified themselves as homosexual were to abstain from sexual activity whereas homosexual laity were permitted, if not encouraged, to engage in sex. What was also clear was that the document, which is only 48 pages long, was written in a particular style and tone proposing a legal framework rather than a distinctive theological purpose. In reading it, it is difficult to ascertain a sense of theological understanding. The document reads both in style and conclusion as a guideline for the legal imposition of a particular code of conduct particularly for clergy.

In publishing in 2003 *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* the Church of England did seek to address the issue of a wider theological perspective. Yet this document although more acknowledging of a wide variety of opinion, was not intended to change the policy of the original 1991 publication. It is rather a summary of the diversity of opinions expressed since

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342 “Shared Conversations”

If *Issues in Human Sexuality* is a document that lacks theological clarity, then any future revision must address a greater theological understanding. In seeking some form of theological clarification I began to explore where the church had usually found a definition for right living, particularly for clergy. I have suggested that this lies within an understanding of the word ‘asceticism’. So in attempting to find a wider theological outlook for any future church policy on the sexual lives of clergy I began to explore the meanings and understandings of asceticism.

What is clear is the variety of definition that exists for ascetic practice. Beginning with an initial understanding of the root of the word, it became apparent that it was used in a distinct way to express achievement, especially in the field of athletics. Ascetic prowess was a discipline of the body which led to sporting success. However, the writings of Paul in the New Testament made an analogy of winning a race with Christian discipleship. Thus being a disciple became part of some form of ascetic discipline of giving up worldly pleasures in the pursuit of heavenly reward. By the medieval period, asceticism in Christianity had become adapted to embody particularly a theology of abstinence to gain heavenly reward. Using the work of Mary Daly who was particularly dismissive of Christian asceticism, a particular understanding of the punishment of the body for heavenly reward was outlined. She used the life of Benedict who would involve himself in extreme forms of ascetic discipline in a desire for holy living. However, what became evident through the writing of Daly was that such asceticism became complicated when applied to sexual activity. The boundaries became confused between ascetic denial and pleasure. Daly used the analogy particularly of masochism where both punishment of the body and pleasure became intertwined. She used the example of Lawrence of Arabia whose confused relationship between torture and sexual pleasure outlined a complex relationship between sexual expression and violence to the body. Using Daly’s analogies, it became clearer that asceticism was not only associated with denial but also with pleasure. The pursuit of an ascetic discipline of punishment of the body for some would be a means to pleasure.

However, what Daly’s understandings of asceticism did begin to outline was an establishment of boundary where asceticism in traditional form became the means by which particular behavioural patterns were established. Sexual denial became a means of sanctity and the boundary of sexual behaviour was an important part of ascetic discipline. The development of such boundaries developed further into the embracing of celibacy which became the normal understood practice for clergy until the Reformation. The problem with celibacy is that it has not traditionally been a requirement for Anglican clergy. Rather Anglicanism reflects the writings of Luther and Calvin who desire clergy to be heterosexually married. In offering a brief description of celibacy through Orlson, it became apparent that celibacy meant more than simply sexual abstinence. Indeed using more radical understandings of celibacy such as those offered by Vincent Lloyd and Lisa Isherwood, the word celibacy implied something beyond the imposition of sexual boundary. Elizabeth Clarke further suggested that in the nineteenth century in particular Anglicans had actively sought to avoid celibacy but rather embrace marriage as the right living for clergy. It is also
important to note that, despite requiring sexual abstinence for homosexual clergy *Issues in Human Sexuality* avoids the use of the word celibacy. The understanding that I have drawn from such observations is that *Issues in Human Sexuality* is concerned with an imposition of sexual abstinence rather than an engagement with any theological concept of celibacy. Therefore I have concluded that an analysis of *Issues in Human Sexuality* should avoid the use of the word celibacy because it is confused with simply being the term for sexual abstinence. *Issues in Human Sexuality* is concerned with abstinence, not celibacy. What is clear from the division of celibacy and abstinence is that celibacy is far more easily aligned with a desire for holiness rather than simply abstaining from sex. A legal requirement for abstinence does not necessarily lead to a desire for holiness.

2 Anglican Holiness

Throughout this study I have sought to identify an asceticism that has relied on holiness for its basis. I therefore began by establishing some account of Anglican holiness by using the work of Malcolm Thornton. Although he cannot offer the definitive definition of Anglican holiness, his style of writing and gentle approach is identifiable as reflective of Anglican thought. His definition of holiness is particularly helpful because it defines a sanctity for clerical life especially. He argues for a particular definition of holiness which is found through living the life of an Anglican clergyman. The desire for holiness is found both in celebrating the sacraments and in belonging to the Church community. The daily life of a priest becomes a desire for holiness and therefore an ascetic quest. The desire for holiness through a life of engagement with a community is also present in Michael Ramsey’s writing which, although written in the 1970s, is still considered as a key text for those seeking ordination in the Church of England. Anglican holiness is found in community and sacrament.

The problem with *Issues in Human Sexuality* and Anglican holiness is that the document relies on a division between clergy and lay people. It expects an ascetic boundary of abstinence only for clergy. Thornton establishes in his writing why such a division is present in Anglican thought. For Thornton there is a particular clerical holiness which is reflective of a boundary. Holiness is found through service to the community and the celebration of the sacraments. Where Thornton’s ascetic boundary becomes particularly relevant to *Issues in Human Sexuality* is that his boundary is self-imposed rather than demanded by the wider church. His desire for holiness found in daily life is through personal prayer and devotion, not through regulation of activity by others. In the context of clerical sexual activity, a desire for holiness through self-control rather than imposition moves the argument away from *Issues in Human Sexuality* to an area of self-regulation. The process of self-regulation also expresses a desire for a greater understanding of asceticism. Admittedly if asceticism relies on boundary only, then *Issues in Human Sexuality* imposes boundary. What Thornton’s understanding of clerical holiness does is establish an asceticism that introduces holiness in an Anglican context. His writings are not concerned with sex but they reflect an ascetic desire for holy living by self-regulation and not by imposition.

