

## **Queer Holiness: A Review and Critique**

The following is a review and critique of Charlie Bell's book *Queer Holiness: The Gift of LGBTQI People to the Church*. It will be divided into four blog posts (though a complete version of the review can be found here).

The first part is an introduction to *Queer Holiness*, plus the beginnings of an exploration for the implicated trajectories the book seems to make, or at least opening the ground for.

The second part is an analysis of the problems with the rhetorical strategy Bell makes in his book, namely polemic, and why he is unsuccessful in the use of such a strategy.

The third part then returns to the proposal raised in the first part, namely that something has gone wrong with Bell's argument. This explores the problems of Bell's use of Scripture, the Fall, and understanding of revelation.

The fourth and final part will respond to one of the key questions which Bell raises, namely, considering our developing scientific knowledge of same-sex attraction, why God would permit it? Diverging from Bell's own answer, this section seeks to place the issue within a wider revelatory context.

Though the reasons for the extensive nature of this review will (hopefully) become apparent when reading, one reason can be clarified in advance: Bell's book is in many ways paradigmatic for crystallising the arguments and problems with the revisionist position in the Church of England. As such, it is written with a view to a wider debate and the need for an extensive, coherent, and systematic response.

### **Part I: An Introduction to Queer Holiness**

#### *Introduction*

It's not easy being a conservative on matters of sexuality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century West—especially if you used to be a liberal. One feels out-of-place. A strange, uncomfortable disjunction between sociopolitical and theological views sometimes feels like a widening internal chasm. If, like me, that is your perspective, you may find yourself hopeful when approaching an author who claims to be able to bridge this chasm—that the Bible, after all, does make positive space for same-sex sexual activity. In the past I have been frequently disappointed when such claims were made. Indeed, it is in reading them that this once-liberal has become conservative (or 'orthodox/catholic', whatever the lingo may be). I found the claims made were found to be hermeneutically faulty or historically naive; alternatively, they would dismantle one theological loci to make space for a positive reappraisal, but thereby needing to make piecemeal restructuring of the whole dogmatic architecture.

Far more convincing, therefore, were those Queer theologies that simply did away with classical dogmatics as traditionally understood (for example, Susannah Cornwall or Marcella Althaus-Reid)—at least their theological social imaginary was internally coherent. Nevertheless, the hope does not die. With this in mind, when author, blogger, activist and priest Charlie Bell claimed that his book *Queer Holiness: The Gift of LGBTQI People to the Church* responded to the issues I had raised in my open letter to Bishop Stephen Croft, I

approached the book with a sense of promise. Perhaps at last I need not feel like a resident alien?

Bell makes some great claims for the Bible:

The Bible is of God and from God, and God owes us the clarity we demand no more than he owes us anything else. God is Truth, and Christ is the Word of God—this truth has been revealed in the scriptures and *continues to be revealed* in the work of the Holy Spirit throughout the ages. This revelation must be—by nature—concordant—and it is for this reason that we must be constantly alert to the work of the Spirit and willing to wrestle with scripture, placing it into dialogue with our knowledge and understanding of the world. (220-1)

On the surface, there is not a single line I could disagree with. Yet when we scratch that surface just a little, the book reveals a disjunction. It's hinted in that line '*continues to be revealed*.' In the context of the rest of the book that has a far greater weight than would appear in the surrounding sentence. Indeed, one could even make a key structural node to Bell's approach. This is hinted at in the opening pages of the book:

This book has a simple premise—that however much we might know our Bible, if we exclude human experience, science and reason from the way we read and interpret that Bible, we not only do a poor job of interpretation, but in so doing fail to take the Bible seriously on its own terms... The life of God revealed in scripture is one of narrative and of being alongside humanity—one in which the Son of God Himself became flesh and dwelt among us, and yet still we rejected Him. We don't appear to have learnt. (13)

It's the last sentence that struck me most. An astute reader of the Scriptures would say, 'Of course we haven't learnt. That's the point.' It's those two terms, 'continuing to be revealed' and 'don't appear to have learnt', which when delved into separate the whole of Bell's theological worldview from my own.

Apologies. I'm getting ahead of myself. I haven't even managed to tell you what Bell's argument is! Let's explore...

### *Bell's Argument*

For Bell, Scripture is not encountered in a vacuum. It is 'never about something abstract' (20), but rather is read in the flux and change of the reality 'here below' (to quote Cardinal Newman). Furthermore, doctrine—the teachings of the church—is practically minded, in the sense that 'it is an overwhelming, all embracing, total reorientation of our whole lives to God' (ibid). Despite that flux, the hierarchical structuring of doctrine nevertheless centres on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, 'recorded' in Scripture, of a world 'saved through Christ and yet a world that remains beset by sin and death' (ibid).

The purpose of this is, in part, the flourishing of human dignity—'that which points to the life of Christ in God'. The Holy Spirit works throughout the world to encourage and drive this flourishing—something which is not static and bounded within ecclesial or even a Christian orbit. One could read Bell's argument as a pneumatological 'unfolding' of creational potential.

This is invoked as the glue which holds together his quasi-Hookerian ‘scripture, tradition, and reason’ triad as the lens through which he approaches divine revelation. Because of this, the Scriptures should be read alongside the sciences. Christian theology in the main ‘reinterpreted’ the creation accounts of Genesis to incorporate the findings of evolutionary science, for example.

Accordingly, theology should thereby reinterpret certain ‘texts of terror’ in the Scriptures to coincide with the findings of the sciences and science-humanity hybrids such as psychology and sociology. The findings of evolutionary science could be incorporated because of an ‘appeal to a hermeneutic that looks to the overarching narrative of scripture rather than simplistic notions built on particular texts’ (49). The same approach can be found regarding sexuality. That overarching narrative becomes vital for approaching ethics:

It is important to reiterate that God does not bless everything, and this includes things in the area of sex, sexuality and relationships. The biblical record in this regard is genuinely clear: God does not bless abusive relationships, does not bless the subjugation of women, does not bless infidelity and does not bless coercive sexual behaviour. The Bible is clear in this regard because the entire canon of scripture points in this direction—through books of different genres, eras, and audiences. (52)

The texts regarding same-sex sexual activity should be interpreted through this trajectory. The ‘hermeneutical key is Christ Himself’ (44) who comes to fulfil rather than abolish the law. And what is the fulfilling of the law? In a quasi-echo of Augustine, Bell argues that it is Love—a Love that manifests itself in the justice-drenched, embodied life of Jesus. It is this love-based, human-flourishing-releasing trajectory which stops the Bible from being swamped into the potential relativism of scientific findings with which it is in dialogue. The Bible ‘guides’ (63) our interpretation of human knowledge.

Bell takes us into these scientific and psychological findings. Critiquing a dualism which separates a person’s acts and ontology, he argues:

It is deeply flawed to imagine that one’s being—which includes sexual desire, and longing for relationship—is entirely separate from acting on such feelings, and we know from basic psychological knowledge that being prevented from acting on some of the most human of feelings—most particularly when this is enforced rather than freely chosen—is detrimental to mental health (and even physical health) and indeed to the ability of individuals to play their full part in society. Worse still is the total repression of one’s thoughts—the denial of even thinking a particular way, let alone acting upon it. (58)

The Church has forced this kind of repression on the LGBTQI community—and still does. Such repression causes such evil consequences as psychological breakdown and suicide. It’s not that Bell is arguing for a complete release of all sexual instincts—‘it is not always right to act on innate desires, even if those desires form part of one’s psychological make-up’—as many are ‘abusive, predatory, paedophilic or destructive’ (63) and thereby dehumanizing. But according to Bell, repressing humanizing innate sexualities has the possibility of leading to great evils (such as enforced celibacy leading to the abuse scandals in the Roman Catholic Church) (67). For a more recent example of this, one just needs to think of the unfolding Mike Pilavachi case.

