## On Chapter 3 in Sedgwick's The Christian Moral Life

## **Query from mentor K. Roberts:**

My one year 4 participant contacted me to complain about the Sedgwick book. This is a woman who understood why we read the troubled believer book. She can see how it all fits together, the golden thread God weaves through all. When she complains, I listen.

Chapter 3 really bothered her. She's a lesbian in a committed relationship and when she read Incarnate Love she felt left out because it says Incarnate love is a man and a woman married to each other raising children. Then I read it, as a heterosexual who never married, I felt left out. Anyway, we discussed the timeframe during which the book was written (copyrights of 1999 and 2008) and how society and the Episcopal church have changed since then.

The chapter is exclusive except for part of one paragraph that begins on the bottom of page 74. The chapter is out of step with the current position of the Episcopal Church. I'm referring to the actions of the most recent General Convention. I'm wondering if Sedgwick has published an article that updates chapter 3 or if an essay could be written and included in [the] RRG.

## Response from author Timothy Sedgwick:

I am sorry to hear that our EFM reader felt excluded. That is the furthest thing from my hope for readers of this book. The rhetorical strategy of the chapter was to see the Hebraic-Christian tradition as a history which both transforms human sexuality from its ground in the body of desire as participation in the cosmic powers of creation to the forming of sexual desire in the context of love as the knowledge and care of another. The larger framework of the chapter is the nature of love as fulfillment in the recognition and embrace of the other which is always a conversion from the idolatries of our lives. Idolatries are those places where we have narrowed our attachments to particular interests that we believe will preserve and sustain the self instead of understanding that it is in giving up the self to the other that stands at the heart of love and the fulfillment of our hearts desire. (This is the larger vision of the Christian life as a way of life, of dying and rising, as kenosis, to reference Philippians, that I am seeking to convey in the development of the book, beginning with the account of Anglicanism.) The section on idolatry is intended to emphasize this point with particular reference to the problem of idolatry in moralism, in seeing the Christian faith and life as a matter of principles and rules received. That section concludes with idolatry of a narrow focus on procreation and the importance of pleasure. This then makes possible a presentation of the Christian tradition in terms of marriage and its transformation from a narrow focus on procreation and children to sexual relationships as expressions of love in which eros is realized and transformed by a covenant of commitment to form a life together. The concluding paragraphs—which is to say, the conclusion of the presentation that has sought to make sense of the history of sexuality and marriage in the Christian

tradition—draws together what is central to these relationships as matters of incarnate love, identifies the problem of idolatry as a problem of patriarchy, on the one hand, and the problem of self-fulfillment, on the other hand. This concludes then with the claim that many different kinds of households are part of the ongoing development of ways of living out Christian faith. Gay and lesbian couples forming households of faith are underscored and the final paragraph concludes with the single person in forming lives as matters of incarnate love.

I recall in writing this whether it would be better to begin with the contemporary witnesses of faithfulness, especially that of gay and lesbian persons. My strategic decision was to develop the argument in terms of the development of the tradition, making clear the transformative power of the tradition and its captivity to patriarchy. In this way I wanted to "conserve" the tradition by understanding it as the ground for its ongoing transformation. There is a kenotic theology here about which various conservatives and liberal would disagree, though I think it is the conservatives who have the most fundamental grounds for disagreement. That is one of the reasons, though, I began with the tradition. That said, the order of presentation may mean that some readers feel they cannot find themselves in the text or find an absence which makes them feel minimalized. Alas, but I can understand that.

I hope this is helpful and indicates why it is so difficult to develop an account for a broad audience. I imagine that this chapter will evoke responses that will find it too liberal or insufficiently supportive. I hope it is able, though, to serve the broad audience as I think it opens the reflections and discussions that are needed about human sexuality, desire, and Christian faith as a way of life. (I have gratefully received a couple of such responses from EFM mentors about the response to the materials, which I find encouraging.) Perhaps the materials you provide for the EFM sessions are what is most important in this regard.

As I said before, I am most thankful for EFM and what it does and for your leadership in its ongoing development. Supporting your readers and navigating texts, balance, and all are great needs and skills which, as now a former academic dean, I well appreciate. I think of the and analogous secular roles and always think of the foreign service.

Warm spring to you and Lenten blessings, Tim

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