Having established an Anglican understanding of holiness through self-regulation I began to explore how holiness and therefore asceticism could be extended to include some form of sexual activity for homosexual Anglican clergy. What has emerged through recent writings
such as those of Song, Coakley and John is a desire for some form of sexual continence found in the extension of heterosexual marriage. It is clear in Anglican thought that clerical holiness can still be sought and sexual activity be present in a relationship. Heterosexual marriage is allowed and possibly encouraged for clergy and sexual activity permitted within that boundary.

3 Regarding permanent relationships

The argument for permanent, faithful and stable relationships relies on a particular premise that monogamous relationships are the most fulfilling sexually and lead to an understanding of a healthy lifestyle. Williams and Roger’s arguments regarding the sanctity of the body rely particularly on the understanding that sex in a monogamous relationship leads both to holiness but also to pleasure and fulfilment. For Coakley, though, there is a different understanding of permanent relationships where monogamous same sex relationships set an example of Christian holiness to wider society. Williams and Rogers argue for fulfilment through sexual activity, while Coakley relies on an example of holiness through sexual control. The difference between the two arguments is a small yet significant one. Williams and Rogers argue for sexual monogamy because it the most fulfilling of all relationships. Coakley argues for monogamy as an example to society of ‘right living’ rather than monogamy being the most sexually fulfilling of all relationships.

Both these arguments are particularly interesting relating to Issues in Human Sexuality and also a desire for holiness. It is easier to see a relationship between Coakley and Issues in Human Sexuality because Coakley applies an asceticism of boundary. There is right living for homosexual clergy by simply shifting the boundary of sexual abstinence to sexual continence. Where the argument for sexual continence becomes more complex is with the inclusion of Williams and Rogers. They argue for the same continence as Coakley but they argue that monogamous sexual activity is the most pleasurable form of sex. For Williams and Rogers there is a boundary certainly, where sex is only practised within a permanent relationships but it is the understanding of Williams that it also leads to the greatest pleasure.

For Coakley it is right living that leads to holiness. She speaks more directly to Thornton who seeks for sanctity through holy living and a self-imposed ascetic boundary but also to Issues in Human Sexuality. Using the understanding of monogamous permanent relationships Issues in Human Sexuality is easily reformed. Clerical heterosexual continence is extended to include homosexual clergy. The boundary is moved. Yet the boundary becomes more complicated when applied to the understanding of Williams and Rogers. They have a boundary but it is rather complex because it is a boundary that leads to pleasure. It would appear that right living is more pleasurable than any alternative. Coakley’s argument relies on a boundary which reflects ascetic holiness. The challenge to her writing is easier to understand. Because her argument depends on imposing a boundary to show to society ‘right living’ for gay Christians, why should the boundary be monogamous relationships? Is a reform of Issues in Human Sexuality merely a realignment of boundaries? Heterosexual marriage becomes open to homosexuals and clergy have a sexually active alternative for holy living but one still controlled by documentation. One boundary is replaced by another.
The argument of Williams and Rogers is that the sense of boundary is blurred. The boundary brings pleasure rather than denies it. It means also an interesting relationship with asceticism. There is an understanding of holiness but it begins an understanding of holiness which is wider than a boundary of imposition. An ascetic understanding of monogamy is the ultimate form of sexual pleasure not the denial of it. It may be also that such an understanding of asceticism is reflective of Mary Daly. Her observation that the ascetic practice of flagellation may bring pleasure rather than deny it makes some forms of ascetic discipline pleasurable. The understanding of sexual activity by Rogers and Williams also brings pleasure but is also ascetic because it desires holiness. Monogamous sexual activity is the most pleasurable but also ascetic through a desire for holiness. Holiness and pleasure become intertwined where sexual monogamous sexual activity both brings pleasure and is a means to holiness.

The question that arises, however, is whether such an understanding of sexual activity is true? If one compares the ascetic practice of Mary Daly with the ascetic practice of Williams and Rogers, is there a convergence of ideas? Daly’s understanding of asceticism brings erotic pleasure for some people but not everyone. The pleasure of masochism is not considered to be universal but it is certainly pleasurable to some people. Permanent, faithful and stable relationships are pleasurable in the eyes of Williams and Rogers, but are these pleasures universal? The argument of Williams and Rogers relies on the principle that they are. Yet, as Song acknowledges, the universal desire for permanent and faithful relationships is not necessarily the case.