Secular work on human flourishing, on the other hand, is a better—and for Bell, a more biblical—model:

[It] looks at the whole person—both as an entire individual and as someone in relationship, in community. It is not enough to point to specific elements—each element forms part of an interconnected whole. (79)

For Bell, the scientific record explains why repression of non-heterosexual sexual orientation is wrong:

- ‘that sexual variation is normal, and that there are clear exceptions to the XY binary genetics’;
- ‘that homosexual activity is found throughout nature’;
- ‘that in human, homosexuality forms part of a variation in sexual lives and that sexual orientation is not a choice but an innate part of the mature human personality, with some genetic and some developmental environmental factors involved (as in almost all human traits)’;
- ‘that sexual orientation cannot be changed through the volition of the individual concerned’;
- ‘that great psychological damage can be done to LGBTQI people if attempts are made to split apart their identity’;
- ‘that LGBTQI people can and do live lives which are equivalent in terms of many different measures of human flourishing to those who are straight’;
- ‘that the greatest challenge to LGBTQI flourishing is prejudice from without.’ (74-5)

Each of these bullet-points are referenced—and the references are worth looking at!

With this in mind, Bell turns to the arguments of his opponents (we’ll explore this more fully later). Alongside critiquing such groups as Side B Christians, he presents some harrowing stories of the impact conservative exclusion had on several LGBTQI and heterosexual Christians (102-3, 128-9). He argues—rightly—that ‘a church in which openness about LGBTQI matters is not only frowned upon but actively shunned, however unconsciously, is a church that is failing to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4.12). He then adds an empirically untrue statement—‘and a church which is bound to fail’. It appears that many of the most successful churches have unfortunately managed to get along quite well without addressing matters about LGBTQI people!

In a book that vents ire in multiple directions, he is especially critical of those bishops who in private are deeply supportive of clergy in same-sex relationships yet in public are either conservative or are uncritical of the Church of England’s current teaching. He notes the ‘crippling levels of fear’ that exist in the episcopate, when after the Bishop of Grantham’s outing ‘not a single other gay bishop came out publicly to show solidarity or support him’ (122). Bell is withering towards the strange solution of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, which considers masturbation as ‘the best of two evils’—masturbation being ‘a key example

of sexual gratification without any relational aspect' (96). He rightly exposes such vile language used by the Primate of Nigeria referring to homosexuality as a 'virus' (153, 186).

In Part III, Bell turns his eyes to practical solutions. He spends some time reiterating the arguments of Clare Herbert's *Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Marriage*. This argues that same-sex marriage is a legitimate development of the classical understanding of marriage, which can be summed up in the line, 'It is not the role of the Church to 'own' marriage, but to witness—or recognise—it' (179). This means reconsidering the importance, or at least interpretation of procreation, and rethinking the Christ-and-his-Church model to not be around gender roles. Because the idea that there has been 'one single understanding of marriage throughout Christian history is quite clearly nonsense' (21), this means we should be able to revise our understanding according to contemporary norms grounded in science and experience. For example, although Bell does not mention this, the introduction of same-sex marriage has been associated with a [significant reduction](#) in the rate of attempted suicide rate of LGBT youth—a statistic that should give all those who are conservative on these matters pause for thought.

Yet Bell is—rightly, given his premises—not satisfied with a mere development of marriage to include same-sex couples. After a chapter exploring a eucharistic 'open table' ecclesiology, he gives a series of hints that the impact of LGBTQI people goes beyond the somewhat bourgeois marital inclusion model. He is (somewhat understandably) wary of the expectation for all clergy 'to be forced into civil partnerships if they are living with a partner' (205). He seems to suggest that the church must come to terms with the reality that 'not all sexual behaviour is described or experienced in the context of a long-term, stable relationship' (208), and questions 'whether we can quite so easily roundly reject' such an idea. He goes further: 'the immediate response to any argument that posits "the right place for sex is within marriage" is to ask the simple question: why?...Whether sex must always be relational—and whether that relationality, if it is required, must take a particular form—is a key question for contemporary culture' (210). Further: 'It is quite simply unacceptable that the Church of England's thinking and position on marriage and sex appears to primarily focus on what LGBTQI people cannot do' (211). Although I agree with this last quote, I perhaps agree with it from a very different perspective.

Building on such scattered statements throughout the end of the book, the suggestion seems to be that the restriction of sex within marriage—whether classically understood, or a 'developmental' notion which incorporates same-sex couples—should begin to be considered as one option amongst several for the church. Indeed, considering the unexpected relativising of his prior argument for relational sex, and the hints given regarding the sexual revolution and the need to recognise that sex can be fun (60), as well as the emphasis on listening to the *cultures* (not just the *experience*) of the LGBTQI community (142), one can see an argument opening for the church coming to terms with some forms of hook-up culture—as long as they are not abusive, subjugating, unfaithful or coercive. This is hardly a slippery slope argument—one just needs to see the theology undergirding the ethical development of the Metropolitan Congregation over the past five decades to see it is quite feasible for other churches to go in a similar direction. After all, the kind of arguments made by Bell in *Queer Holiness* are reminiscent of arguments made by Metropolitan

theologians decades ago; look at the Metropolitan beliefs today to see how Bell's arguments could be used.

For example, one begins to wonder what 'unfaithful' means—is it about pure monogamy or is it about consent? After all, a polyamorous theologian like Paul Tillich did not consider his open marriage 'unfaithful'. We're not too far away from the arguments made in Althaus-Reid's radical essay *The Queer God*. When this is combined with quotes such as the following ...

The corollary is not that God has changed his mind—far from it—but that God is leading us ever closer to His heart in His continual revelation in the world. It is not God who has been wrong—it is us—and yet we continue to refuse him (182)

...one cannot help but wonder whether this allows in principle the sacralisation of contemporary Western culture.

### *Something has gone wrong*

It is here that this implicit argument takes an interesting turn. Whereas previously there could have been a tenuous claim to theological development—i.e. the extension of the institution of marriage to incorporate same-sex couples—we are now in a place where the position of the church regarding sexual ethics almost exactly coincides with the [beliefs and sexual norms in contemporary British society](#). I'm not saying that Bell is arguing for the sacralisation of these new norms (though I also cannot be sure from the text alone that he is not). I am rather observing that it is difficult to see how one can *not* argue from this that the logical conclusion is such a sacralisation. This means one of four things:

1. contrary to Bell's assertions, God has 'changed God's mind', or at least has 'learnt' more;
2. Christian views of sexuality always have been, broadly speaking, relativistic to the 'host culture' within certain revealed bounds;
3. divine intention for sexuality through progressive revelation has coincided almost exactly with British liberal values of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, meaning that Christianity-rejecting secular Britain is the closest human society has ever been to 'what God wants' regarding sexuality;
4. something has gone wrong with Bell's argument.

The first proposal is theologically promising—if one accepts some kind of rigorous process metaphysics. Yet the question arises, as it has always done with Whiteheadian process thinking, whether it is compatible with Christian doctrine as it has been received. I'm not sure it is; Bell doesn't suggest it; as such I can bracket this idea for another time.

The problem with the second proposal is that either it is total relativism, or the 'revealed bounds' as understood by the proponents tend to be suspiciously close to Western liberal values of autonomy and choice. Though there is a toleration of other cultural expressions of marriage and sexuality, there lurks an inward superiority complex. We can see this in a film like *Eat Pray Love* where, although the protagonist tolerates another character's arranged

marriage, it is presented as a tragic circumstance, a core of bitter sadness dressed in bright colours, dancing, and joyful music.

