

"For I Am Wonderfully Made"

Texts on Eastern Orthodoxy and LGBT Inclusion



Eds. Misha Cherniak, Olga Gerassimenko, Michael Brinkschröder

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In the midst of the culture wars of our broader society, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people have become the focus of a spiritual battle within the Orthodox Church. The recognition of LGBT rights in the political sphere has triggered negative ecclesial responses. In the struggle to maintain traditional values and teachings, LGBT Orthodox are denied confession, communion or blessings. Many face exclusion from parish life, and some face physical violence.

Roughly half of the essays gathered in this book were first presented at a seminar entitled "Orthodox Theological Reflections on LGBT People," held 20-23 August 2015 in Finland. The other half represent Orthodox theologians, clergy, scholars and activists writing over the past 20 years. Together they offer an affirming message, urging LGBT Orthodox to proclaim with the psalmist: "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made!" (Psalm 139:14)

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European Forum of Lesbian, Gay,
Bisexual and Transgender
Christian Groups



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Made”**

Misha Cherniak,
Olga Gerassimenko,
Michael Brinkschröder
(Editors)

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and LGBT Inclusion



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**Introduction
and
Foreword**

Introduction

Michael Brinkschröder

Despite the splendour of the Orthodox liturgy and the myriad ways in which gender and sexuality find symbolic expression in its rites, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people often find themselves ignored, confused, and oppressed by the Orthodox Church. They are confronted with a church that teaches that traditional and family values must be preserved even if they contradict the dignity and the human rights of LGBT people. They are confronted with priests who wield their sacramental power by refusing them Confession, Communion, or blessings, and by excluding them from parish life. Some clergy do not even shy away from instigating hatred or physical violence against them. These harsh attitudes have become more rigid in the last few years as a reaction to the LGBT movement.

This book presents an affirmative Orthodox message to LGBT people, allowing them to exclaim the words from Psalm 139:14: “For I am wonderfully made.” It presents an Orthodox theology that embraces LGBT people, offers them sensitive spiritual guidance, and argues for their inclusion in Orthodox parishes.

The idea for a book on LGBT-affirming Orthodox theology came up during a seminar of the European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups. The European Forum is an ecumenical association of around fifty member groups from twenty-six countries, founded in 1982. It has a long-standing

commitment to advocacy for LGBT equality and inclusion in various churches, working together, for example, with the World Council of Churches and related to the Roman Catholic Church. It was only a logical consequence for me when I was co-president of the European Forum to initiate similar activities related to the Orthodox Churches in Europe, because I believe that every church can change and become LGBT-inclusive.

A first meeting of Orthodox LGBT Christians was held on 24 May 2014, when the annual conference of the European Forum took place in the form of a boat tour on the Baltic Sea and stopped for one day in Helsinki. Around sixteen people—most of whom identified as being LGBT—shared their experiences as Orthodox Christians, and looked for a way forward. We agreed that a theological seminar should be held, offering new perspectives on the roots of the Orthodox tradition and on the core of the Orthodox understanding of the human person, and connecting them with the contemporary experiences and testimonies of LGBT Orthodox believers.

This seminar, with the title “Orthodox Theological Reflections on LGBT People,” took place from 20–23 August 2015 near Helsinki, Finland. Twenty-three Orthodox theologians and LGBT activists from fifteen countries took part, representing Orthodox people from the North American, Western European, and Asian diasporas, as well as demonstrating the hardships that LGBT Christians have to face in Eastern European countries with Orthodox majorities. Around half of the contributions to this book were presented at this seminar. However, we had the idea that much more LGBT-affirmative Orthodox theology had already been developed and published in a wide array of sources over the past twenty years, and that collecting this and making it available alongside new reflections would be fruitful. To this end, the website www.orthodoxlistening.com was a veritable treasure chest.

The present book contains five sections, covering the areas of theological anthropology, Orthodox tradition, the moral politics of Orthodox churches, pastoral problems connected to Confession and Communion, and finally an evaluation of the results of the pan-Orthodox Holy and Great Council (held at Kolymvari, Crete, in July 2016) from an LGBT perspective. The anthropological foundations for a constructive understanding of gender are laid out in the section “Trinity, Person, and Gender: Anthropological Foundations.” Taking the Trinity as a starting point, an Orthodox bishop

preferring to remain *anonymous* in this publication develops the rich anthropological concept of the person. In his response to this paper, *Philippe de Bruyn* affirms the fruitfulness of such a theological anthropology and highlights the relational aspect of the person, both within the Trinity and among humans. *Valerie Karras* examines the question of what precisely “male and female” (Gen. 1:27) means theologically in reflection on the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and other Fathers, while *Bryce E. Rich* examines the apophatic anthropology of the person developed by Vladimir Lossky. *Natallia Vasilevich*, in turn, applies this apophatic anthropology in her contribution in a critical assessment of the “Social Doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church.” Two other contributions to this section address the issue of anthropology from a different angle by stressing the appropriate perception and acceptance of reality. In this sense, *Mark Stokoe* insists that the real must find an appropriate place in Orthodox theology and pastoral practice; *Misha Cherniak*, for his part, uses the story of a left-handed person as a parable for being a gay.

