

Article

Marriage and Sexuality in the Light of the Eschaton: A Dialogue between Orthodox and Reformed Theology

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Abstract: This article proposes a re-examination of the institution of marriage in light of the eschatology of the Eastern Church and the theological discourse on the topic developed by three thinkers of the Reformed tradition, namely Kierkegaard, Barth, and Bonhoeffer. In doing so, I take into consideration the relationship of marriage with: (1) sacramental theology; (2) philosophical anthropology; (3) politics; and (4) the question of human sexuality. Such a re-examination of marriage has been made highly urgent and relevant today in the wake of the recent debate on same-sex marriage. This fourfold examination illustrates marriage's ambivalent position within the Christian tradition insofar as, if taken as normative, marriage diminishes the subversive claim of Christian eschatology. Furthermore, Christian theology refuses marriage an absolute merit, by demanding that it is always qualified in relation to the Church's eschatological vision.

Keywords: marriage; marriage and eschatology; theology of sexuality; Orthodox theology; Søren Kierkegaard; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; John Zizioulas

1. Introduction

In a special issue of the *Anglican Theological Review* dedicated on the topic of "Marriage and the Church" Scott MacDougall advises us to consider the thorny issue of "same-sex marriage" and of marriage in general in the light of the eschaton:

Rocketing like a bullet train from God's promised future into our present, the (always partial) healing of our deep brokenness, our sin, by the irresistible reconciling power of God's grace smashes dead certainties and moralistic conventions, subversively disclosing and bringing into being the radical, thoroughgoing relational communion of the new creation, now, in history, in the body, even if only by anticipation and never fully [1].

MacDougall's understanding of eschatology's "subversive" element is based on my earlier treatment of eschatology in the theology of the Eastern Church [2]. In this article I would like to follow up MacDougall's insight by probing further into the relationship between marriage and eschatology. To this aid, I utilize the theology of John Zizioulas (Senior Metropolitan of Pergamon), arguably one of the most influential voices of Orthodox theology in our times. In my article I bring Zizioulas's articulation of the eschatology of the Eastern Church in dialogue with Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In doing so, I hope that the discussion that follows will make a modest but original contribution to the dialogue between the Eastern and Reformed theological traditions.

More specifically, I would like to ask whether the sacramental status of marriage was always held as unproblematic as the frequent appeals to its sanctity today seem to suggest and if not, why not? This question cannot be considered apart from an examination into the theological criteria of

sacramentality. My aim is not to discredit marriage as such, but rather to suggest that it is rather dangerous for our theological discourse to: (a) elevate marriage to an absolute good in itself; and (b) reduce the question of human sexuality, or better yet, the ecstatic character of eros only to marital relations. If considered “in itself” marriage, instead of being a sign pointing to a higher reality, becomes secularized and thus an obstacle to God’s kingdom; in the same way that the penultimate *in itself*, that is, without the constant reference to the eschatological ultimacy for whose sake it exists, becomes sin. As a result, I raise a series of difficulties that marriage poses to a theology that wishes to remain faithful to the Church’s vision of eschatology.

In recent years, the institution of marriage has received increased attention from political, sociological, and theological commentators. In particular, the question of same-sex marriage, that is, the question whether marriage should be defined exclusively as a bond between a man and a woman or should it be extended so as to include same-sex relationships, has become a hotly debated and dividing issue. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Church has become involved in this debate as people feel that matrimony between spouses of the same sex would threaten the so-called “sanctity of marriage”, the institution of the family and, by extension, society itself.

The above sentiment harbors a certain fallacy, which I hope to make apparent. How is it that desiring a certain good—if the marital life is to be considered such a good—requesting that this good be granted to you as well, asking for the “right” to participate in it, might constitute a threat *to it*? [3] Allow me to use an example: when women, not so long ago, demanded that they also be allowed to vote—was this request seen as a threat against voting? Did women, by asking for political rights, demonstrate that voting was good or bad? Did they despise the political institution or did they further validate and legitimize it in seeking to participate in it? Similarly, when two persons of the same gender ask to be afforded the civil right of marrying each other and of forming families, does this request undermine marriage as an institution or does it rather validate it and legitimize it even more? To me, anyone’s request to participate to the institution of matrimony constitutes an endorsement of marital life, a desire to become incorporated in the traditional configurations of society, an effort to move toward homogeneity in all forms of public and private life. The old adage that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery applies here too.

It is precisely at this point that I take exception to the question of same-sex marriage. Whether states and societies decide to recognize and institutionalize same-sex marriages is of no concern to me, nor, I believe, should it be the Church’s concern, insofar, at least, as these are decisions that affect the relationships between a state and its citizens, *as long as the Christian Church retains the right to articulate her own discourse drawn from her theological resources.* It might be useful to examine in outline the theological status of marriage, at the end of which, we may be surprised that Christian theology on this issue has to offer a view far more radical and subversive of the secular mentality than the adherents of such mentality might have expected.

2. “The Sacrament of Sin” [4]

In beginning our theological examination of marriage, we should immediately note the mistake of considering marriage as a Christian institution. It should be clear that marriage is not the exclusive property of the Church as it predates Christianity and exists outside the Church. However, this observation is not enough, as the Church assumed common practices of the everyday life and transformed them by ascribing to them a new meaning. Judged only by their external forms, what else is the Eucharist but a common meal? Furthermore, what more is baptism than the washing of one’s body? The difference between the sacred and the profane—to the extent that such a difference can be maintained at all—is here imperceptible, yet, in the eyes of the Church, it makes all the difference. Could we not make the same argument for marriage, then? That is, is it not also the case that the Church takes the profane union between husband and wife, as it exists in the world before and beyond the Church, and, by incorporating it within ecclesial life, makes it sacred? In other words, could we not speak of marriage as a sacrament?