I therefore concluded that through exploring a theology of asceticism in relation to *Issues in Human Sexuality* the arguments of Williams and Rogers would be sufficient for a revision of the document. *Permanent, Faithful and Stable* advocated a desire for holy living and a reflection of ascetic practice. The problem with Rogers and Williams’ argument however, is that not only, in the words of Song, is it not universal: it is not accepted universally theologically either. Permanent monogamous relationships are not necessarily reflective of society, nor of all theological understanding of sexual practice. Using the work of the secular theorist David Halperin for example, it is clear from his writing that gay sexual practice is diverse and expressed in a variety of ways. 343 Accepting that gay sexual practice was wider

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343 In his book *What Do Gay Men Want?* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2001), David Halperin the American Queer Theorist seeks to address this question by outlining his initial definition of homosexuality as not ‘to exhibit a queer subjectivity but belong to a social group. Homosexuality refers not to an individual abnormality but to a collective identity.’ (Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, 2). This means that for Halperin being gay is a political identity rather than even necessarily a sexual choice. He then extends his argument to express the view that ‘the aim is to distract straight people from everything about gay culture that might make them feel uncomfortable about it, and to get them to sympathise instead with our political demands for equal treatment.’ (Halperin, *What do Gay Men Want?*, 5). This sense of equality may indeed reflect some form of permanent faithful relationship where partnerships are recognised in a political and social context but equally it may not. What Halperin begins to suggest is that in what he sees as ‘gay culture’ relationships may not necessarily reflect the permanent faithful model at all. Rather Halperin sees this creation of a particular ‘gay culture’ where gay men can almost live in a form of sub culture which can
than monogamy I began to explore a theology of asceticism that reflected sexual diversity rather than permanent and faithful relationships.

To engage with a wider sexual diversity in a theological context I began to explore the writings of what has been termed ‘queer theology’. In secular queer theory sexual practice has been identified as an area of confusion and diversity. Monogamous relationships are challenged as being the only form of sexual practice in an attempt to diversify sexual expression and sexual encounter. As queer theology has no identifiable creedal statement, the task I faced was how to engage with a theology that reflected a desire for sexual encounter beyond permanent faithful and stable. The three theologians I chose represented (for me) a gradual shift towards a greater diversity of sexual expression. What became apparent from the three writers I engaged with was a great importance placed on the word ‘identity’. The question of identity meant that right from the very beginning of my engagement with their writing I was cautious not to label any of them specifically as ‘queer’. Neither did I assume that they acknowledged for themselves a shared theology with each other.

Both Issues in Human Sexuality and permanent, faithful and stable understandings of relationships rely on a particular view of identity where homosexual people are identified and an understanding of sexual practice is outlined. The question of ascetic boundary for Issues in Human Sexuality and permanent relationships relies on identity to establish where sexual practice is acceptable. For ‘queer’ theology identity is not necessarily established so it became clear that presenting a diversity of understanding of identity would be important. Outlining a sexual practice that relies on boundary and holiness, both Issues in Human Sexuality and permanent relationships rely on a particular identity for those boundaries to be in place. Homosexuals exist, therefore they should abstain from sexual activity or they should form permanent relationships. In queer thinking identity is confused and diverse. To engage with a theology of boundary and holiness that may not rely on identity it became important to establish some understanding of what identity meant. In choosing the three theologians of Alison, Jordan and Althaus-Reid their understandings of identity represented a shift in emphasis further away from a particular identity into something more fluid.

4 James Alison

James Alison’s theology was particularly useful in this regard as his identity was very clear. He is a gay man, a priest and a self-confessed queer theologian. Indeed, to engage with Alison there had to be an understanding of the particular theological standpoint of the gay victim which relies heavily on gay identity. The gay victim for Alison is persecuted by the church and therefore reflects Christ in his rejection by the religious authorities and is crucified. The gay victim is crucified through persecution and rejection by the church both currently and throughout church history. Alison emphasises his own victim status as a gay man and as a priest who is rejected by the church despite his expressions of theological

then ‘invent concrete escape routes from self-analysis ranging from gay churches to gay bath houses’. (Halperin What do Gay Men Want?, 8).
orthodoxy. Much of his theological output reflects a desire to be seen as a Catholic theologian despite his sexuality.

The problem with his understanding of gay victim is that it makes his identity of great importance. His writings speak the language of *Issues in Human Sexuality* where ‘homophiles’ and ‘homophile clergy’ are both identified and expected to live a particular lifestyle. Alison confesses to being gay and expects the church to not only acknowledge but also to rejoice in his sexuality. Although Alison writes as a Roman Catholic priest, such rejoicing is not present in the Anglican Church through the definitions on ‘homophiles’ expressed in *Issues in Human Sexuality* either. The Anglican Church requires a particular lifestyle for clergy that may acknowledge the existence of being gay but does not rejoice in gay sexual activity of homophiles. For *Issues in Human Sexuality*, ‘permanent, faithful and stable’ relationships and Alison, identity forms three individual understandings of holiness. *Issues in Human Sexuality* holds that one is holy through abstinence, ‘permanent, faithful and stable’ through sexual continence or Alison through holding to an identity of being gay. Alison’s theology of victim relies on persecution to seek after holiness and therefore relies on being labelled by the church as being homosexual. Anglican gay clergy may be as much part of Alison’s understanding of victim as much as Alison is himself as they are also denied sexual activity by the church. The danger with accepting victimhood only is that it relies on persecution. If the church did rejoice in diverse sexual expression then victimhood disappears. However what does not disappear for Alison is his identity. Even if the church rejoiced in his sexuality then his identity would still be as a gay man and a priest.

Yet Alison acknowledges that if such a freedom was given to gay priests the question which would arise would be how does a concept of holiness exist in sexual liberation? Is there an asceticism which embraces a theology of freedom for Alison’s gay identity? Is gay freedom at the expense of holiness? Alison explores holiness through his understanding of ‘desire’ and an identification of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ desires.

Alison suggests therefore that holiness and so asceticism is not only reliant on an understanding of victimhood but also on an alliance with desire. Good desires lead to holiness, but these good desires are outside the boundaries of sexual activity. Good desires for Alison are making right choices and offering forgiveness. Such theological ideals certainly reflect a traditional form of ascetic practice where there is an element of self-sacrifice. Being a victim involves sacrifice, but also acting on right desires may also be sacrificial. Forgiveness is often sacrificial. Good desires may involve self-sacrifice.