The second section presents “Sources for LGBT-Affirmative Theology” based on Orthodox Tradition. *Bryce E. Rich*’s piece considers different kinds of traditions and the greater Tradition of the Church writ large. *Mark Stokoe* writes about slaves and eunuchs and the historical fluidity of moral norms, while *Anastasios Kallis*, in answering questions from everyday people, offers practical responses grounded in both science and theology on issues of intimacy and homosexuality. In light of recent legal developments regarding LGBT rights in the United States, both *Father Robert Arida* and *Father Alexis Vinogradov* re-examine and re-explore Church teachings on marriage, divorce, and sexual orientation. Concluding this section is *Misha Cherniak*’s assessment of various lines of argumentation for an LGBT-affirmative discourse within the specific context of the Orthodox Church.

The third part of the book analyses the situation within various Orthodox Churches bearing the hopeful title: “From Exclusion to Dialogue.” It begins with a comparison between Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox responses to contemporary homosexuality by *Volodymyr Bureba*. Following this is the contribution by activist *Valery Sozaev* that outlines the “culture wars” of contemporary Russia and the struggles there for LGBT rights in both Church and society. *Konstantin Mikhaïlov* in his essay uses the sociological theory of

modernization to describe the increasing rejection of phenomena such as gay and lesbian identities as a consequence of the weakness of liberals in Russia and the rise there of fundamentalism. *Florin Buhuceanu* then shows how the Russian government uses religious concepts like “traditional” or “family values” and exports and applies them to a putative Orthodox Commonwealth and to the United Nations. The final contributions to this section challenge the underlying ecclesiology that leads to the exclusion or moral rejection of LGBT people. *Deacon Valiantsin Tsishko* exposes the contradiction that the Orthodox Church understands herself as “universal” (*katholikos*), while yet excluding LGBT people; *Johan Slätis* and *Olga Mark* take the laity’s perspective and identify the few but significant opportunities for overcoming such exclusion.

The fourth section is entitled “New Pastoral Approaches: From Confession to Testimony.” *Father Jim Mulcahy* describes the dire situation of LGBT people in Eastern Europe with regards to reconciliation. *Maria Gwyn McDowell* and *Olga Mark* provide personal testimonies about the difficulties of confronting different opinions about homosexuality in parish life, while the section concludes with two roundtable discussions held at the aforementioned LGBT Orthodox seminar in Finland on confession, pastoral care, and the families of LGBT people in an ecclesial context.

The final section addresses the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church that took place on Crete in June 2016, containing the Open Letter from the Orthodox Working Group of the European Forum to the Council as well as an interpretation of the impact of this synod on LGBTQI persons by *Natallia Vasilevich*.

Together with my co-editors, I want to express my gratitude to all who collaborated in the efforts to make this book possible: the authors, the publishers who gave permission to reprints, the translators, and especially to our copy editor, *Christopher Sprecher*. We must also thank Father Heikki Huttunen from the Conference of European Churches for his encouraging foreword. Furthermore, the European Forum owes a great debt of gratitude to the Arcus Foundation, whose financial support not only made the seminar in Finland possible, but also the publication of this book.

Foreword

Fr Heikki Huttunen

The issues of human sexuality and gender are at the forefront of discussion today: political, philosophical, historical, psychological, and even theological. Many of us may find this discussion alien to Orthodox thinking and spirituality, and would like to dismiss it without any serious consideration. Human rights or sexual orientation are often not considered valid categories in a spiritual context, although we might embrace them in other settings. This discussion comes to us both from the societies we live in as well as from within our own communities. Human sexuality is also an ecumenical issue, which has created divisions along new lines: not between traditions, but within them. We often prefer to avoid discussing it at inter-church encounters, while some of us want to draft the Orthodox Churches into a campaign of morally conservative Christians and adherents of other religions. Despite its political dimensions, I think this challenge should be treated as an intellectual and pastoral one. We would be wise to deal with the themes of human sexuality in a manner we would identify with the Holy Fathers and Mothers: with clarity of mind, prayer, and respect for everyone involved.