Orthodox and Catholic theologians do so—and quite unambiguously, historical considerations notwithstanding. By this I mean that the question regarding the number and the identity of sacraments should not be overlooked: the fixed number of seven sacraments is a relatively recent invention to which marriage was the last to be added¹. It is worth noting that in one of the earliest attempts to a liturgical theology, that of Dionysius's (the pseudo-Areopagite) *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, the author, whose influence in the formation of both Western and Eastern theology can hardly be overestimated, recognizes only five sacraments or “mysteries”: the mystery of illumination (baptism); the mystery of assembly and communion (Eucharist); the mystery of myrrh (chrism); the mystery of priestly perfection (ordination); and the mystery of monastic perfection (tonsure). Marriage is conspicuously absent from this catalogue [6].

From a liturgical perspective, there is today the practice in the Orthodox Church of a “sacrament of matrimony” or “crowning” and a corresponding service can be found in the liturgical books. However, there is also a funeral service, even though funerals are not considered as sacraments. The existence of a liturgical service alone is not sufficient reason for designating something as sacrament, especially since the Church has composed prayers for blessing every aspect of human life (e.g., births, deaths, and so on), every occasion of various human endeavors (such as education, work, travel, etc.), and even material things associated with them (houses, gardens, ships, etc.). What is, then, a sacrament?

This is a difficult question, as it presupposes the distinction between the categories of the sacred and the secular—a distinction that Christianity has challenged since its beginnings. Indeed, this distinction is the nodal point around which every religion structures itself, according to the lines of investigation followed by Durkheim and Eliade [7,8]². Yet, if the Church challenges the distinction that defines religion as such, then the Church could not be simply another religion. It is interesting to observe how the question “what is a sacrament?” takes us directly into the question that seeks to define the essence of the Church. One could not answer the first question without first confronting the second. What is, then, the Church?

This is a question that the Church herself has resisted answering and with good reason. To ask: “what is the Church?” is to seek the Church as some-*thing*, an objectified reality, which can be defined only as ob-ject; that is as something lying over there, standing over against the questioner who, by virtue of the very question, sets himself or herself outside of the Church. Indeed, one can raise the question: “what is the Church?” *only outside the Church*. Yet, the answer to this question is the Church itself and if the one who asks the question can do so only outside the Church, then that means that the question cannot be answered as long as it is asked.

Perhaps we should return to our first question: what is, then, a sacrament? It was this question that led us to the question about the Church and now we can see why. For a sacrament is what the Church makes and what makes the Church. A sacrament is the effect of the Church that, in turn, “effects” the Church. In the famous words of Henri de Lubac “the Eucharist *makes* the Church” [10]. A sacrament is the event *of* the Church—where the genitive should be taken at once as objective and subjective. Here is not the place to embark upon the argument that only one sacrament merits in this sense to be called a sacrament, namely the Eucharist. All other so-called sacraments are intrinsically linked with it: baptism and confirmation as the rites of initiation that enable the participation in the Eucharist; the holy orders for providing the celebrants whose chief duty is the celebration of the

¹ Metropolitan John of Pegamon (Zizioulas) believes that the fragmentation of the Church's sacraments into seven distinct “sacraments” came at a time that the Orthodox Church developed several “confessions” (such as those of Peter Mogila, Dositheus of Jerusalem, Cyril Lucaris, etc.)—that is, from the sixteenth century onwards. So he writes: “[a]t this time the East, struggling to relate somehow to the on-going debate between Roman Catholics and Protestants, produced its own ‘Confessions’, which assumed without any criticism the problematic inherited in the West from medieval Scholasticism, and tried to reply to the Protestant views by using Roman Catholic arguments and vice versa. Thus, in the very centre of Orthodox theology and in spite of the continuous centrality of the Eucharist in Orthodox Church *life*, an ecclesiology developed in the academic level which regarded the Eucharist as *one* sacrament among many (usually seven)...” in [5].

² For a discussion of the various attempts to define religion, see [9].

Eucharist; and, finally, confession, as a way of reconciling the fallen Christian with the sacrament of the Eucharist, participation in which confirms his or her full communion with the Church. Thus, even through the fragmentation of the sacrament into a plurality of sacraments, understood as independent, since they have now become separated from the celebration of the Eucharist (with the notable exception of the holy orders) we still can discern their origin and unity in the Eucharist³. Having said that much, we can now pose again the question: is marriage a sacrament? This question can now be better articulate thus: “what is marriage’s relation to the Eucharist?”

To answer this question, we need to take into consideration that the event of the Church is nothing more than a continuous unfolding of the eschaton into history, the proleptic manifestation of the ultimate in the penultimate, of the “not yet” in the “already” (cf. John 4:23, 5:25). It is this paradox, the logic of the eschatological reversal, which allows death, symbolized by the immersion of baptism, to be transformed into new life and the digestion of the Eucharistic bread into the incorporation of the partaker into the body of Christ⁴. In other words, the sanctifying grace of the Church is precisely constituted in the overcoming of (as we shall see, natural and biological) limitations of the world: thus worldly practices—eating, dying—are transformed to their opposites while maintaining their external structures. However, if we were to apply this same principle on marriage then we are immediately confronted with marriage’s *dissolution*—for the reversal of the bond that has united the two spouses is either the undoing of that bond in itself or the overcoming of its particularity by inscribing it on a higher plane, perhaps that of the community. Both amount to the same thing. Marriage cannot withstand the coming of the eschaton.