This leads to the third proposal: progressive revelation coincides with 21<sup>st</sup> Century British liberal culture. The problem here is that there lurks a cultural imperialism, akin to the arrogant Hegelian idealism embodied in pre-First World War Germany. There, the unfolding of the divine idea coincided with the cultural norms of the Second German Reich. This is not to say that progressive revelation ends with that culture, but rather that that culture is claimed to be the incarnational stream through which the Spirit makes revelation concrete. As far as I can see, no one is arguing that progressive revelation in matters of sexuality is happening through African Pentecostalism or even Indian Hinduism. This is convenient: God is revealing himself on this matter through the host culture of the proponent. Yet this is what Bell seems to be arguing for Western liberal values. The fact that he tries to back up his argument through the latest science strikes the dogmatic historian in me as a remarkable parallel to the pre-war German use of then-contemporary science to back up their own cultural norms.

This is why I think the most likely proposal is the fourth: something has gone wrong. In Part III of this review, I will be exploring that fourth proposal in more detail. In Part IV, I will also attempt to make an alternative suggestion to Bell's in incorporating some of the scientific evidence he raises in his book. However, before we can reach there, we need to make an unfortunate detour in Part II.

## Part II: A (Very) Flawed Text

In Part I of this review of Charlie Bell's book, *Queer Holiness*, after outlining his overall argument, I noted that the hints and implications of some of his arguments lead to a 'sacralisation' of contemporary Western norms for sexual ethics, that is, equating our current culture with divine revelation. As such, I proposed that something has gone wrong with his argument. I would love to dive in and answer that proposal. However, I will have to delay the reader for a little while. So far, I have presented Bell's argument in its most irenic and reasoned mode. Had Bell decided to maintain an irenic tone, this would have been a good and challenging book. There are plenty of irenic moments—calm, considered, rational—and I have tried to present the better part of his argument above. But this irenicism is conveniently granted only to those who agree with his position.

The book, in the main, is a sustained polemic. Don't get me wrong: I enjoy a well-written polemical article or book, even when directed at my own theological/political positions. But it takes quite a bit of skill to pull off such a thing. One must be careful of internal consistency, strawmanning, and an undeserved superiority complex. Even excellent theological polemicists like David Bentley Hart have a tendency to lapse into at least one of these three. When all three are continuously present, the rhetoric becomes less polemical and more a diatribe. Bell's Twitteresque mode of communication spills over, leaving a much weaker book than what it could have been, with a more than comfortable number of internal inconsistencies, strawmanning and an undeserved superiority complex. This means that (sadly) this review will have to be much longer than should have been necessary. A whole section has had to be added because *Queer Holiness* is a (very) flawed text.

### Internal Inconsistencies

In general, Bell's argument is consistent. But when it comes to the practical implication, it tends to be one rule for him and another for others. A prescient example can be found here:

In the Church, like elsewhere, there remain people whose lack of introspection and whose privilege leads them to quite genuinely believe that they know better and know more than others, and that it is their right and even calling to ensure that their interpretation is not only heard but enforced (126).

In the same paragraph he then says:

This is an outright abuse of power and authority, and one that the Church should *stamp* on before it damages souls [emphasis mine].

Were Bell talking about an outright 'stamping' on people enforcing their positions on others, there may be something to say for it. But the context—critique of conservatives who tend to be 'white, male, heterosexual, cisgendered and well off' according to Bell (I fit the first four)—makes it quite eye-opening. What enforcement means is unclear—at the very least it means that other views are 'stamped' upon, which is an interesting position to say the least. Bell is himself white, male, cisgendered (as far as I understand) and well off—in other words, very privileged himself. It would not be too difficult to draw the implication that any expectation for monitoring (or 'enforcing' the Church of England's canonical position should be curtailed by enforcement, at the recommendation of a white, cisgendered and well-off



male. (The evolving position of The Episcopal Church comes to mind here—let the reader understand).

Elsewhere, the statements of the text contradict the events of the out-of-text world. Bell writes, ‘that Christianity has not managed to throw off the very human lust for power is disappointing but not entirely unpredictable’ (113). He spends a lot of time in the following chapter analysing the lust and abuse of power. Now, unlike Bell, I do not have the privileged contacts or cultural influence to [speak to MPs in Parliament](#), who have the power to bring up legislation to disestablish the Church of England unless it conforms to contemporary norms. That he has such contacts and cultural influence is a position of immense privilege, something to which most people, including myself, do not have access. From my non-London-centric perspective, Bell has immense power and privilege. Indeed, he has had one of the most privileged educational upbringings in the world: [Cathedral School education and a Cambridge doctorate](#). My secondary modern-educated parents, who were born into the upper working class, taught me from a young age that to get by in class-ridden Britain I would have to lose my Welsh-inflected Black County accent and put on Queen’s English—the truth of which was horribly confirmed in university.

Why do I bring this seemingly unrelated subject up? It’s a matter of pointing out power and privilege, as Bell is seemingly oblivious to his own. This is the problem of intersectional theory (which Bell recommends on p 212) that someone of his privilege and power could consider himself to be oppressed by someone like me. It has the feeling of, ironically, a paternalist intersectionality. (It’s why Roxanne Gay’s friendly though insightful critiques of intersectional theory resonates so much with me; also why I am highly sceptical of the so-called ‘1968’ revolutions in the West). Bell’s classist attitude lurks beneath the surface of the text. For example, in his pot-shots towards evangelical accommodation of pop aesthetics he writes that no ‘amount of imported pop culture in our worship’ will convince people (219)—a position which is blind to the psychological implications of contemporary aesthetic theory, and how that works out amongst those who did not have the privilege of being immersed in the post-bourgeois aristocratic aesthetics of a Cathedral school when growing up.

Another example of Bell’s internal inconsistency is his frequent critiques of the pride and lack of humility in his opponents, especially regarding the conservative argument for the perspicuity of the Scriptures on matters of sexuality. Yet as we will see from the undeserved superiority complex, Bell’s writing presents itself as almost entirely lacking humility. Because of this, when he does attempt humility—‘It is important to state something that is entirely obvious—we might be wrong’ (139)—it seems like a shallow or even sarcastic assertion. The extent to which he is genuine is masked by the prior rhetorical strategy. It feels like a sophisticated manoeuvre to please his adherents rather than a genuine sense of humility in the face of reading the arguments of his opponents. More of, ‘there is a statistical probability that I might be wrong’ rather than ‘my opponents have some good arguments which I find challenging’—as seen in his statement that continuing opposition to LGBTQI relational sexuality is ‘flimsy’ (151).

A final example is his critique of ‘othering’ (183-191). Bell spends much time emphasising the sin of ‘othering’ human beings. Although there is far more to it (summarising the riches of Levinas in a paragraph is a non-starter), one way of viewing ‘othering’ is to treat people as 2-D caricatures rather than psycho-social 3-D beings deserving of ethical respect and love.

Yet throughout *Queen Holiness*, conservatives are treated as stupid, uneducated, unthinking, oblivious, manipulative, cruel, wicked, even demonic. Perhaps I missed it, but I could not find a single occasion when conservatives were treated as people deserving dignity and respect. Take this, for example:

It is all part of a culture war that has been whipped up by ‘conservatives’ in order to point the finger of blame at those who don’t fit the norm. These aberrant people are the problem, the argument goes, and their ‘lifestyles’ cannot possibly fit within the Christian church. The problem with this position is that its starting point is culture rather than God: it assumes that the Church of God must, by its nature, be monocultural, and thus must require adherence, and even loyalty, to one, particular, cultural way of ‘being church’ (141).

Now excuse me for a moment whilst I put my MAGA hat into the cupboard before anyone discovers that the Labour-voting Europhile Joshua Penduck is in reality a fifth-columnist Trumpist. Joking aside, who here is Bell talking about? This idea of conservatives being monocultural culture warriors is a nonsense fantasy projection. Yes, there are right-wing culture war warriors amongst theological conservatives; there are also Corbynists and Liberal Democrats too. Conversely, a liberal colleague in my church is a Telegraph-reading Brexiteer. An Augustinian interpretation of a parable about wheat and tares comes to mind.