Alison then acknowledges that desire is also associated with sexual activity. There is clear sexual desire, which for him would be towards people of the same rather than the opposite sex. Alison sees his attraction as being a ‘good’ desire rather than a ‘bad’ one. He suggests that in some cultures gay priests are celebrated rather than rejected. It is through his sexual desires that holiness is explored rather than rejected. His sexual identity becomes a manifestation of holiness. His identity as both a gay man and a priest leads to holiness. The very presence of his gay identity is a means to holiness. It is his gay identity that becomes of great consequence. Alison seeks holiness though being gay and being a priest. In relation to *Issues in Human Sexuality* seeking holiness because of being gay is interesting. *Issues in
Human Sexuality would seek to acknowledge gay priests but certainly not celebrate their sexuality, rather to seek to control and limit it. The document would wish to control sexual desire rather than celebrate sexual activity. In fact sexual activity is not permitted for lay people, but acknowledged that it exists. It expects sexual abstinence completely for gay clergy. Although not explicitly expressed by Issues in Human Sexuality I suggest that in Alison’s terms, denying the fulfilment of homosexual desires makes homosexual desire ‘bad’ desire. For Alison, homosexual desire is ‘good’ desire.

So, for Alison, his argument for holiness and therefore asceticism relies on three particular concepts: victim, identity and desire. The concept of identity intertwines with both victim and desire. Gay identity leads to having victim status in the church and therefore through being a victim there is a desire for holiness. Good desires lead to holiness, becoming a victim is a good desire. Sexual desire also becomes a good desire and therefore holy rather than something to be controlled or avoided. The problem with Alison’s writing is that in the area of sexual activity there is no establishment of sexual boundary or where good desires stop being good. There is certainly a boundary found in identity and there is a boundary found through theological adherence to the Catholic Church, but there is an absence of boundary for sexual activity.

It became clear therefore that a difficulty arose with identifying Alison’s theology with the prescriptive asceticism of both Issues in Human Sexuality and permanent relationships. Alison offers only an identity of being gay and being a priest. He does not offer in prescriptive terms a particular sexual activity. He acknowledges gay sexual desire but not how this desire should be fulfilled. So have Alison’s writings assisted at all in a definition of asceticism? Issues in Human Sexuality and permanent relationships rely especially on a prescriptive form of sexual activity be that sexual abstinence or monogamous relationship. Alison does not share in this demand. He argues for a greater understanding of gay sexual expression and rejoicing in being gay. However through his specific gay identity what Alison does establish is an alternative for holiness which is crucial in an understanding of asceticism.

Alison outlines a holiness for gay clergy which does not rely on sexual conduct in a particular direction. In not outlining a prescriptive definition of sexual practice it is his understanding of identity and desire which become important. His theology moves the concept of holiness away from sexual activity rather than towards it. For Issues in Human Sexuality and permanent relationships some form of sexual boundary is established to define what leads to holiness and what does not. For Alison, the boundary of holiness has moved but not in prescriptive terms. What Alison establishes is the identity of a gay priest and a means for the gay priest to desire holiness. Holiness becomes either an identity with Christ as a victim or an establishment of good desires.

Alison’s understanding of holiness returns the argument back to the writings of Thornton and Ramsey. The priest becomes holy through good desire or through adherence to the church. Thornton sees church adherence as vital to the holiness of the priest and Alison reflects this. He desires to be accepted by the church as a gay man and when he is rejected becomes part of the victimhood of Christ. Alison is holy through the church either as a victim
of it or by seeking to engage with its sacraments. What Alison does establish is a positive sanctity which is found in being gay and in being a priest. A prescriptive form of right sexual activity is not important. What Alison establishes is a freedom to be gay and to be a priest. He rejoices in his sexuality rather than condemning sexual practice. Asceticism for Alison is a desire for holiness found in the sacraments of the church and the freedom to hold to a gay identity.

At this point in the study it was also therefore possible to come to a conclusion regarding a particular understanding of asceticism. Alison establishes a ‘gay holiness’ which relies not on limiting sexual activity but rather seeking right desires. Gay clergy are not given a specific guideline as to sexual desire but rather rely on a self-motivated quest for holy living which may or may not involve sexual activity. Asceticism is explored through following right desires rather than a specific set of regulations. The definition of asceticism through the writings of Alison has moved forward to incorporate some form of self-regulated choice which reflects the devotional writings of Thornton.

The problem with Alison’s writing was not the absence of guidelines for sexual practice but rather his understanding of identity. Relying heavily on gay identity did not reflect the writing of either Jordan or Althaus-Reid. It was therefore important to consider what relevance identity had to a wider definition of asceticism. As asceticism involves boundary and holiness the desire for greater sexual freedom and a wider understanding of holiness relied on a specific account of identity. It was here that the writings of Jordan became particularly helpful.

5 Mark Jordan

In contrast to Alison, Jordan concentrates particularly on sexual activity rather than sexual identity. His writings establish only a definition of a particular sexual activity, that of sodomy. In tracing a history of sodomy rather than gay identity Jordan concentrates also on desire but sexual desire in particular. He sees outlining desire rather than seeking gay identity as being part of his quest for new holiness. Jordan identifies a history of the desire for sodomy which does not rely on identity. He argues that the history of the church reflects the desire for sodomy rather than identifying particular people as being gay.

Jordan argues not from a point of identity but rather the opposite, the desire for a particular sexual act, the act of sodomy. Jordan argues that it is this that the church has identified throughout history rather than a specific group of people requiring a particular set of regulations of sexual abstinence or continence. Jordan argues that sodomy is attractive and that the church has sought to regulate the particular Act rather than identify particular people. Jordan further argues that it is not even specifically sexual acts that the church has sought to regulate but rather anything which creates pleasure. The role of asceticism had become a means by which pleasure was regulated rather than specifically sexual activity. His argument relies on the definitions of asceticism outlined by Daly which required denial rather than freedom of expression to reflect a desire for holiness.