It is worth recalling here that in the eschatological parable of the great banquet, marriage is one of those worldly affairs that prevent one of the guests to accept the invitation. The parable is given in response to the comment “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God”—a remark that address the unmistakably Eucharistic character of the banquet:

A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many; and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, “Come; for all is now ready.” But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, “I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it; I pray you, have me excused.” And another said, “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them; I pray you, have me excused.” And another said, “I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.” (Luke 14: 16–20).

Interestingly enough, it is only the third guest, the one who declines the invitation on account of his marriage, who does not ask to be excused. I leave it to others to draw whatever conclusions they may from this scriptural nuance. For us, it is enough to note that marriage, together with the other economic activities of buying a field or purchasing five yoke of oxen (and is marriage not really an economic arrangement after all? [14]), precludes the participation in the eschatological feast.

To this scriptural testimony, we should also add Christ’s words: “At the resurrection [‘when the dead rise’ Mark 12:25] people will neither marry nor be given in marriage” (Mt. 22:30). What these words may mean can be the subject of an entire study. For our purposes here, they can be taken to mean *at the very least* that in the kingdom to come (the same kingdom that the Church enacts through the celebration of the Eucharist) the institution of marriage, like many other structures of this world, will be rendered, at least in their present form, inoperative and obsolete. This could be perhaps because the marital bond between two spouses is a response to our fragmentary existence as fallen creatures

³ Instrumental here are the studies on Eucharistic theology by Metropolitan John of Pergamon. See, for example, [11] as well as [12]. In this last work, and in particular in the chapter entitled “The Identity of the Church”, Zizioulas observes that the first definition of the Church was attempted rather late, in the fourteenth-century, in the writings of St. Nicholas Cabasilas who gave the following aphorism: “The Church is signified in the mysteries (ἐκκλησία σημαίνεται ἐν τοῖς μυστηρίοις)”; Zizioulas makes clear that “mysteries” here refers to the sacrament of the Eucharist ([11], p. 26).

⁴ The famous words from Augustine’s *Confessions* come to mind here: “I am the food of the mature”, Christ says to Augustine, “grow then, and you will eat me. You will not change me into yourself like bodily food: You will be changed into me.” [13].

and therefore in the eschatological restoration of our nature the need for marriage would no longer be there. It could also be because marriage is the promise and the sign of an intimacy that, eschatologically, each one of us is to enjoy with every other person and, therefore, once the fullness of that communion is reached there would be no need any longer of the partiality of the sign (something of this kind might indeed be surmised by the rest of Christ's saying that "they will be like the angels in heaven"). Seen under this eschatological light marriage is a *shadow* of a reality still-to-come, or, in the best case, a ladder by means of which we may be led to this reality—in either case, however, and seen by this very end which marriage serves as the means, the value of marriage is only *relative* [15]. It would, then, seem that the goodness of marriage (to recall the title of one of Augustine's works, *De Bono Coniugali*) does not derive from itself but from that to which it refers, namely, the eschaton. Given, though, that "in the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage" marriage derives its goodness from its own dissolution and, strangely, it succeeds only to the extent that it fails.

3. Marriage and the Self

Oftentimes, however, marriage fails to fail and thus becomes what the world calls "a successful marriage"—yet, such "success" according to the world can mean nothing else than the Church's failure ([16], p. 178). I rely here on Kierkegaard's insights, as he was the first to recognize in the absolutization of such institutions as the nation and marriage, especially at the Church's hands, Christianity's degeneration into her greatest enemy, namely Christendom. The third volume of Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers* lists over fifty entries on the topic of marriage, all of them berating one or another aspect of marital life [17]. Through them one notices the emergence and the development of a certain theme that connects marriage with a faith that is inherited *naturally* and *biologically* by means of one's birth into a family and a nation. Nothing could be more unnatural in Kierkegaard's eyes than a "natural faith" which has foregone the anguish of decision. Christianity (or rather Christendom) is thus spreading by procreation instead of conversion and one professes to be a Christian in the very same way one is a Dane ([18], pp. 50–65). Kierkegaard's critique of established Christianity and a national Church goes deeper than the obvious objections that have been raised ever since. What he laments is not so much the indifference of the Christians of his times and his native land, it is not so much how "cheaply" one acquires Christ's grace, to anticipate here Bonhoeffer's criticism of which we shall have the opportunity to say a few more words below; rather, what Kierkegaard saw as the greatest danger in the passage from Christianity to Christendom was the loss of the human person, of one's own particularity, which had to be given up as an offering at the altar of collectivism, be it that of the nation or of the national Church. Family, and thus marriage, had an intrinsic role to play in this crime.

Christianity's original zeal, the "fire" with which Christ had promised to set the world ablaze when he said "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" (Luke, 12:49)—that fire had been extinguished. Even worse, it was extinguished by the hands of Christians. Kierkegaard wept over the ashes of a faith growing cold. In a passionate entry from his *Journals and Papers* that is worth quoting at some length, Kierkegaard explains:

So far removed, so distant is Christendom (Protestantism, especially in Denmark) from the Christianity of the New Testament that I continually must emphasize that I do not call myself a Christian and that my task is to articulate the issue, the first condition for any possibility of Christianity again.