And Bell’s ‘monocultural’ critique is unintentionally amusing. A good number of the theologically conservative churches I have visited are multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-class, multi-generational groupings. A good number of the theologically liberal churches I have been to have been monochrome groups of middle-class white retirees (the irony of Bell’s critique of the typical white, middle-class Anglican parish on p 144 is therefore quite amusing). Is this to say that all conservative churches are beacons of diversity, and all liberal churches are bastions of in-group suspicion? Of course not. But to claim it of conservatives, as Bell argues here, is a classic and egregious case of othering.

This contradictory attitude is nicely illustrated when he writes, ‘we do not win people for Christ by pretending there are no other arguments, rubbishing others, or streamrolling people’ (218). After a book full of such attributes, this line also gave me much ironic mirth. Which leads to the second fault of the text: strawmanning.

### **Strawmanning**

This is the fruit of his ‘othering’ of conservatives. Because he has refused to give his opponents the benefit of the doubt, they are presented in the worst possible light. This seriously effects his argument and his research. I could not help being reminded of that old classic of strawmanning, *The God Delusion*, where any engagement with opposing arguments is dealt with in the most disdainful, withering and simplistic ways.

There are occasions when I can let the strawmanning slide and give Bell the benefit of the doubt—there’s only so much you can say within what appears to be a middle-to-high-brow popular book. Not every argument can be fully explored. On other occasions the strawmanning is just irritating. His blithe dismissal of the conservative arguments from the Scriptures—based on a lack of clarity from the Biblical texts—connects with a sliding

between conservative critique of same-sex sexual activity and rejection of LGBTQI people. Take this, for example:

We may hypothetically prove beyond reasonable doubt that particular Greek words used in the epistles really do refer to consensual sexual acts between two men (although such a claim is highly dubious), yet this does not immediately mean that the Christian church *must oppose homosexuality in all its forms* (125) (italics mine).

But outside of Fundamentalist circles, no one is arguing that the Church ‘must oppose homosexuality *in all its forms*.’ Another example can be found later in the book:

It is important to be clear that unless and until LGBTQI people have access to the sacraments, rites, and public ministry of the Church in the way that heterosexuals currently do, then there is no equality (161).

Once again, no one in the mainstream is arguing that LGBTQI people should not have such access. The question is about practice and order. These are just two (irritating) examples amongst many. In a similar way to how Dawkins would associate all religion with its most fundamentalist interpretations, Bell associates the conservative position with fundamentalism.

But the real problem of strawmanning is when it undermines the credibility of the arguer. For example, Bell only seemed to engage with popular conservative books on sexuality—with one exception—whereas his arguments for a liberal case is resplendent with journal articles and academic tomes. It’s not as if theologically rigorous conservative arguments are difficult to come by. One just needs to turn to [Oliver O’Donovan](#) or [John Paul II’s \*Theology of the Body\*](#). But there is nothing in Bell’s text that indicates even an awareness of standard conservative approaches. Nothing. Zilch. Because of this lack of engagement, he writes conservatives off as ‘appearing increasingly desperate’ (181). Well, of course they would appear to be that if you hadn’t read them. It’s not even as if there is any engagement with liberals such as [Luke Timothy Johnson](#) who would claim that a directly biblical case *cannot* be found for changing the Church’s traditional teachings on sexuality (though Johnson would claim biblical principles—[such as found in Acts 17](#)—do equip the church to think differently).

But even on the one occasion Bell does engage with an academic conservative book, namely Robert Gagnon, he does so without any real rigour. Excepting a critique of the latter half of [The Bible and Homosexual Practice](#) (which Bell rightly critiques for its selective—and I would also argue, outdated—approach to the psychological literature on LGBTQ people)—the only engagement with the main body of Gagnon’s work is through one other author. For example, he claims that an article by David Atkinson ‘carefully decimates’ Gagnon’s account (82 ff.10). However, Bell does not say *how*. Considering that Gagnon’s book, for all its faults, is a key (though by no means faultless) text in this debate, at least from the perspective of biblical theology, one would have thought that some indication may have been made to show *why* Atkinson’s argument is superior. But yet again there is nothing. Zilch. As such, I had to dip into my increasingly small post-energy crisis book budget (!) to buy [Other Voices, Other Worlds](#) in which Atkinson’s argument could be found. Though his argument has some good points, I did not find it ‘carefully decimating’. It would just require a bit more clarification from Gagnon. After reading, it occurred to me: ‘I’ve read this somewhere before.’ As it happens, [Gagnon responded](#) to Atkinson’s argument on the website of the

organisation of which I am part, *Fulcrum*. It is a long, thorough, reasoned, and measured rebuttal, arguing that Atkinson's account misread *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. What's more, [Atkinson himself responded to Gagnon](#), also on *Fulcrum* (which, albeit disappointingly, is little more than a shorter restatement of his original argument). After re-reading Gagnon and Atkinson's articles, there clearly was no 'careful decimation'.

All this was not difficult to find: I just typed in 'Gagnon response to Atkinson' into Google. My point is that because of his othering and strawmanning, it seems Bell did not think the conservative response might have even been worth his time to research. There's a word for that: laziness.

The opposite of strawmanning is called 'steelmanning'. This is about so entering into the arguments of one's opponents that you can find ways of improving them, before then critiquing them. The technique goes all the way back to Socrates—or at least Plato's interpretation of him in *Meno*. I attempted to dabble a little bit of that in my account of Bell's book in Part I of this review. Although the technique is not entirely faultless, at least some steelmanning would not have gone amiss in *Queer Holiness*.

### **Undeserved Superiority Complex**

This leads to the final problem of the polemical tactic manifest in the book: undeserved superiority complex. A good polemic always has a whiff of the superiority complex—but that is because the polemicist really knows their subject well enough to make it feel genuine. But that takes a lot of work, none of which Bell has really demonstrated. When it comes to his own strengths—psychology—he is worth listening to. But otherwise the superiority complex demonstrated throughout the book is thoroughly *undeserving*.

#### *a) The hermeneutical question*

Too often Bell decides implicitly that all his opponents are fundamentalists of the most literalistic sort. Take this for an example:

Just because their [LGBTQI people] interpretation is different to others' doesn't mean they don't believe or that they don't place the Bible above everything else in their lives. Indeed, quite often their way of reading the Bible shows it more respect, rather than less, because it takes the Bible on its own terms, and doesn't ask it to do what it is not able to do, nor designed to do. *The Bible is not an instruction manual*.

From personal experience I know that instruction manual biblicism is not something restricted to conservatives. Bell goes on to criticise 'a literalist, peripherally-focused reading of Scripture', and goes on to criticise a conservative reading, thereby tying the two together. The long running thread throughout Bell's chapters on the Bible is the implication that hermeneutics is an alien field to conservatives. Of course, those great hermeneutical scholars who represent the church triumphant and church militant respectively, Anthony Thiselton and Kevin Vanhoozer, would be bemused at such a statement. Is Bell aware that there is a whole host of hermeneutical scholars—biblical, systematic, philosophical—who hold a conservative position? If he is aware, then it demonstrates dishonesty in its presentation of the opposing argument. If not, then it has been badly researched—yet again.

A quasi-postliberal understanding of overarching narrative is offered (49) as Bell's own hermeneutical tool for approaching Scripture (though admittedly little attention is given to this). Where Bell does use narrative-based interpretation, it tends to be used to overrule propositional interpretation. But this is an increasingly problematic interpretation of Scripture. For example, Fred Sanders in his [The Triune God](#) has made an excellent case that the kind of Barthian, revelational narrativity typical of, say, Leonard Hodgson, was not the means through which the Church Fathers developed that great doctrinal development in the Nicene Creed. Instead, there was a far more propositional approach than postliberals would be comfortable with today. A similar argument has been made in Katherine Sonderegger's second volume of her outstanding [Systematic Theology](#).