The argument that Jordan proposes is that the act of sodomy reflects a diversity of identity not one that is specific. He sees new holiness as embracing sexual acts rather than denying
them. Asceticism moves away from denial to embrace a greater freedom of sexual expression. The act of sodomy takes on a wider definition than simply identifying gay people. Jordan outlines the use of sodomy in a very different way to embracing a gay identity. He sees sodomy as a means to pleasure, both in the act itself but also in the fulfilment of other desires. The rent boys in Rechy’s novels use the act of sodomy for financial reward which may or may not result in the act of sodomy being pleasurable. It is rather the desire for financial gain or financial security that brings pleasure.

Jordan argues that the church is against sodomy because it is against pleasure. He sees the church as denying rather than embracing pleasure. If new holiness becomes the quest for pleasure then it removes the need for identity. If sodomy is pleasurable then sodomy is desirable. It may be desirable for a particular group of people, or, equally it may not. Jordan’s writings subvert not only *Issues in Human Sexuality* but also ‘permanent relationships’ and Alison. All three concepts rely on identity. Jordan removes identity and replaces it with a desire for pleasure whatever form that pleasure takes. There is no longer a regulation of particular people but rather a willingness to embrace sexual pleasure. For Jordan it is the embracing of pleasure that leads to new holiness rather than the denial of it.

Where Jordan’s writing also moves a quest for asceticism forward is that he engages with a differing understanding of boundary. Boundary becomes something to be challenged not embraced. The freedom to engage in the act of sodomy for whatever purpose moves the boundary of sexual activity away from regulation to an embracing of greater freedom. Yet for Jordan it is the diversity of sexual expression not only sodomy that leads to freedom. He, like Daly uses the example of sado-masochism, a form of sexual activity which is beyond the definitions of conventional sexual practice and so beyond the boundaries of permanent, faithful and stable relationships. He moves the boundary of sexual activity further than embracing the act of sodomy, to embracing what he suggests have previously been labelled as perversions. The quest for new holiness embraces sexual diversity rather than seeking to regulate it.

For Jordan a quest for holiness embraces diversity rather than denying it. It is only the sexual act which is labelled not the individual who engages in sexual activity. However, where such an understanding of holiness became difficult was in relation to the original document of *Issues in Human Sexuality*. ‘Permanent relationships’ and Alison both operate within the arena of seeking to reform church understanding towards gay people. They seek to identify a means by which gay clergy can embrace a holy life reflective of Thornton’s desires for clerical holiness. Jordan challenges the definition of holiness and therefore the definition of asceticism.

Holiness for Jordan means not constraint but rather freedom and so ascetic desire is a desire for freedom rather than regulation. Holiness for Jordan is found through the desire for pleasure, whether that be sexual activity or not. He acknowledges a difference in decency between singing hymns, for example, and sexual activity, but sees a correlation between them as they both bring pleasure. He suggests that pleasure is found in many different forms and that new holiness should embrace rather than deny that pleasure.
This is not the traditional language of the church. Yet it is partly the language of Williams and Rogers, who see sexual pleasure as being the gift of God. Where the arguments diversify is how sexual pleasure in particular is found. For Williams and Rogers it is found through permanent relationship, for Jordan it is found through the pursuit of pleasure whatever form that pleasure takes. Jordan’s understanding of sexual pleasure is one of individual choice and practice. Jordan does not regulate or require a particular understanding of sexual activity, only that it is pleasurable. Whatever form the sex may take if it brings pleasure then it is desirable. Jordan further extends his understanding of pleasurable sex to include sexual encounters which bring secondary rather than primary pleasure. If sexual encounter brings wealth and stability then whether the sexual act is or is not pleasurable, is less important. It is the desire for pleasure itself that becomes most important.

The problem that Jordan’s understandings of identity and pleasure raises is that it moves the definition of asceticism away from the boundaries of Issues in Human Sexuality and permanent and faithful relationships. It also removes the gay identity of Alison. It was Jordan’s definition of boundary which embraced freedom and pleasure that was particularly removed from the directive instructions of Issues in Human Sexuality. Yet Jordan insists that his theological position embraces some form of holiness which means that his engagement with asceticism is an important one. If Jordan desires some form of holiness then his understanding of boundary and identity needs to be acknowledged. If some form of reform for Issues in Human Sexuality is proposed then Jordan’s removal of identity is to be wrestled with. Issues in Human Sexuality relies heavily on identity for its conclusions. If a reform is to be considered then it should reflect both a desire for holiness but also an acknowledgement of the diversity of identity which Jordan suggests.

Relying on a definition of asceticism which embraces holiness, Jordan’s ‘new-holiness’, removed the need for a specific sexual identity. With the abandoning of identity the argument for greater freedom became even more important. If there is to be an engagement with a freedom that does not rely on identity, the question that arose was how far should this freedom extend? If asceticism embraced freedom rather than regulation or denial, then should boundary be removed completely? In an attempt to broaden an understanding of freedom I sought to engage with the writings of Althaus-Reid.