It was incendiarism (this is how Christ himself describes his commission), it was incendiarism, setting fire to men by evocatively introducing a passion which made them heterogeneous with what is naturally understood to be man, heterogeneous with the whole of existence, an incendiarism which must necessarily cause discord between father and son, daughter and mother—in short, in the most intimate, the most precious relationships, an incendiarism with the intention of tearing apart "the generation" in order to reach "the

individual”, which is what God wants and therefore the passion introduced was: to love God, and its negative expression: to hate oneself.

It was incendiarism. But it is not always water that is used to put out a fire—however, to keep the metaphor, I could certainly say that Christendom is the water that has put out the fire. But, as mentioned, one does not always use water; sometimes one uses, for example, featherbeds, blankets, mattresses, and the like to smother a fire. And so I say that if Christendom is the bulk that has smothered that fire once lighted, it now has such an enormous layer of the numerical beneath it that Christianity may serenely and safely be made into just the opposite of what it is in the New Testament.

Whoever you are, if it is your purpose, your idea to do your bit to help smother the fire still more, then get busily involved in this massive popularization, doing it under the name of spreading Christianity, and you will do as much harm as you can possibly do. But if you want Christianity again, fire again, then do all you can to get rid of the featherbeds, blankets, and mattresses, the grossly bulky stuff—and there will be fire.

The orders for busyness of that kind are: Away, away with abstractions: the state church, the folk church, Christian countries—for any effort of that kind is treason against the fire; they are the featherbeds and blankets that help smother the fire still more. But efforts of the kind that aims at dispersing, aims at “the individual”, are the solution ([19], XI 2 A 206 n.d., pp. 549–50).

This fire, Kierkegaard argues, has been extinguished by “featherbeds, blankets, mattresses, and the like.” I take this enigmatic expression—in conjunction with the references to Christendom’s “enormous layer of the numerical”, the “massive popularization” by means of which Christendom spreads, and the familial relations between “father and son, daughter and mother” which Christ’s incendiarism upsets—as a specific reference to the pleasures of conjugal life. Indeed, it is telling that from the whole array of things that relate to the humanity’s attachment to this world, any of which might have served as well Kierkegaard’s metaphor, he chose a series of items closely associated with the bedroom not only as the place of marriage’s consummation, but also as a symbol of a life made, thanks to marriage, *comfortable*.

In our reading of this passage we should not fail to take into account that Kierkegaard places over against the impersonal collectivism of Christendom (“the state church, the folk church, Christian countries” which, significantly, he calls “abstractions”) one of his favorite terms, namely, the “individual”. The “individual” does not signify what might erroneously pass as individualism, but rather the uniqueness and particularity of the person. Thus, the “individual” is contrasted with “the generation” (and in other entries with “the race”) out of which the “individual” is extricated by *heterogeneity*. It is important to notice here that the individual is heterogeneous “with what is naturally understood to be man”—that is, with man’s nature, with what is natural. Even though, as it is often assumed, marriage presupposes sexual difference (the difference between the two genders), yet, on another plane, marriage is a process of homogeneity, exclusive and even polemical of any form of otherness [20].

Here, at last, we begin to see what is considered problematic with marriage and this is nothing else than its character as a thoroughly natural process, especially since, through procreation, it perpetuates nature. If Kierkegaard’s position that Christ came *not* to save the race (or even the human *nature* as such) but he came to save us precisely “out of the race” ([21], XI 2 A 164 n.d., p 152)⁵. If we were to say that Christ, by his incarnation, suffering, and resurrection, saved the human *nature*, then what we say

⁵ So also Augustine who, speaking of familial relations, writes: “No one can perfectly love that *to* which we are called unless he hate that *from* which we are called” [22].

in fact is that no-one was saved for the human nature is nothing more than a mere abstraction that would make little sense apart from its individuation in particular human persons. God is not a God of ideas or philosophical concepts, as Pascal reminds us, but he is the “God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob” (Ex. 3:6; Mt. 22:32), that is, a God of persons in communion with each other and capable of relations. Thus, the impersonal aspects of marriage cannot be given, from a Christian viewpoint at least, any legitimization.

At this point, one may ask what we mean by the “impersonal aspects of marriage.” Is not the bond between husband and wife an exemplary form of personal relationship? Indeed, it would seem so, if it did not involve a profound expression, although rarely expressed, of *egotism* (an egoism à deux). Whether out of romantic love or any other motivation, the partnership between a man and a woman is stamped by the possibility of procreation—regardless of whether the couple will have children or not. The *possibility* of procreation alone irredeemably affects the bond between a man and a woman, insofar as the child constitutes another end, over and beyond the beloved, turning the beloved into an instrument for the achievement of each other’s most egotistical desire: biological continuity of oneself. Thus, love becomes economical, productive, and, indeed, reproductive. The possibility of procreation demotes the personal relationship to an automatism of the natural; that is, it constitutes the triumph of impersonal being (the species over the person).