At the same time, Bell's hermeneutical method isn't quite what he claims it is. Rather than a narrative approach, the method appears in practice to be more a Neo-Irenaean developmental understanding of Scripture typical of 19<sup>th</sup> Century liberalism. For example, there are hints of a Whiggish notion of historical development—'the Church has lagged behind wider society' (19)—drawn towards some eschatological future which nevertheless lacks content. Indeed, except for Particular Incarnation and Trinity, there is little here that is substantially different from a 19<sup>th</sup> Century liberal Protestant account (the ghosts of [Ritschl](#) and [Harnack](#) lurk here and there). His use of a community of love and justice as a hermeneutical principle seems to be taken straight out of a Ritschlian textbook—a kind of hermeneutics of charity towards which Augustine would be quite suspicious (see *On Christian Teaching III.X.14-16*). It must be said that there are the Anglican family-resemblances to [F.D. Maurice](#) and [Charles Gore](#) thrown in the mix. But in general, this is a classic liberal hermeneutic—and Bell doesn't appear to be aware of it. If he is, there is a dishonesty in not even giving the knowing reader a footnote that to such an approach there has been over *one hundred years* of excellent conservative critiques from a variety of church traditions. If he is not, then it once again demonstrates an disappointing lack of research and methodological self-awareness.

#### *b) Stoolism*

Another example of this is his lauding of the three-legged-stool (41-2)—of Scripture, tradition, and reason (with experience being partly reason, partly its own category). Within this, the Bible is considered in a somewhat Barthian vein as 'a divine-inspired record', or alternatively just a 'record of God's revelation' (37) (the slide between the two is very interesting, considering that they are two fundamentally different ontologies of Scripture). It is 'a dialogue partner—the senior partner, indeed, but a partner nonetheless' (41) for whom we look to for 'guidance on human flourishing' (46). He goes on to claim an Anglican heritage for this stance: 'The Church of England takes the ongoing revelation of God through history very seriously indeed—the Bible is indeed complete, but the work of the Spirit is not, and the Bible can point us to where that work continues in our own day' (41).

But once again, with the exception of a reference to Paul Avis, Bell shows no awareness that there are different models of three-legged-stoolism. Thomas and Turretin and Tillich all lauded Scripture, tradition and reason, but their different emphases changed the outcome. Barth and Balthasar and Borg all used the three legs but have remarkably different theologies: whereas Barth would say Jesus is the one revelation of God, Borg would say he is one of many. Even Hooker's own model is not neatly packaged to systematisation: as

[Michael Brydon's \*The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker\*](#) demonstrated, there were a variety of ways in which 17<sup>th</sup> Century Anglicanism appropriated Hooker's legacy. One just needs to pick up Beveridge's [Ecclesia Anglicana](#) to see that one can take the three legs in a blandly literalistic approach, or one of Jeremy Taylor's sermons to find a much more organic approach—though one which admittedly too easily slides between the three. Waterland used the three legs to defend Orthodoxy, Gilbert Burnett to allow a whole host of heresies to nestle quietly within. Bell's own model seems to be something of a mix-and-match: on occasion, Scripture dominates (i.e. incarnation, Trinity, justice etc), at times tradition (liturgy, Creedalism etc), at times reason (sexuality, psychology, biology), at times experience.

At the risk of sounding like a German systematician, a little bit of consistency justifying the changing accents would have been highly useful. Even an methodological appendix or endnote nicely tucked away from the main text would have helped. But once again, nothing. Zilch. The impression given is that because the author assumes stoolism plus experience equals superiority to those ignorant biblical literalistic conservatives, he has no reason to explore any further. And once more this undermines the credibility of the author. Indeed, quite far from the Bible being 'the superior partner', Anglican stoolism mainly worked on the principle that the Bible is the *norma normans non normata*, that is the norm in theology that is not normed, or the one 'leg' of theology which does the shaping, whereas the other legs have been considered as *norma normata*, that is, normal aspects of theology which are shaped by the Scriptures.

Wherever Bell uses the Bible specifically on the matter of same-sex sexual practice, it is considered a 'normed norm', that is, shaped by his understanding of reason and experience. Having the Bible be 'the superior partner' may or may not be a legitimate development of Stoolism; but classic Anglicanism it is not. Indeed, Bell's understanding of reason bears ripe comparison with the Socinian models which mainstream classical Anglicanism was at pains to reject. The irony is that for all its many faults, *Issues in Human Sexuality* is far closer to classical Anglican models than Bell's, despite his critique of its 'broad but shallow flourish towards the *Anglican* three-legged stool' (133, emphasis mine).

A merely cursory reading of doctrinal history over the last few centuries would prove that the kind of dogmatic function for reason that Bell employs to critique the traditional understanding of sexuality has been used for nearly every dogmatic and ethical loci: the Trinity, the incarnation, atonement, resurrection, miracles—the list goes on. That the Church of England has rejected such an approach over the last few decades and reaffirmed creedal orthodoxy is in part due to the reclamation of the supreme authority of Scripture as interpreted through the tradition. (On a side note, I have a sneaking suspicion that one of the reasons Trinity, incarnation and resurrection have been reclaimed even amongst liberals is that they fit in with a post-Deleuzian model of ontological diversity and a feminist/queer defence of the integrity of the body and materiality. Not that these are bad things in themselves—indeed, any return to creedal orthodoxy is a good, no matter the route. Nevertheless, this risks reliance and dependence on the fittingness of creedal orthodoxy with academic and cultural trends).

I should say that there are many places where I have placed 'ticks' in my copy of *Queer Holiness* (for example, the central paragraph on page 53) and wholly agree with Bell's understanding of Biblical interpretation. Funnily enough, most mainstream conservative

exegesis within the Church of England—even those far more conservative than I—would also agree (and therefore doesn't fit into the binary between conservative and liberal which Bell seems at pains to create). Nevertheless, it is difficult to understand the dogmatic function of the Bible for Bell. Is it narrative formation? Sacramental? Of pneumatological existentiality? Something having merely formal authority? A literary classic for a traditioned community? Calling it an inspired record of God's self-revelation is a parson's nose. It can mean anything to anyone, depending on how 'inspired', 'record', 'God', 'self' and 'revelation' are understood. I think in principle even Don Cupitt could agree with this.

In one place where he does seem to give the Bible senior partner authority is also the one where he also seems to divest it of all potentially authority of content—'The Bible, in one sense, does have all the answers—the problem is that one of the Bible's own answers is to take narrative and human knowledge seriously' (83). I am now probably splitting hairs but considering that at the heart of this debate for conservatives is the *quality* of authority which the Bible has within Christian dogmatics and ethics (not just *quantity*, which 'a senior partner' indicates), clarity is vital. Despite his lauding of the role of Scripture in the last chapter, this seems to contradict how he has approached Scripture on this particular issue of sexuality.

This problem of a lack of clarity is worsened in that Bell spends considerable time across the book pointing out how it is difficult to understand the meaning of Scriptural texts, which lack clarity. Naturally, his preferred Biblical verses are presented as beacons of perspicuity; it's just the verses which challenge his own argument which lack perspicuity. This is convenient, to say the least. Yet two of the examples he gives for Scriptural perspicuity—'God... does not bless the subjugation of women' and 'does not bless coercive sexual behaviour' (52)—have (tragically) not been seen as clear throughout Christian history. In Bell's own words, with Scriptural interpretation, 'we can always find what we want' (130).