This book contains the proceedings from a conference that took place in 2015: a conference that was simultaneously a delicate and a natural endeavour. It occurred on three levels: that of academic discussion, of the

sharing of intimate stories and wounds, and of the liturgy at its centre. The conference clearly showed one of the interesting dimensions of the current discussion concerning gender. When taken seriously in the Orthodox context, this discussion is an inspiration for pioneering theological research and an intellectually demanding exchange of views. It is encouraging that some of the sharpest young minds in Orthodox theology are engaged in this study and discussion. When intellectual activity is combined with hearing each other's stories and testimonies, together with common prayer, which connects the encounter with the sacramental and mystical life of the whole Church, the exercise opens the way for a sincere and fruitful continuation of the discussion.

Fragile Repentances¹

Maria Gwyn McDowell

Every Orthodox person who loves someone of the same sex risks hearing the following:

“I can no longer offer you the Eucharist. While I cannot tell you to leave this parish, I would prefer you no longer attend.”

Few words are more painful to hear.

We can argue endlessly over proof-texts from Scripture or the Tradition, wielding verses and canons and quotations like scalpels cutting out a cancer, or swords lopping off limbs. How many of us, though, stop to wonder what it is like to be a partnered lesbian woman or gay man in an Orthodox parish?

Do you invite your partner to the choir family potluck? Do you express your grief at the death of your mother-in-law? Do you share the hysterical antics of your stepson? Do you cover your car with, “My daughter is an honor student” stickers? As you struggle in your relationship—as all married people do—do you go to friends at church for comfort and advice? Do you approach the wise men and women in your church to ask them how they have sustained their marriages?

¹ This essay was first published at the Women In Theology blog; URL: <https://womenintheology.org/2013/11/19/fragile-repentances/>. Reprinted with permission.

Everything that seems a given for Orthodox who are safely married to someone of the opposite sex is fraught with anxiety for the coupled gay Orthodox.

Imagine this conversation:

“Father, I would like to have my girls baptized in the church, will you do so?”

“Are you married?”

“If it were legal here, I would be. We have been together for over two decades.”

“But you are unmarried?”

“Yes, Father, unmarried.”

“Well, I will baptize your girls only on the condition that you leave your current relationship, confess your sins, and commit to a life of celibacy.”

“You would like me to leave my partner of over twenty years? Their mother?”

“Yes. Others choose to remain celibate.”

“On your recommendation?”

“Of course. I recently told another woman who struggles as you do that she too needs to remain celibate or she will burn in hell.”

“...”

After admirably collecting her wits:

“If I find a priest who is willing to baptize my daughters, will you welcome them into this parish?”

“Of course. But you will never find such a priest.”

Since not all priests are unsympathetic to partnered lesbians and gay men, and even more priests would never withhold baptism based on the “sins” of the parents, your children end up getting baptized. But this is still your local parish priest. So now, you attend Sunday school with your daughters so you can be there if and when homosexuality, same-sex marriage, or the parenting of children by same-sex couples should arise. You want to be present in case your children are attacked because their parents are two women; you want to be able to explain to them that not everyone can see how much you love and enjoy one another.

One of the greatest tragedies of our current theological predicament is the way it robs lesbians and gay men of the freedom of repentance. We seem to think that it is pastoral and caring to describe homosexuality as a sickness from which one can be healed, equating it with an addiction (usually alcoholism) against which the afflicted must faithfully struggle for the rest of their lives through “voluntary” celibacy. We glibly target homosexual acts as if same-sex love were just a problem of misdirected genitals.

A theology that simultaneously characterizes homosexuality as a disorder and a disease encourages the following confessional situations:

A gay man who broached his homosexuality was calmly reassured that the priest would do his best to keep him from the company of little boys, as if gayness and child molestation went hand in hand.

Or how about this recommendation for a cure:

“You just need a really good fuck with a woman, then you will be fine.”

How can your confession be genuine when the recommendation given to you is to leave your partner and dissolve your family, suggestions that would be abhorrent in any circumstance other than abuse?

It is easy to identify these situations simply as confessions gone wrong, as blaming children for the sins of their parents. Perhaps these priests are just terribly confused. Surely there are kinder, gentler priests.

But the problem is not with the method of delivery, it is with the message: this relationship that is for you a source of faith, hope and love is in reality “the result of humanity’s rebellion against God, and so against its own nature and well-being.”²

No kindness in the world can undo this message, and it takes every ounce of your being to fight its pernicious effects.