6 Marcella Althaus-Reid

The writings of Marcella Althaus-Reid concentrate particularly on liberation of the female body rather than particularly gay identity. Having established a fluidity of identity through Jordan her understanding of the liberation of female sexual expression became particularly helpful to my argument in returning to the question of boundary. Althaus-Reid identified the boundaries of the female body as being particularly connected with the depictions of the Virgin Mary. The Virgin of Guadalupe represented for Althaus-Reid the divisions that are made in relation to the female body. The post-colonial Virgin was a depiction of the oppression of women both by the church and by the state. Her observations that the Virgin was the white woman who did not walk demonstrated the establishment of very clear boundaries as to what was regarded as acceptable behaviour for women. The Virgin was the
white, wealthy, middle-class woman who was paraded on the shoulders of men. The woman was without specific identity and purpose other than that decided by men.

Althaus-Reid challenges the identity of the white colonial woman by re-establishing a connection with the portrayal of women before the Spanish conquest of Argentina. The understanding of the pre-Christian worship of WOMAN represented not a meek woman but one of power and authority. What was also particularly identifiable about WOMAN was that she was not sexless. For Althaus-Reid the white woman who did not walk was a symbol of sexual oppression. The purity of the Virgin was something to be acknowledged and celebrated. For Althaus-Reid the celebration of purity was not to be acknowledged in this way but rather to be subverted. She suggested that the purity of the poor was one of degradation and submission to the dominance of men. The woman who represented the pure mother was a woman who lived in poverty and had no means of escaping that poverty unless it was at the hands of men.

It was the WOMAN who walked that gained a greater understanding of freedom. It was a woman who embraced sexuality rather than sought to control it that explored true freedom. Althaus-Reid’s understanding of the female body was one represented not by the middle class white woman, nor the pure mother embraced in poverty, but rather the lemon sellers of the streets. The boundary of freedom embraced a wider acceptance of the freedom of the female body to embrace sexual activity. Her argument for freedom was reflective of the writings of Jordan where sexual activity which brought financial reward was not to be disregarded. Althaus-Reid saw the lemon selling prostitutes as being as free as the middle class woman in slavery to her position. Sex for Althaus-Reid was a means by which women gained financial security. Prostitution was no different to the enslavement of the white woman. Sex became a secondary consideration if it meant a greater freedom for women. It was the abandoning of the identity of a woman oppressed that Althaus-Reid wished to acknowledge and celebrate.

Yet what was also important for Althaus-Reid is that the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe had begun to take on an identity that represented gender diversity rather than one that was exclusively female. Althaus-Reid as well as Jordan embraces an understanding of identity which abandons boundary. However, where their arguments mirror each other is that Jordan relies in his writing on the abandoning of gay identity in favour of a definition of sodomy. For Althaus-Reid her outlining of identity is one that embraces a blurring of boundaries regarding male and female. For her the Virgin of Guadalupe embraces not only the liberated female form but also the transsexual and the transvestite. The boundary of sexual expression moves forward towards a blurring of the boundaries of sexual identity. Male and female become interchangeable in the carnival representations of the Virgin. WOMAN is both male and female, she is both and yet neither. Her identity becomes interchangeable as does the identity of male and female figures in the gospel story. Mary Magdalene becomes a drag queen. Althaus-Reid’s definition of God becomes interchangeable with ‘he’ and ‘she’.

The body for Althaus-Reid becomes the means of liberation both financially but also sexually. It is here that her writings become in stark contrast to the understanding of
Williams and Rogers. For them the body is sacred and the means by which holiness is found through the giving of the body to one person in a permanent relationship. Althaus-Reid offers an understanding of the body that is in stark contrast to this. She sees the body as diverse and a means to freedom. The body is identified as WOMAN not the white repressed woman, but the woman who is so liberated she wears no underwear. The body is free both financially and sexually. For Althaus-Reid holiness is found through freedom not through constraint.

As with Jordan, Althaus-Reid also seeks to find some definition of freedom. For Jordan it is through the freedom of rent boys to remain on the streets, but for Althaus-Reid it is through an engagement with the Marquis de Sade. It is an interesting choice, but these are writings that represents the most extremes of sexual expression. Althaus-Reid acknowledges that it is a choice not without problems. The books represent in some form not freedom but exploitation and enslavement. Yet for Althaus-Reid what they do express is some desire for sexual diversity and sexual pleasure at the expense of nothing else. It is the pursuit of sexual appetite that embraces freedom rather than denies it. The Marquis de Sade represents in literature a desire for sexual liberation. The reader of such literature acknowledges the desire if not the means by which that desire is fulfilled. The reader becomes the voyeur rather than the participant. Freedom is found through the embracing of desire rather than the practical fulfilment of sexual fantasy.

So Althaus-Reid challenges the boundary of both sexual freedom and sexual identity. But it is through her understanding of boundary that her writings become particularly interesting. She argues not only that the church has sought to oppress sexual expression but rather that it has an interesting relationship with sexual activity. She uses the sacraments to illustrate her point. The most conventional forms of religious expression take on a new form of holiness in the pursuit of sexual gratification. She uses the sacrament of confession initially where the positions of the priest and the penitent represent a sexual act. The penitent kneels in front of the priest and the allusion of sexual pleasure is formed. The genitalia of the priest become a focus in the act of kneeling. Althaus-Reid does not reserve her sexual allusion to only the sacrament of confession. She sees the Eucharist as engaging with bodily fluid and bodily function. The eating of bread and the drinking of wine are functions of the body and God is found through them. The sexual act is a mixing of bodily fluid and bodily function, the communion cups become interchangeable with bondage gear and fetish boots. God is sought through sexual activity whatever form that sexual activity takes.