## **Conclusion to Part II**

It should be noted that the kind of background research I have noted *Queer Holiness* as lacking is not necessary for every contribution to this debate (or any debate). It is not required for one to know the genealogy of their own thinking, nor even some historical excavation for the theological views of one's opponents. However, once one decides on a polemical rhetorical strategy, lest one fall into the trap of a diatribe, it becomes necessary to understand the wider thinking of one's opponents in order to understand how they came to a conclusion in one particular area of ethical *loci*. Yet repeatedly throughout the text, Bell presents a haughty tone towards his opponents, dripping in condescension. Repeatedly, overblown and overly-simplistic statements are thrown about:

Beyond these creeds, there are no foundational articles of belief, and there is no test of orthodoxy. To base orthodoxy on the sex-lives of LGBTQI people is nothing short of blasphemy. (212)

There are no foundational articles of belief critiquing numerous ethical problems, including genocide. Does that mean we should remain in communion with a church which advocates genocide? Is it blasphemous to schism in such a circumstance? Of course not. It's a silly statement for Bell to make and gives ammunition to those who critique Anglicans as creedal reductionists. (Note: for those who are eager to see evil incarnate in anyone making a



conservative argument, I refer here to the well-established distinction between the use of rhetorical casuistry to illuminate ethical principles and a moral equivalence).

Sometimes, Bell gets quite cringe-worthy in his lack of basic understanding. Take this for example:

whilst the teleological argument—*the argument from intelligent design*—has well and truly run its course’ (81)

(The great disturbance that you may feel in the Force is that of tens of thousands of Thomists, Medieval scholars and Aristotelians having sickly convulsions). Once again, this kind of theological faux pas was unnecessary. A little bit of research—plus a good theological editor—could have made this embarrassing statement disappear into the ether. But sadly, the text is littered with moments like this. What I find unsettling is that despite all its othering and strawmanning of the conservatives, a diocesan bishop can claim in the sleeve notes that such a ‘comprehensive’ book ‘deserves’ to be ‘read widely’. The question can be legitimately raised of what extent he shares Bell’s views of the conservative parishes and clergy in his diocese.

The great mistake here is that of pride, understood both in its classical theological sense, and also as argued by [Stephen Cherry](#). Perhaps it is a reaction against unthinking conservative arrogance (I know my own ‘side’ of this debate can get horribly haughty and unthinking). But two wrongs don’t make a right. Othering, strawmanning, and an undeserved superiority complex has led to a lack of basic research outside of Bell’s own academic niches, an unhealthy scattering of theological clangers, and an overconfidence in his positions without the necessary prior excavation of methodological presuppositions nor those of his opponents. It is the last which makes his argument weakest: the first two can be easily corrected if ever a second edition were forthcoming; the last is a structural problem. Had Bell stuck to his strong areas—in particular, the contribution of biological and psychological sciences—this would have been a valuable contribution to a difficult debate. Unfortunately, his tendency towards polemic has undermined what value could have been offered and in doing so made the book a very mixed bag.

Now that this (unfortunately both necessary—from my end—and unnecessary—from Bell’s end) part of the review is over, I can return in Part III to the closing question of Part I: what has gone wrong?



### Part III: What has gone wrong?

Let's review. Bell has argued that the Church of England must reach the point of accepting gay marriage as well as implying some kind of concordance with contemporary sexual ethics in the modern West (his suggestive reference to *aggiornamento* on p.159 is revealing). Although the Bible has a narrative function within this, giving what appears to be a formal structure within which other 'tools' are used, his main argument comes through the 'reason' embodied in the biological and scientific sciences and the 'experience' of LGBTQI people.

#### The problem of Evolutionary Acid

The previous section of this review, for all its negative critique, did have a positive function in bringing to the surface the conflicting role of the Scriptures in Bell's argument. Frequently he refers to grey areas. I have already noted his argument that Scripture is hermeneutically 'grey' on sexuality (I must confess that I find this deeply unconvincing; if Scripture was 'grey' here, I'd still be a liberal). He also notes that there are grey areas in the distinction between sexual acts and friendly acts—how we interpret this is somewhat subjective. Later on, he draws on Diarmaid MacCulloch in noting that there has not been a consistent Christian interpretation of marriage—thereby making it another grey area. Unsurprisingly, rather than indicating the need for caution, Bell uses the 'grey' as a way of saying, 'This means we can shape it towards a liberal outcome.'

As such, despite all his paeans to Scripture, the strategy has been to undermine the central place of Scripture for giving practical and ethical content in the particularity of this debate. Anything that Scripture says about sexuality is considered either unclear, irrelevant or relativised. For example:

It is not enough to simply point to isolated texts without engaging with the whole record of God's revelation, through scripture and through scripture applied to *and tested against the living history of the people of God* (51-2, emphasis mine)

I am completely in agreement with the first part of that sentence; it's the second part I have problems with. Notice that phrase, 'tested against'. Whereas Hookerian Anglicanism made the brilliant step of arguing that the role of Scripture is not to dictate all practical outcomes but rather to 'test' whether something is in accordance or harmony with it, now we have Scripture being 'tested' by the tools used to apply it—tradition ('history', 'people of God'), reason ('tested'), and experience ('living people'). In principle, this means that even if Scripture was clear on matters of sexuality (which is the majority consensus of biblical scholars), it could be ignored if it doesn't accord with reason and experience. Because Scripture has in effect been neutered, Bell can make such fascinating arguments as the following:

It is reasonable at this point to ask the key question—why did God allow this to happen? Even if we take the most scientific understanding of evolution and consider the necessity of genetic mutation for evolution to occur, and we recognise the genetic influence—albeit as part of a multifactorial whole—on homosexuality and hence the likelihood of its development in evolutionary genetic processes as part of sexual function, the question remains: why did God allow those who He has called by

name, and who are created in His image, to be born into a world in which they can never access a relational sexuality without being condemned to hell?

I'm going to ignore the last phrase—once again, an example of Bell's keen desire to strawman the breadth of his opponents views into a singular rigid type (there are conservatives who do hold to the view Bell lambasts here; there are others for whom this is less a soteriological matter and more a matter of church order and teaching). Instead, let's focus on the implication of his argument that because we have an 'is', that therefore gives us room for an 'ought'. The 'why' is very strange here. Surely this is not just a question limited to matters of sexuality? Isn't this a question of theodicy? Are we to say that of the many things that God 'allows' to happen this entails divine blessing? For example, in that psychopathy generally comes from genetic factors (as opposed to the social factors that lead to sociopathy), is this to indicate that because God allows psychopathy, God intends it? Arguments for inevitability due to evolutionary genetic processes do not stand up here either—for one thing, psychopathy can be considered inevitable due to evolutionary survival factors.

Let's take this argument closer to the world of sexuality. Evolutionary history has wired my brain to ensure that my genes are passed on as widely as possible. This is an important—indeed for genetic propagation 'good'—function. However, it means that structurally I am not wired for monogamous faithfulness. To put things simplistically, whenever I see someone I find attractive, a shot of adrenaline shoots into my brain saying, 'Have sex with them'. Sometimes, this urge is overwhelming and can consume all my thinking. For many people, it can even consume their acting too. Yet the 'is' does not imply an 'ought'. Were it so, polygamy, concubinage, polyamory, or prostitution could be considered 'good', or at least tragically necessary solutions to the problem. Later, Bell writes:

Why has God created LGBTQI people who are intrinsically unable to access relational sexuality? Are we really to believe that by virtue of this accident of genes and environment, they are all called to abstinence? (97-8)

The response to the last rhetorical question is another rhetorical question: 'Are we really to believe that by virtue of this accident of genes and environment, we are all called to exclusive monogamy?' When Bell writes, 'once again raising the question of how and why God would create people for whom this gift [sexuality] is dangled like a forbidden fruit' (172) the response can once again be given regarding exclusive monogamy. Both are founded in evolutionary history and genetic wiring—though a greater argument could be made for the latter. (I am reminded here of [South Park's Satan explaining naturalism to Stan](#)).

Of course, for most Christians through the ages, the answer was simple: God did not intend such things, because he did not intend for sexuality to be used in such a way. How did it happen? The Fall. Naturally, Bell rejects such a move:

We have addressed the unconvincing "regression to the Fall" theological explanation in Part I—and it is no more convincing when we try to blame the diversity of human sexuality on the Fall in this context. As we know, sexuality appears to be a spectrum and as such, it is hard to neatly delineate that which is fallen from that which is good—it is also somewhat incoherent theology, as what we inevitably need to argue is that it is the entire sexuality of certain people that is "fallen" (i.e. those who are

attracted to those of the same sex), which raised more theological questions than it answers. (Ibid).