It is almost impossible to silence the clamor of the Orthodox blogosphere or the tirade of a priest:

It does not matter that your relationship is monogamous; you are blamed for promiscuity.

It does not matter that you do not care for hard-core pornography; you are blamed for its increase.

It does not matter that it would never occur to you to have sex with a goat, a relative, or a child; your relationship grants permission for bestiality, incest, or pedophilia.

Your straight brothers and sisters may or may not be questioned about their sexual continence; it is assumed that you have none. The culture of promiscuity and hookups that straights can resist is presumed irresistible to you. Worse, you are at fault for the rise of promiscuity and sexually degrading relationships. Homosexuality is as much a cause as it is a sign or symptom.

While there may be something humorous in witnessing the discomfiture of a priest as you agree with him that promiscuity is a problem, that you too dislike the rise of degraded sexual relationships, there is nothing funny in the truth that these topics are being broached by him because you stated your attraction to people of your same sex, or confirmed that you are indeed living with your partner and really would rather be married to them, since you too are uncomfortable with your extra-marital status. Your relationship is, by its very existence, a capitulation to a whole host of perversions and a guarantee of your eternal damnation.

It simply isn’t possible to have an edifying conversation about how your relationship can continue to be a place of joy and delight in one another and God if every time you must wade through the detritus of someone else’s misperceptions of you and “your people.”

No one ever asks: how is this relationship a blessing to you, to your family, to your neighbors, and to your relationship with God?

You cannot express delight that you have come to love and trust another person enough to share your life with them, to invite them not simply into your bed (despite the rhetoric otherwise), but to wash dishes together, trip over one another’s shoes, move the sweater that is always left on your favorite chair, to share a meal with each night. This is the companion with whom you share your life, with whom you argue, by whom you are challenged. He or she is someone with whom you grow into the likeness God, the one with whom you practice theosis (it is a practice, friends: an ongoing process, not a state).

² Cf. the official statement of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) on homosexuality; URL: <https://oca.org/holy-synod/statements/holy-synod/synodal-affirmations-on-marriage-family-sexuality-and-the-sanctity-of-life#Homosexuality>.

The Orthodox liturgy is permeated with the language of sin and repentance, a constant call to turn away, to “hit the mark” and become more fully a human person made in the image and likeness of God. This stream of call and response, which shapes you into a person of prayer and of love, becomes a torrent against which you suddenly find yourself swimming. After being invited out of a community through the denial of the Eucharist and in some cases the suggestion (or insistence) that you leave entirely, the liturgy becomes an agony, and your attempts to love your neighbor better are lost in the constant, breathless defense of your own life, which is such a joy to you and a horror to others. You stand, praying, no longer asking for healing, but desperately insisting that you are not sick.

You are so busy fighting against the current to stay alive, to remember that your relationship is a source of life and joy, that you hardly have the energy to recall the ways you really have failed to be human. You are so busy gasping for breath that you cannot enter into the necessary process of acknowledgement, repentance, and change, which is the heart of the Christian life.

If you mention the fight you had the other day, and how it was really because you were tired and irritable, and not because your loved one yet again failed to turn off the lights, will the response spring out of an awareness that all relationships suffer from trivial selfishness, or is this seen as merely a manifestation of the selfishness upon which your entire relationship is supposedly built? Will every struggle you have in your relationship be turned into a struggle over your relationship?

It is horrible to realize that you cannot repent because you are afraid that admitting to one sin is a concession to something you cannot with any integrity concede: that your life of joyful partnership is actually a sickness, an addiction, a perversion. To desperately realize that you no longer feel like you have the room (or even permission) to learn to be a Christian with your sisters and brothers through shared liturgical practices because you are too consumed with wondering if you are even worthy to stand in their presence, much less eat at the same table as them.

How ironic it is, then, that the denial of the Eucharist, meant to inspire repentance, results in the inability to repent.

Some will interpret this anguish as typical of someone who refuses to acknowledge their sinful relationship. Certainly, many men and women have followed the counsel of their priest, and struggled to remain celibate. Some succeed; others fail. There is an irony, though, that those who agree to see themselves as sick and in need of healing are welcome, no matter how often they fail to remain sexually continent; but those who choose to engage in a faithful and lifelong relationship have capitulated to their disease. In the tangled web of our theology, promiscuity is better than commitment, because the possibility remains for the only option open to a lesbian or gay man: lifelong celibacy. The promiscuous person can still repent, while the partnered (or worse, married!) person has, by their commitment, shown that they are unwilling to consider the possibility.

The person who asks these questions, who will not forsake their partner or disrupt the only stable household their children have known, is ostracized, silenced, and exiled. The one who will not visit the emotional and spiritual equivalent of divorce on themselves, their beloved, or their children is rejected.