Since Plato’s *Symposium*, desire is defined as the desire to be and to be forever (206a9). The secret of desire is the selfish coveting of immortality [23]. However, since personal immortality cannot be achieved in the strict sense, it becomes sublimated in procreation. If I cannot live on forever, at least I can live, as it were, through my child. However, who is exactly this “I” that enjoys this immortality by proxy? It is not the “personal I” but rather an impersonal I (and therefore no “I” at all, for an “impersonal I” is a contradiction in terms) of my species, my genes, my nature⁶.

The Church Fathers of the Eastern Church were well aware of the problematic connection of marriage with the fallen nature—and here one should be careful to avoid the Gnostic conflation of nature as created by God with the post-lapsarian natural state. We read, for example, in Maximus the Confessor that “the more nature rushed to assure its own continuity through procreation, the more it became entangled in the law of sin, because the first transgression remained alive in nature’s passionate aspect” [25]. Similar testimonies abound throughout the Patristic literature. However, no other statement summarizes this consensus better than John Chrysostom’s pithy comment: “Do you see whence marriage had its origin, whence it was regarded to be necessary? From the moment of disobedience, from the curse, from death. For where is death, there is also marriage” [26]. It is advisable, therefore, that the Church’s discourse on desire and human sexuality become disengaged from the pagan exaltation of fertility and procreation.

It is precisely over against such “pagan” understanding of a desire in the service of procreation that Kierkegaard contrasted human sexuality as intimated, in his mind at least, by the Gospel’s radical message:

⁶ Otherwise put, this is a desire that desires desire, that is, its own (eternal?) propagation. I have in mind Levinas’s treatment of eros from the last pages of his *Totality and Infinity*: “But the Other is not a term: He does not stop the movement of Desire. The other that Desire desires is again Desire; transcendence transcends toward him who transcends—this is true adventure of paternity, of the transubstantiation which permits going beyond the simple renewal of the possible in the inevitable senescence of the subject. Transcendence, the for the Other, the goodness correlative of the face, founds a more profound relation: The goodness of goodness. Fecundity engendering fecundity accomplishes goodness: Above and beyond the sacrifice that imposes a gift, the gift of the power of giving, the conception of the child. Here the Desire which in the first pages of this work we contrasted with need, the Desire that is not a lack, the Desire that is the independence of the separated being and its transcendence, is accomplished—not in being satisfied and in thus acknowledging that it was a need, but in transcending itself, in engendering Desire”. That such a conception of desire instrumentalizes the Other, turning the Other into a mere stepping stone, effecting a metaphysical violence, seems not to bother Levinas. Thus, we are told that the beloved “presents a face that goes *beyond the face*” ([24], p. 260); that the feminine constitutes an inversion and disfiguration of the face ([24], p. 262); that “voluptuousness aims *not* at the Other but at his voluptuousness; it is voluptuousness of voluptuousness, love of the love of the other” ([24], p. 266); that “the beloved...has quit her status as a person,” ([24], p. 263); and that “one plays with the Other as with a young animal” ([24], p. 263).

As the nerve ends lie under the nails, so human egotism is concentrated in the sexual relationship, the propagation of the species, the giving of life. According to Christian teaching, God wants only one thing of us human beings—he wants to be loved. But in order that a human being may love God he must give up all egotism, first and foremost the intensified egotism: propagation of the species, the giving of life. That sexuality is the center of human egotism God knows too well, of course, and therefore this became the locus of attention. A person does not have to look very hard to be convinced that here human egotism is total. So God demanded the renunciation of this egotism—then God pointed to immortality. As I have often discussed in these journals, propagation of the species was a substitute for immortality (which both Plato and Aristotle explicitly state) both in paganism and in Judaism⁷.

Sexuality is the culmination of human egotism. Therefore, in a purely human sense, not only the woman but the man also feels life to be lost, a failure, unless he is married. Only the married are genuine citizens in this world, the single person is an alien (which is precisely what Christianity wants the Christian to be—and what God wants the Christian to be, in order to love him). Therefore the Jews (who knew all about the propagation of the species) regarded sterility as a disgrace for a woman. Therefore no mishap touches a person so painfully as one which affects propagation of the species; everything else (being blind, crippled, deaf, etc.) does not violate him, does not touch the tender point of his egotism ([27], XI 2 A 154 n.d., pp. 141–42).

One could indeed speak here of a self-idolization in effect even within marriage which is what allows Karl Barth, in line with Kierkegaard's critique, to read a key passage from Romans (1:23, usually read as a condemnation of homosexuality) under a new light:

Wherever the qualitative distinction between men and the final Omega is overlooked or misunderstood, that fetishism is bound to appear in which God is experienced in "birds and fourfooted things", and finally, or rather primarily, in the "likeness of corruptible man"—Personality, the Child, the Woman—and in the half-spiritual, half-material creations, exhibitions, and representations of His creative ability—Family, Nation, State, Church, Fatherland. And so the "No-God" is set up, idols are created, and God, who dwells beyond all this and that, is "given up" [28].