This is a reference to his earlier argument from intersexuality, which he argues is a genetic inevitability, and cannot be considered an outcome of the Fall. In principle, I would agree (although I disagree with her theological perspective, I have found Susannah Cornwall's [Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ](#) very helpful here); nevertheless there are theological 'problems' which emerge from other but related ethical cases if we take such a perspective. Though these problem do not discount Bell's argument, my focus is that he relates the questions of intersexuality with sexual orientation. This is understandable from the perspective of LGBTQ; however, I think we are dealing with two separate matters, one being bodily condition and the other being orientation.

Bell is keen to take the question of the Fall out of this area of sexuality. Earlier he writes, 'regression to the Fall is not good theology' (78). However, it is difficult to understand what he means by 'the Fall'. Although he affirms his belief in it, he argues that it 'may be expressed in new and different ways in each generation' (30). The risk with such an approach is that it can be made to mean, 'the Fall is whatever I consider Fallen', and thereby a confirmation of one's own ethical presuppositions.

His concept itself becomes quite flaccid when he argues that the Fall is 'the doctrine that the world is not as it should be, but rather a place in which disobedience has brought sin and evil'. One must then ask: is not disobedience also an inevitability of our evolutionary history and our genetic wiring? Anyone who has spent time with a small child realises that disobedience is quite natural as soon as he or she can grasp the word 'no'. Bell doesn't state his model of understanding the Fall, though my suspicion is that he holds to the mimetic scapegoating theory of Rene Girard, whom he references on p 183. I have much respect for Girard's theory, yet unless it resorts to using supernatural interference (for example, demonic entities, which Girard himself hints at), then the acid of evolutionary theory strikes again: to what extent is scapegoating a natural outcome of our evolutionary history and genetic wiring? Do we not have here a mere internal and social interaction between our 'selfish' and 'altruistic' genes? [Gillian Rose's critique of Girard](#)—that he has 'left the city'—demonstrates that the theory rests on as ahistorical foundation as the classical Augustinian approach to lapsarian theology in the light of modern science.

The problem with Bell's notion of lapsarian heterogenerationalism is that it doesn't consider the idea that some models of the Fall are heretical—not all of which are explicitly announced as such by the Creeds. For example, many Gnostic understandings of the Fall are not explicitly ruled out by Nicaea or Chalcedon but are nevertheless heretical. What was at issue in Gnostic understandings? In part, the creator had created an always-already Fallen world. Salvation, therefore, is being removed out of the world itself. In other words, the Fall was ontological, part of the make-up of embodied existence. This is why I feel that Tillich's understanding, partly based on the alienation that emerges out of the natural distinction between persons as they grow, is heretical unless part of a wider narrative, as the Fall here is ontological, a Heideggerian 'thrownness' into Fallenness. Salvation, therefore, is about overcoming that natural Fallenness (Tillich) or accepting it (Heidegger). Some interpretations of the Fall are useful but also need to be part of a wider account. These often run into the same problem as Girard: is the Fall simply the outworking of natural human potentialities

given by evolution? One can consider Moltmann's [\*The Coming of God\*](#) in this vein, where his Noahic version based on the emergence of oppressive violence can be once more considered as the continuation of evolutionary dynamics in a civilisational mode. If this is the case, it is not strictly correct to use the word 'Fallen' for the human condition (which indicates matters could be otherwise).

To repeat: salvation here is about accepting or overcoming natural fallenness. The former can be summed up in the words of Michael Tippett's Jungian oratorio, *Child of our Time*: 'I must know my shadow and my light, and then at last be made whole'. The latter needs a different approach. Here, salvation is to be lifted out of our tragic existence away from the lower levels of material reality towards some higher form of embodiment. Christ came not so much to 'redeem', but rather to raise our humanity to higher and greater levels of existence, to begin or accelerate the march of The Great Progression. The Spirit could be considered the one who represses our evolutionarily developed natural instincts of based materiality and guides our progression to a greater and more perfect Law.

Each age has its own progression into this greater Law. For example, ours could be Intersectional Theory. We must therefore turn to the elect few who have been gifted with this insight by the Christ into the true, higher structures of reality. These are the ones who receive the new revelations. They have many names, but I have chosen upon one: the Western Liberal Intelligentsia. Those who do not follow this enlightened elect can be dismissed as the reprobate, bound to the lower levels of material reality. And it is vital that the chosen incarnate pathway of this election come through the Western Enlightenment tradition, either in its modern or postmodern form. Other traditions throughout the world are praised when they are in harmony with this tradition, like little lights. But woe unto those who do not harmonise with the great progression! Woe unto those who hold to older ideas! Woe unto the reprobate who do not keep up with The Great Progression! Theirs is the greatest blasphemy, for they should know the true revelation but have turned away unto their own lusts.

The nod towards Gnosticism is deliberate here. (Its why I cannot help but consider Teilhard de Chardin's system as 'horizontally Gnostic' as opposed to a 'vertically'—that is, the separation from Fallen embodied existence is stretched out across time as opposed to the hierarchical levels of the Gnostic cosmogony). And although this is a caricatured version, there are elements of this argument throughout Bell's book. It's why I would argue that despite his homage to the doctrine of the Fall his argument does not need it. Furthermore, such a narrative pattern of progressive revelation outlined above explains the paradox of someone advocating Intersectional Theory whilst simultaneously being blithely dismissive and scathing towards the views of most of the poorest Christians throughout the world.

It also explains why in *Queer Holiness* the Spirit's guidance becomes identified with the Western intelligentsia's cultural direction. If revelation is progressive, moving from base materiality to higher levels of embodied existence, then there is very little to separate revelation from culture. In that Bell (like me to a lesser extent) is a member of this Elect group, it is no accident that in this presentation revelation seems to happen through this group. In the previous section of this review, I noted that Bell claimed Scriptural perspicuity for parts of Scripture (such as the absence of divine blessing for the subjugation of women and coercive sexual behaviour). Unsurprisingly, these supposed moments of perspicuity are

also places of ethical perspicuity amongst the Western intelligentsia. And perspicuity is the word here: for the contemporary Western Intelligentsia, whereas matters of belief (like Incarnation and Trinity) are *adiaphora* ('things indifferent'), matters of ethics, and sexual ethics in particular, are first-order matters. To be considered above reproach in such circles, one *has* to agree.

Like with Second Reich Germany, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the best of the culture and Christianity. As I wrote in Part I, 'that culture is the incarnational stream through which the Spirit makes revelation concrete.' The Elect become the cultural drivers of that particular culture; other, non-elect cultures which are not in harmony with the Elect (African, Asian, traditional Western) become the people of darkness which must be 'stamped' upon—to quote Bell. When Bell writes, 'Yet the doctrine of the Fall does not inevitably lead to our viewing creation as entirely disordered—it simply calls us to discern carefully where the Spirit is working' (30), a Marxist hermeneutic of suspicion is not out of order.

This is perhaps why we see Bell so emphasising the need for cultural acceptance of Christianity. In his critique of Side B Christians, he writes, 'for those outside of church circles, this position can certainly feel quite bizarre' (99). But surely Christianity should be, to a certain extent, bizarre? The question that matters is which peculiarity we choose to emphasise. Wearing robes (which I do) is a cross on which many an Anglican would die, for example. Yet this bizarre practice alienates many people from Church life. Does that mean we should change? Some say yes, some say no. But although how society considers us is important (otherwise we ignore Romans 13), it is not the test of Christian faithfulness. Another example: earlier, Bell wrote, 'to be in a position where the Church and wider society glare at each other across a river of incomprehension is a travesty' (31). Is society's incomprehension at the Church a travesty, something which the Church needs to correct? Were Christians fed to the lions at fault for not making offerings to the Emperor and thereby causing the glare of societal incomprehension and offence? Or is it the case that there are occasions when, as Jesus said, because he was hated, so will we be?

