New Blackfriars

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Comment: *Caveats*

No 'polyamorous unions', no 'marriage with robots': these caveats figure in the report by the Theological Forum to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland held in Edinburgh last May, recommending that ministers should be allowed to conduct same-sex marriages. In their cautiously guarded statement, the theologians could see 'no sufficient theological reason for the Church not to authorize specific ministers to officiate at same-sex weddings'. However, the church lawyers have first to work out how to protect ministers who refuse to take part in such ceremonies. Their proposals will be discussed at next year's Assembly.

Presbyteries and congregations will continue to disagree irreconcilably, the report accepts, over how to deal with the Scripture passages that seem to condemn homosexual practice. As with the debate over women's ministry, the report goes on to hope, Presbyterians at large will eventually accept same-sex weddings initially on the basis of the standard 'equal rights' arguments. But a new theological understanding will develop, as is indeed already happening. Drawing on the innovative work of the Anglican theologian Robert Song (*Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships*, 2014), the report appeals to New Testament eschatology, contending that, since procreation is no part of human fulfilment in the life to come (e.g. Matthew 22: 30), there is no final reason why marital relationships should be regarded as intrinsically or deliberately open to procreation, as hitherto supposed. 'The coming of Jesus', we now realize, 'inaugurates a new age, in that the growth of the kingdom is found through union with him, not in multiplication of the chosen people through procreation' (an interesting alternative). This allows for 'an eschatological understanding of non-procreative unions which in their own way reflect the faithfulness of God'. Marriage would thus be separated, once and for all, from having offspring (an idea that would not interest same-sex couples who, by adoption or surrogacy, very much want children of their own).

In this perspective of 'constrained difference', as the report calls it, the Church of Scotland should seek 'an area of allowable disagreement within the tradition of the Church as a whole' — 'while upholding the fundamental doctrines of the Church', which is where the caveats appear: 'We do not believe that extension of marriage to two persons of the same gender opens the door to a rights-based argument that marriage should be extended to polyamorous

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unions. Nor, for example, do we think the door should be open to marriage with robots. Consent within a covenanted relationship between two persons remains at the heart of our understanding'.

In presbyteries and congregations across Scotland who is supposed to need such reassurance? The authors of the report seemingly find it necessary to head off their opponents from invoking the slippery slope argument: same-sex marriage will *not* lead, as these recalcitrant people are expected to fear, to blessing polyamorous unions in church, or marriage with robots. That these denials appear at all in a report to the General Assembly must strike old-fashioned Presbyterians as no more than a joke, in rather bad taste at that.

Polyamory, a word first recorded in 1992 according to Merriam-Webster, means a set of sexual relationships, in which one is committed quasi-maritally to three or more partners, of whatever gender. This isn't quite Mormon-style polygamy, or polygyny as in Islam. It's more like 'free love', as in the long defunct Oneida Community in New York State, a millennialist Christian sect.

As for robots, people are already turning to them for companionship, so it is reported. According to Dr Kevin Curran, of the Institute of Electronic and Electrical Engineers at the University of Ulster, the first mass market for robots will be to provide companions for elderly people or minders to take children to school — but then, so he tells Mail Online, in gratifyingly sensationalist terms: 'We just have to project a few years down the road and we may see robots being re-purposed for sexual purposes'. Humans will become so attached to a particular robot that they may fall in love. Artificial intelligence researchers are already exploring how to apply techniques such as 'deep learning' to give computers 'emotional intelligence', in order to make the relationship less one-sided. Dr Curran predicts that one day quite soon robots will come to be regarded as beings with some of the same legal rights as humans — 'persons', in effect.

Caveats are sometimes quite tricky. Being advised that some outcome will not happen often just puts an idea into people's heads that they would otherwise never have thought of. How many Church of Scotland folk have ever considered polyamorous unions or marriage with robots as possibilities for anyone at all, let alone possibilities that will never affect them? For that matter, what prompted the authors of the report to set same-sex marriage over against such bizarre alternatives, admittedly only in order to rule them out?

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