4. Marriage and the Political

The extension of the status pertaining to familial relations to everyone within the ecclesial community by the early Church (see, for examples, the appellations of "father" or "brother and sisters") must have been a radical move which could be taken as undermining the institution of family as this existed in the ancient world. It was for sure a policy that moved beyond the natural to the symbolic. For if everyone within the Christian community is my brother and my sister, then my biological siblings cannot any more lay an exclusive claim to these relations. What is at play here is the difference between the sacred (a natural quality) and the holy (a symbolic quality) [29]. On this score too, marriage belongs decidedly to religion, especially to natural religions, but its rooting in the natural makes it difficult to attain a self-overcoming that would have place it on the side of

⁷ It is disturbing how often Kierkegaard makes the accusation that Christianity's uncritical endorsement of marriage constitutes a concession to Judaism. On the other hand, it is remarkable that the Orthodox service of matrimony borrows its language almost exclusively from the Old Testament (with the exception of the wedding at Cana). On the wedding at Cana as supposedly a ground for a Christian marriage, Kierkegaard points out that "Christendom's *repeated* and *repeated* reference to this and to Christ's being present at a wedding and providing the wine proves indirectly that men have a suspicion that Christianity is opposed to marriage, and therefore this story becomes as important to them as their reasoning based on it is ridiculous" ([27], XI 2 A 160 n.d., p. 144).

holiness [30]. On the other hand, natural (biological) relations were seen by the Church as overcome by the new, “spiritual” (or, better yet, ecclesial) relations established by the new identity given to each of the Church’s members⁸. The difference between the two was clear: the former were exclusive and, as we have seen, egotistical, the latter inclusive, moving beyond one’s natural allegiance to family and clan. Indeed, this distinction between biological and ecclesial relations might be more apt in distinguishing the pagan and the Christian paradigms respectively, than the distinction between eros and agape. The Gospel itself had made this clear: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Thus, Augustine writes: “Man is not to be loved by man as brothers after the flesh are loved, or sons, or wives, or kinsfolks, or relatives, or fellow citizens. For such love is temporal. We should have no such connections as are contingent upon birth and death” ([22], p. 270, emphasis added). Birth and death here clearly demarcate the borders of the natural. Providing a gloss to the scriptural passage quoted above, he writes:

Accordingly, the Truth himself calls us back to our original and perfect state, bids us resist carnal custom, and teaches that no one is fit for the kingdom of God unless he hates these carnal relationships. Let no one think that is inhuman. It is more inhuman to love a man because he is your son and not because he is a man, that is, not to love that in him which belongs to God, but to love that *which belongs to yourself*.

Once more, familial relations are suspected of egotism. The family, its imagery and language, became early on the key metaphor of the *polis* and, by extension, one’s state (*patria*, fatherland, homeland, and so on). The language persists today as well in the tendency to speak of the family as the society’s “cell” or “building block”. This rapport between the familial and the political is dangerous for it purports to invest civic relations with a legitimacy borrowed from the biological relationships, thus blurring the distinction between nature and convention (or the symbolic). Thus, the political leader becomes a father figure that demands the same loyalty from the citizens as a father would from his children and exacts the same punishment to anyone who might criticize his authority as a crime comparable to patricide—that is, at least, how Sophocles reads the myth of Oedipus in his *Oedipus Rex*. Together with this, or rather as part of the fatherland’s myth is the notion of *autochthony*, where the earth “begets” the citizens who dwell on it (notice again the employment of a biological concept, such as natality, in order to make sacrosanct a political identity). Plato acknowledges the usefulness of such a “noble lie” (*Rep.* 414c) that would create a homogeneous society out of heterogeneous individuals (to employ the very terms used in Kierkegaard’s critique). So he writes:

I’ll first try to persuade the rulers and the soldiers and then the rest of the city that...in fact they themselves, their weapons, and the other craftsmen’s tools were at that time really being fashioned and nurtured inside the earth, and that when the work was completed, the earth, who is their mother, delivered all of them up into the world. Therefore, if anyone attacks the land in which they live, they must plan on its behalf and defend it as their mother and nurse and think of the other citizens as their earthborn brothers [31].

Thus, in the double association of family and earth, we have the two factors of ethnic identity that became more familiar in recent years as *Blut und Boden*, although their origins could be traced as far back in the story of the incestuous polis—that is, of a community without otherness—in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* [32].

⁸ “When man loves as a biological hypostasis, he inevitably excludes others: The family has priority in love over ‘strangers,’ the husband lays exclusive claim to the love of his wife—facts altogether understandable and ‘natural’ for the biological hypostasis. For a man to love someone who is not a member of his family *more* than his own relations constitutes a transcendence of the exclusiveness which is present in the biological hypostasis. Thus a characteristic of the ecclesial hypostasis is the capacity of the person to love without exclusiveness, and to do this not out of conformity with a mere commandment...” ([18], p. 57).