My point here is not to engage in a debate over the so-called clobber texts, or argue about canons and their applicability or interpretation. It is also not to claim that same-sex relationships were ever blessed in our liturgical history. Substantive historical work is almost entirely absent within Orthodox theology. Interesting work has been done by Mark Jordan, Eugene Rogers, Bernadette Brooten, Martti Nissinen, and John Boswell (note: “interesting” does not mean agreeable).

Rather, my point is threefold. First, we need to consider seriously the possibility that our efforts at theological kindness are pernicious and destructive of the very thing that we want to encourage: repentance. By calling diseased, evil, disordered, and destructive something that is experienced as a source of faith, hope, and joy, we create a dissonance that is sometimes impossible to un-hear. We call what is good, evil. In doing so, we deafen someone to those parts of their lives (we all have them) that truly are destructive and from which we are invited to turn away.

Second, we need to be aware that our current theological position creates a fragility for lesbians and gay men who simply never know how they will be received. The stories above are real—some many years old

and perhaps the consequence of youthful priests, some very recent. Even those men and women who have found welcoming communities live with the reality that their beloved priest will not live forever. Faithful longtime members of churches who are “out” as gay men and lesbians have been denied Communion upon the arrival of a new priest who is dedicated to eradicating the scourge of “casual” Christianity. A new priest might refuse to recognize that the commitment of a gay person to a community, whose theology at best mischaracterizes them and at worst actively seeks to destroy their most cherished relationships, is anything but casual. Orthodoxy is full of wise same-sex oriented individuals who have spent decades loving God, their partners, and the Orthodox Church, often to their great suffering. The reality is that for these women and men, their life in community is often dependent on the whim of a priest and the willingness of their friends to defend them when necessary. Even priests who are sympathetic may be too frightened (of the loss of their jobs, their colleagues’ reactions, or rumor and spite) to commune openly known lesbians and gay men (this conundrum is worth a blog post of its own, though perhaps better written by a priest in this position).

Finally, the Orthodox community must allow lesbians and gay men to make the same appeals to relational experience that undergird Orthodox theologies of marriage:

“In Christian marriage, it is not selfish ‘pleasure’ or search for ‘fun’ which is the main driving force: it is rather a quest for mutual sacrifice, for readiness to take the partner’s cross as one’s own, to share one’s whole life with one’s partner. The ultimate goal of marriage is the same as that of every other sacrament: deification of the human nature and union with Christ. This becomes possible only when marriage itself is transfigured and deified.”³

The belief that marriage is, like all relationships, a vehicle for transformation into the likeness of God comes from the experience of men and women who have seen themselves become more virtuous, more neighborly, more joyful, more hopeful, more loving through their marriage.

³ Hilarion Alfeyev, “Orthodox Marriage and Its Misunderstanding,” 21 November 2008; URL: <http://theinnerkingdom.wordpress.com/2008/11/21/orthodox-marriage-its-misunderstanding-by-bishop-hilarion-alfeyev/>.

Orthodox theologians have attended to the practice of marriage, examined its fruits, and found it fertile ground for becoming more like God.

Homosexuality is not at all like alcoholism or diabetes,⁴ favorite comparisons among those Orthodox who are trying to be gentle. Diabetes, when untreated, can kill you. Literally. Alcoholism, when given full rein, kills your relationships (metaphorically) and then kills you (physically). A life shared in love with another person is exactly that: a life. It does not kill, and it may very well be the vehicle for growth into God that is most potent, most transforming, and most salvific.

What would really happen if the Orthodox Church, its people, its clergy, and its theologians, were likewise to look at those same-sex relationships which are most closely patterned after marriage and use them as a measure for considering same-sex marriage? How is discovering that God is present and active among these men and women a detriment to anyone or anything?

At best, we may be astonished at the creative movement of the Spirit, which blows where it wills, and be humbled yet again as we realize that we do not own or direct its works. At the very least, perhaps we can allow lesbians and gay men to repent alongside us, to recognize their true struggles rather than bear our perceptions of their struggles, and to celebrate together the God who gives “us these awesome and life-creating Mysteries for the good and sanctification of our souls and bodies.”⁵

⁴ Katie Grimes, “Homosexuality Is Not Like Alcoholism,” 15 December 2011; URL: <https://womenintheology.org/2011/12/15/homosexuality-is-not-like-alcoholism/>.

⁵ From the prayer to be said after receiving Holy Communion. For the full text, see URL: <http://oca.org/orthodoxy/prayers/before-and-after-holy-communion>.