The boundary of freedom is challenged through a desire for a different form of holiness. Her holiness echoes Thornton in that it is explored through some form of sacramental devotion. Thornton seeks holiness through the sacraments of the Church. Althaus-Reid extends Jordan’s new holiness to include some form of sacramental observance. However the sacramental observance is through sexual expression or sexual voyeurism. The sacraments take on a new identity of holiness where bondage gear and bodily fluids become the elements of holiness not bread and wine or sacramental forgiveness. The crucifixion scene too is intertwined with the lives of Argentinian rent boys whose deaths from glue sniffing and gang warfare become representations of the crucified Christ. Yet they do not for Althaus-Reid embrace purity, they are crucified because of their gender fluid status and
poverty. The crucifixion itself becomes an image of sadomasochism. Her writings offer a stark contrast to Alison who still seeks holiness through the church and its traditions. Alison argues for a sexual identity, but also sacramental adherence. Althaus-Reid challenges both identity and the traditional sacramental observances of the church.

Her understanding of holiness and therefore asceticism is one not only of sexual freedom but also of sexual subversion. True freedom for Althaus-Reid is found through subverting rather than abandoning the sacraments and practices of the church. The Virgin of Guadalupe becomes a symbol of freedom particularly for women but also for all forms of bodily expression. The sacraments become the symbols of sexual liberation. Holiness is found through the body but, in contrast to Rogers and Williams, a body liberated from sexual constraint.

It is a reasonable conclusion to suggest that her writings bear little resemblance to *Issues in Human Sexuality*. Indeed it is arguable that her understanding regarding the subversion of the church would mean such a document was in complete opposition to the freedom she proposes. However, in offering an alternative understanding of holiness her writings do reflect a form of asceticism. Therefore it is important to consider what her understanding of holiness may mean. Her understanding of sacraments means that her definitions of priestly identity are caught up in a desire for sexual freedom. The priest represents a subversion of sacramental observance and is intertwined with sexual activity. Lisa Isherwood suggests that priestly encounter is sexually charged. Althaus-Reid offers an alternative priesthood, not one confined by sexual constraint but one liberated through alternative sacramental freedom. The role of the priest is one of liberation not of constraint. Although Althaus-Reid does not address the role of a priest directly it may be assumed that some form of liberation of the priestly body was possible. If the body of WOMAN is liberated through sexual freedom and the body of the transsexual or transvestite or glue sniffing rent boy are also liberated through sexual freedom, then how is the priestly body liberated? Is it through freedom to express a sexual desire wherever that desire may lead? Is the oppression of the WOMAN related to the oppression of the body of the ‘homophile’ priest?

7 Seeking Priestly Sexual Identity

Priestly identity becomes diverse. For Alison it is an identity to be rejoiced in. For Jordan his understanding of priests and Roman Catholic priests is not necessarily positive. They are confused with either sexual abuse or a camp identity covering up a wider desire for sodomy. For Althaus-Reid priests are part of the diversity of sexual expression through alternative sacramental observances. However, what is helpful in questioning a reform of priestly sexual activity is that neither Jordan nor Althaus-Reid suggests a removal of priestly identity all together. There is no evidence in either writing that priesthood should be abandoned. This is quite surprising, as there would be an assumption that for Althaus-Reid priests would be associated with oppressive regimes. Although she acknowledges that oppression is by the church, there is no evidence that she advocates the abandonment of priestly identity completely.

Accepting therefore that there is some form of priestly identity the question still remains as to what conclusions may be drawn in exploring a priestly sexual identity. In this context, it is
Issues in Human Sexuality that is the most conclusive. Priestly identity is clear, homosexual identity is clear and sexual activity is prohibited. The problem that I have identified throughout this study is that all three of these assumptions are challenged by definitions of asceticism. The first identity is that of the priest. The role of the priest in Issues in Human Sexuality is one that is controlled and ordered by legal implementation. In exploring ascetic practice it became clear that such an understanding of legal enforcement denied asceticism rather than embraced it. Asceticism embraced holiness rather than an enforcement of rules. Priestly identity relies on holy living which is self-regulated through an individual pursuit of asceticism not by following a specific set of enforced guidelines.

The second identity in Issues in Human Sexuality is that there is a particular labelling of the ‘homophile’ or the homosexual priest. Particular identity is supported by arguments for permanent and faithful relationships which also uses homosexual identity to advocate a pursuit for holiness through monogamous sex. Permanent relationships blur the boundary, not between priests and laity, but rather that both should be controlled by the ascetic discipline of monogamy. Holiness is found through monogamous sex for both clergy and laity. Such sexual activity is acceptable for everyone irrespective of sexual identity.

Alison also supported the identity of both priests and of gay people but his desire for holiness and therefore asceticism became part of this identity rather than one removed from it. His theology relied on identification with the church and with an understanding of gay victim status. For him both gay and priestly identities are important. What was interesting was that Alison was not particularly helpful in moving forward a discussion regarding priestly sexual practice other than a brief comment that he had held conversations with people in bath houses. However, his writings challenged Issues in Human Sexuality in a more indirect way. What Alison challenged was not the question of identity but rather that the identity of a gay priest should be celebrated rather than legislated against. Alison desired priestly holiness and therefore through desiring holiness, becomes ascetic. Alison also desired identity as a gay man and a gay priest to share in the victim status of Christ.

Yet it is the third assumption, the challenging of any concept of identity that contrasted most starkly with the labelling used in Issues in Human Sexuality. In removing identity the celebration of sexual activity became more diverse. What was more significant was that both Jordan and Althaus-Reid explored holiness. This meant that their understanding of sexual freedom in contrast to Issues in Human Sexuality desired an ascetic quest for holiness. Both Althaus-Reid and Jordan desired ‘new holiness’ but sought such holiness through sexual expression rather than the denial of it.