Somehow Christian theology was also brought to serve the “noble lie” of the political family and the familial polis. As early as the beginnings of the nineteenth century, Lutheran theology developed the doctrine of the “orders of creation” (*Schöpfungsordnungen*) that regarded such worldly institutions like nations and states and civil conventions like marriage and family as belonging intrinsically to the creation and thus “good” [33]. This doctrine gave rise to a *Theologie der Ordnungen* that did not hesitate to dress Nazi ideology in theological garb insofar as the Third Reich could be seen as part of God’s creation and thus theologically justified. It is no surprise, then, that Dietrich Bonhoeffer employed his theological acumen in protesting this abuse of Church doctrine. Bonhoeffer’s criticism consisted in the simple but decisive alteration in the language employed to describe such institutions as marriage and state: they were not any more “orders of creation”—a terminology that would have bestowed upon them a permanent validity and given them a theological grounding—but merely “orders of preservation”—thus rendering them parts of the *transient* scheme of this world that has its justification only in relation to the eschaton [34,35]. In his *Ethics*, we meet them under the terminology of the “mandates” ([36], pp. 68–75). The four mandates (work, marriage, government, and church) derive their meaning and validity from God and thus stand toward God as the penultimate toward the ultimate. If considered “in themselves” they become, instead of divine, demonic, as the penultimate “in itself”—without the constant reference to the ultimate for whose sake it exists—becomes sin (thus one could speak of marriage as “the sacrament of sin”)⁹. The crucial question, however, is: will the mandates survive, that is, continue to exist in the kingdom or will they become abolished? From the kingdom’s perspective, that is, seen eschatologically, Bonhoeffer’s grouping of the four mandates becomes problematic, as it is inconceivable that the first three (work, marriage, and government) will continue to exist in the kingdom, while it is equally inconceivable that the fourth (church) will not. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer thinks that the mandates are mandatory: “God has placed human being under all these mandates, not only each individual under one or the other, but all people under all four” ([36], p. 69). This is rather a radical view, incompatible with the example of Christ who fulfilled some of these mandates, but not others, for example marriage.

5. Marriage and Sexuality: Conclusions

We have traversed a considerable distance since the beginning of this essay and I hope that now some of the theological reasons, which inform my position, might have become better defined. Making marriage a norm to which everyone is expected to conform is for me problematic. The abolition of clerical celibacy in the aftermath of the Reformation was perhaps a first step toward this direction that is now completed by granting marital status upon homosexual couples. The difference of sexual orientation makes no difference any more—but to eliminate differences by conforming to a societal norm does not serve the interests of those groups who in the past were marginalized, victimized, and even persecuted on account of that difference. It only promotes further a culture of homogeneity which was, in the first place the cause of their marginalization. Same-sex marriage does not promote diversity; it eliminates it by reinforcing the expectation of a marital arrangement of one kind or another upon all. I am afraid that, under the new efforts of institutionalizing marriage as a universal mandate, the social stigma of those who for whatever reason do not conform to it would become greater. Historically, the Church fostered a number of forms which the cohabitation of two or more people (regardless of gender or sexual orientation) could take place. Marriage was only one of them—there were also monasteries and convents; lay people living consecrated lives in the world; friends who have chosen to live together in leisure, as Augustine did with his friends in Cassiciacum or Gregory with Basil in Pontus; scholastic communities; etc. These arrangements were brief, lasting only as long as the

⁹ The expression belongs to Hans Urs von Balthasar [4]. Similarly, he speaks of evil as incarnating itself in the “principles of creation” (a reference perhaps to the “orders of creation”?) in order to interfere with God’s plans ([16], p. 209).

occasion that gave rise to them, or more permanent. It is difficult for us today to classify them precisely because our categories are predominantly operated by marriage.

Nevertheless, the inability to dissociate marriage from sexuality and sexuality from procreation remains as the Church's single biggest shortcoming on this issue. This connection was only warranted by reducing human sexuality to its biological and anatomical aspects which set the human body apart from the integral experience of being human and prepare the way to the body's demotion to a little more than an appendix. The ensuing condemnation of any sexual expression that does not lead to procreation as sinful remains ungrounded [37]. For us humans sexual desire is always already informed by culture, it is the field where we enter into the realm of freedom over nature's necessity—hereby lies the difference between desire and instinct. Desire has a language—in psychoanalytic terms desire is inscribed within the orders of the symbolic and the imaginary. Instinct, on the other hand, cannot but be mute. Here the biological and the mechanical overlap; for ultimately the biology of reproduction reduces the human body (mine as well as that of my beloved) into a machine of production; one only needs to know how to operate it to accomplish its function. Perhaps sex is sinful only to the extent that it remains bound to the organism's slavish (and as we have seen, selfish) animal impulse to reproduce itself.

Indeed now we can finally address what is at the core of human desire, namely anticipation and pleasure—the temporal and the bodily—and, more specifically, the anticipation of pleasure, an expectation for the Other's body. We believe that it is the joy of the kingdom to come that is foreshadowed in the feeling of pleasure that every such expectation yields [38]. "All pleasures", after all, "have within themselves some feeling of perfection" [39], writes Leibniz and, as St. Thomas Aquinas continues, "in desiring its own perfection everything is desiring God himself" [40]. The desire for God is not independent from the desire for the other human; nor is the desire for the pleasure promised in God's kingdom contrary to the pleasure that the body seeks. One who has not felt the latter rarely and with difficulty would seek the former.

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References and Notes

1. Scott MacDougall. "Three Questions for the Authors of 'Marriage in Creation and Covenant'." *Anglican Theological Review*, 2015. Available online: <http://www.anglicantheologicalreview.org/static/pdf/conversations/ScottMacDougallResponse.pdf> (accessed on 24 June 2016).
2. John Panteleimon Manoussakis. "The Anarchic Principle of Christian Eschatology in the Eucharistic Tradition of the Eastern Church." *Harvard Theological Review* 100 (2007): 29–46. [CrossRef]
3. I leave aside for the moment the complex question of human and civil rights.
4. I borrow this phrase from Hans Urs von Balthasar who, in his discussion of St. Maximus the Confessor, does not hesitate to call marriage "the sacrament of sin." See Hans Urs von Balthasar. *Cosmic Liturgy*. Translated by Brian E. Daley. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003, p. 199.
5. John D. Zizioulas. *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*. Edited by Luke Ben Tallon. London and New York: T&T Clark, 2011, p. 103, emphasis in the original.
6. Dionysius. *De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia in Corpus Dionysiacum II*. Edited by Günter Heil and Adolf Martin Ritter. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991, pp. 63–132.
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11. John D. Zizioulas. *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011, pp. 115, 124.
12. John D. Zizioulas. *Eucharist's Exemplarium* (Εὐχαριστίας Ἐξεμπλάριον). Megara: EYEPΓETIΣ, 2011.
13. Saint Augustine. *The Confessions*. VII.10.16.; Translated by Maria Boulding. New York: New City Press, 1997, p. 173.
14. Marriage is the par excellence economic activity for it establishes the household (*oikos*) whose upkeep necessitates the regulations (the *nomos* of the *oikos*) that become the paradigms after which economy writ large is modelled.
15. In using the term "shadow" I have in mind Maximus's tripartition of salvific history: "For the entire mystery of our salvation has been wisely arranged to unfold in a shadow, an image, and truth". Maximus the Confessor. *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: Ambiguum 21:15*. Translated by Nicholas Conostas. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014, vol. I, p. 443; where "shadow" refers to the times before Christ's revelation in the flesh, "image" (*eikon*) pertains to the revelation of the New Testament, and "truth" to the things to come.
16. Hans Urs von Balthasar. "Success is not one of the names of God, or of Christ, or of his Church." In *Theo-Drama, V: The Last Act*. Translated by Graham Harrison. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983.
17. Søren Kierkegaard. *Journals and Papers*, 2nd ed. Translated and edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997, vol. 7. The entries listed under "marriage" in volume III include those numbered 2578 to 2631.
18. Biological and ecclesial modes of existence become indistinguishable as the latter is absorbed by the former. For the distinction between the two see, Metropolitan John of Pergamon (Zizioulas). *Being as Communion*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985.
19. Søren Journals. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. Translated and edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1854, vol. 6. I am grateful to my colleague Prof. Jakub Marek for bringing this passage to my attention.
20. The case of ideological totalitarianisms (fascism, communism) as well as the historical examples of totalitarian regimes (e.g., Nazi Germany, USSR, Islamic theocracies) that allotted to marriage and family a central position, while beholding with hostility any form of "deviation" from marital normalcy, cannot be ignored. See the section on Marriage and the Political.
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22. Aurelius Augustinus. "De Vera Religione, XL, 88." In *Augustine: Earlier Writings*. Translated and edited by J. H. S. Burleigh. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953.
23. Plato. *Symposium 207a*: ἀθανασία δὲ ἀναγκαῖον ἐπιθυμεῖν.
24. Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961, p. 269.
25. Maximus Confessor. *Questiones ad Thalassium*. PG 90, 313A. ("Ὅσον γὰρ πρὸς τὴν οἰκείαν ἔσπευδε διὰ τῆς γεννήσεως σύστασιν ἢ φύσιν, τοσοῦτ' ἄλλο ἐαυτὴν τῷ νόμῳ τῆς ἁμαρτίας ἐπέσφιγγεν, ἐνεργουμένην ἔχουσα κατὰ τὸ παθητὸν τὴν παράβασιν).
26. John Chrysostom. *De Virginitate*. 14, PG 48, 514 ("Ὁρᾷς πόθεν ἔσχε τὴν ἀρχὴν ὁ γάμος, πόθεν ἀναγκαῖον ἔδοξε εἶναι; Ἀπὸ τῆς παρακοῆς, ἀπὸ τῆς ἁρᾶς, ἀπὸ τοῦ θανάτου. Ὅπου γὰρ θάνατος, ἐκεῖ γάμος).
27. Søren Kierkegaard. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. Translated and edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1854, vol. III.
28. Karl Barth. *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed. Translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. 50–51.
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30. It is clear that the nuptial metaphors employed in the Scriptures have a symbolic value and functions and, therefore, should not be confused with marriage's naturalism.
31. Plato. "The Republic." In *Plato: Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977, p. 1050.

32. John Panteleimon Manoussakis. "The Stranger in the Polis: Hospitality in the Greek Myth." In *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality*. Edited by Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011, pp. 274–83.
33. As, for example, in Paul Althaus. *Theologie der Ordnungen*. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1935.
34. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Creation and Fall*. Translated by Douglas Stephen Bax. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, p. 140.
35. John Panteleimon Manoussakis. "At the Recurring End of the Unending: Bonhoeffer's Eschatology of the Penultimate." In *Cruciform Philosophy: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Philosophy*. Edited by Jens Zimmermann and Brian Gregor. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.
36. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Ethics*. Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Bethge, and Tödt. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.
37. On this score, see Rowan D. Williams. "The Body's Grace." In *Theology and Sexuality*. Edited by Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002, pp. 309–21.
38. The sixth prayer in the service of the vespers, in use in the Eastern Church, speaks of God as the one who "has given to us the worldly goods as gifts, and pledged to us the promised kingdom through those goods already bestowed on us" (ὁ καὶ τὰ ἐγκόσμια ἀγαθὰ ἡμῖν δωρησάμενος καὶ κατεγγυήσας ἡμῖν τὴν ἐπηγγελημένην βασιλείαν διὰ τῶν ἤδη κεχαρισμένων ἡμῖν ἀγαθῶν).
39. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. *Theodicy*. Translated by E. M. Huggard. Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2007, pp. 145–46.
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