Issues in Human Sexuality required sexual abstinence which is challenged by all other writing I have identified in this study. If Issues in Human Sexuality is to engage with holiness rather than legal implementation then some reform of the Anglican Church’s guidelines for the sexual activity of gay priests is needed. What I have sought to argue through an exploration of permanent relationships and the writings of Alison, Jordan and Althaus-Reid is not what descriptive form this reform should take. What is important is the reason for such reforms. If the reforms are merely to realign a particular sexual activity then there is a danger that such realignment will again be at the expense of a theology surrounding asceticism. Asceticism
relies on a pursuit of holiness rather than legal implementation. There could easily be a document which expected, in legal language only, a requirement for identified homosexual clergy to be in monogamous relationships. The exploration of definitions of asceticism has meant an exploration not into the realignment of sexual practice but rather an identification of sexual diversity. What has become apparent is that sexual diversity is not something explored within a theological vacuum. It is an easy assumption that sexual freedom is in contrast to the teachings of the church but the writing of Jordan and Althaus-Reid dispute this.

Their understanding of sexual behaviour is at the most extreme end of sexual liberation. Althaus-Reid in particular rejoices in the extremes of sexual expression. Her engagement with the Marquis de Sade means that she presents sexual practice almost without boundary at all. Yet despite this she still embraces a desire for holiness. If there is a desire for holiness then a definition of ascetic practice is present.

So what then does such a definition of asceticism mean for *Issues in Human Sexuality*? It is clear that a reliance on regulation only is insufficient. However, it is difficult to perceive how such a document could be written at all. It may embrace some form of permanent relationship for clergy which extends the boundaries to include identified homosexual clergy. Yet such a document would still rely on identity and boundary even if there was an acknowledgement of some freedom of choice to embrace monogamy or celibacy.

If one included only the writing of Alison in rewriting *Issues in Human Sexuality* then there would be no direct description of sexual acts, but an ambiguity of sexual encounter based on his self-confessed attendance of gay clubs and bath houses. There would be a positive acknowledgement of gay priests and a rejoicing in that. There would be little if any foundation for the inclusion of a legalised boundary for sexual encounter. Moving from Alison to Althaus-Reid and Jordan the boundaries move to include a pursuit of pleasure and freedom but this would be very difficult to outline in the language and style of *Issues in Human Sexuality*. Arguably if there was an attempt to produce a revised *Issues in Human Sexuality* document the writing would require both identification of particular sexual behaviour and a need to identify specific people in relation to their sexual encounters. Using Jordan’s wording, there would need to be a specific description of particular sexual acts such as ‘sodomy’ and an identification of particular people as ‘sodomites’. It would involve a return to identifying individual people by sexual acts. Reliance on identity and a specific outlining of sexual boundaries mean that whatever the new document contained it would not be in the spirit of the theology outlined by Jordan or Althaus-Reid, nor reflect a desire for individual pursuit of holiness.

The conclusion I have therefore reached is not that *Issues in Human Sexuality* should be reformed but rather whether it is helpful at all. If priestly sexual conduct is based not on legislation but rather on a desire for asceticism then the need for such a document ceases to exist. Whatever forms a revised document would take; it would still rely on legislation and prescription. This would be an injustice not only to Althaus-Reid and Jordan but also to permanent relationships. The understanding of permanent relationships in the language of

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344 One hopes it may have dispensed with the term ‘homophile’!
Williams and Rogers express a desire for holiness but also for pleasure found in monogamy. It may be possible to legislate for monogamous relationships but it would not reflect the spirit of pleasure and desire which permanent relationships expound.

Such a document would certainly not be in the spirit of freedom celebrated by Althaus-Reid and Jordan. The new document would be faced with legislating against freedom and re-imposing the boundaries both Jordan and Althaus-Reid argue against. The presence of some definition of asceticism is more important than a legislative document. Asceticism desires a quest for holiness which is a key definition of priestly ministry. Althaus-Reid and Jordan argue for a presence of holiness and therefore, their definitions of freedom should be taken seriously. It may be that the freedom from identity falls far beyond what is currently accepted within the narrow confines of conventional church experience, but is this reason enough to legislate against their conclusions? The theological understanding of Jordan and Althaus-Reid expound a freedom from identity that is radical but also embracing of holiness.

If the Church of England is concerned with legislating to define what holiness and therefore what asceticism is in only prescriptive terms, it denies the spirit of both holiness and asceticism. Both terms as I have argued rely on a fluidity of interpretation which is experienced by the individual rather than legislated against them. In terms of sexual expression it is too easy to legislate for good and bad sexual activity. Holy sexual activity or unholy sexual activity is far more difficult to assess. The implementation of some form of boundary is necessary to determine ‘holy sex’ if the church persists in defining certain forms of sex as being ‘good’ and others as being ‘bad’. What the theology of Althaus-Reid and Jordan offer is a removal from such definitions of good and bad and an embracing of liberation.

It may be that the Church of England is not ready for such a radical approach to sexual liberation, but this is not reason enough to abandon liberation altogether. Althaus-Reid and Jordan seek to explore a sanctity that is present in liberation. It is somewhat poignant that the difference between the charge at ordination for priests in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and that in Common Worship is the removal of the mention of ‘sanctify’. It is a return to the quest for holiness rather than a desire for legislation which the Church of England should engage with. For such an exploration definitions of asceticism are vital. As holiness is at the very core of priestly ministry it is an ascetic quest for holiness which embraces freedom not legislation that should be central to any future exploration into priestly sexual conduct. The time has come to explore the very nature of identity and holiness and to begin to unite them both in a desire for freedom. If the church is serious about liberation, it must be serious about sexual liberation too. The time for legislation and documentation has ended. The time for liberation has begun.

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