We have seen how Bell has relativised the importance of the Scriptures: despite his statements to the contrary, his argument functionally works on the inferiority of the Scriptures on the issue of sexuality (and therefore can be in principle a method applied to any dogmatic or ethical *loci*). Furthermore, we have seen how due to an unthought-through approach to the Fall, he has tended towards a horizontal (rather than vertical) Gnostic position, which ends up sacralising particular trends within contemporary Western ethical thinking and cultural viewpoints. This causes Christianity to be identified with the ethical trends of that culture's Intelligentsia (as with German Second Reich thinking). The function of Scripture is relativised to be in harmony with these culture trends. Indeed, to paraphrase George Tyrrell's famous critique of Harnack's quest for the historical Jesus, 'The Scripture that Bell sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Conservative darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Anglican face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.'

Nevertheless, whilst the deconstructive approach I have taken so far in Parts II and III towards Bell's text may expose particular hidden and latent power dynamics, and thereby may have some therapeutic benefit for the conservative reader, our task is not finished.

Though Bell's own response to his question is lacking, he still requires a reasoned response:  
'Why? Why did God allow this to happen?'

## Part IV: Revelation, Scripture, and Science

In this long review, I have explored several critiques of Charlie Bell's book *Queer Holiness*. In Part II, I looked out how despite all the merits of his book (some of which were outlined in Part I), his polemical rhetoric has led to problems of internal inconsistency, privilege, strawmanning, othering, a lack of basic research in particular areas, and an inconsistent methodology, amongst a whole host of other avoidable faults. In Part III, I looked at the proposal I raised in Part I, that something has gone wrong in Bell's argument, namely that in relativising the role of Scripture on the question of same-sex practice (despite his protests otherwise) and having an ill-thought through approach to the Fall (which leads to the problem of Evolutionary Acid) he has ended up advocating a modernist 'Neo-Gnostic' approach to theology which equates progressive revelation with the dominant cultural group of which he is part, namely the Western Intelligentsia. However, I did note that the deconstruction of Bell's text can only go so far. Many of his questions need answering, in particular, 'Why did God allow this to happen?'

Whilst it is impossible to fully answer this in a review—that would require delving far more into theodicy and like subjects—one can begin a tentative answer. Indeed, certainly a better answer is needed than what Bell has provided, given the hydra-headed problem that emerges once we begin to investigate the problem of evolution, genetic inevitability, and sin. My own tentative answer will not be flawless, nor a kind of deductive reasoning that gives no room for alternative explanations. Instead, to refer to Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology*, as with the apologetic status of all Christian doctrine, I will be presenting a brief hypothesis, grounded in abductive reasoning. Part of the answer is by locating Bell's 'why' in a wider revelational context and then transforming it into a 'how'—i.e. 'how can God allow this to happen?' By doing so, it becomes easier to consider this part of a wider set of questions relating theodicy to the Fall. Given some the 'facts' of the case—that same-sex sexual attraction is not a choice, is a combination of that simplistic phrase 'nature and nurture', can be found in the animal world and is therefore an evolutionary 'inevitability'—a Christian response, grounded in the Christian understanding of revelation—is necessary.

I'll be honest here: I'm not going to respond to Bell's arguments about sexuality and repression, because I don't know enough about the subject. I found it the most convincing part of his book and wish he had spent more time on this (rather than the diatribe-like polemic that resulted). I have some ideas of how the first sketches of a responsive argument might be made—namely that the distinction between repression and sublimation that Bell makes (99) is blurred, the intensity of which is to a greater or lesser degree responsive to the surrounding culture's ethical goods as narrated by the social imaginary. For example, I think this may have more to do with intensive promotion of particular ways of being in capitalist society, which is hinted at by the American-rooted topography of the Pride Movement. Nevertheless, I'll let the psychologists, sociologists, ethicists and practical theologians debate that, otherwise I'd be making the ultimate English faux pas of contributing to a conversation the subject of which I know very little about!

### Revelation and Scripture

The first place we respond is by emphasising the concept of revelation. As [Colin Gunton argued](#), revelation means that in principle we would have no access to its content, nor know

it beforehand, without the revelatory initiative of God. Whilst this is obvious with regard to General Revelation, it is also true of Particular Revelation too. For example, we would not know the Trinitarian nature of God, the possibility of the Incarnation, atonement, resurrection, etc, were it not expressly revealed by God (even if hints and shadows were given through General Revelation). It must be remembered that Particular Revelation is by nature, particular. It is focussed and localised through history. It's why I disagree with Tillich's distinction between 'original' and 'dependant' revelation, as much as I sympathise with his argument. This makes the risk of understanding the original revelatory events and Scriptural 'explanation' as merely the source (or even 'a' source) of the river from which the mighty and greater but technically 'dependent' estuary flows.

It's also the problem with certain presentations of doctrinal development—not so much by how Newman articulated it, but rather by the ways he has been continuously been misinterpreted, as evidenced by the notion's recent use in General Synod. Much to be preferred is the old Protestant Scholastic distinction between 'revelation' and 'illumination'. Here, the latter brings insight to the former, but it is not of equal ontological weight. It reduces the risk of both a liberal 'progressive revelation' (which invariably leads to the sacralisation of the proponent's culture) or alternatively the need for a Magisterium to 'monitor' and 'prune' what is truly revelatory (which is the way of Rome; arguably this is more founded in Scripture and tradition than the liberal approach).

The key to my argument is that Particular Revelation *includes* Scripture. These are not separate categories. As such, we could not understand the meaning of these revelatory events without the interaction of both Scriptural narrative and *propositions*. The latter are as much part of revelation as the former. For example, the proposition 'God is Love' (I John 4.8b) makes sense of and gives ontological weight to the subsequent narrative verses (9-10), even as they give content to the possibly abstract proposition. This is the position of the historic church. It is the revelatory text through which we understand the revelatory acts—and is part of those revelatory acts.

It was [Carl Ludwig Nitzsch](#) who, in response to Fichte, divided the 'matter' of revelation from its 'form' (a genealogy which can be found in the Protestant Scholastics' own distinction and Luther before them). This contrasted external revelation found in history from the 'imperfections' of biblical testimony. Nitzsch's distinction would form the basis for much 19<sup>th</sup> Century Liberal theology of revelation. Bell's own distinction between 'revelation' and Scripture as 'a God-inspired record' is simply the latest iteration of this old claim. Part III of this review demonstrated why this is such a faulty move: by relativising the role of the 'imperfect' Scriptures as a mere 'record' of revelation, it enables the contemporary exegete to claim that they better understand God's revelation than even the Apostles and therefore they can mould revelation to be more in keeping with contemporary ethical, metaphysical or epistemological norms (see [here an example of Bell himself doing this with St Paul](#)).

In good Aristotelian fashion, by claiming that revelation includes Scripture, or rather that the matter of revelation is intrinsically 'shaped by' its Scriptural form, we are saying we must take Scripture with as much seriousness as one takes the historical facts 'behind' Scripture. Though, as Bell argues, Christ is the Word and Scripture the word (36-7), it is still *the* word on the Word, and not *a* word. One does not merely look for 'guidance' (46) from the Scriptures; one is bound to them, indeed submits to them. [As J.I. Packer argued](#), Jesus never



treats the Israelite Scriptures as a literary classic which guides us to understand God's revelation, but as an authority. This is not to say that one should ignore the historical context through which the Scriptures were composed, but neither does historical criticism relativise the ontological status of Scripture—a short reading of [John Webster](#) should put pay to such an idea. Instead, with redactional, narrative and form criticism in mind, we should be looking at what Scripture is revealing to us through the methods God employed. Forget for a moment the great distinctions between inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy; let's also bracket the question of the ontological link between God's word the human words used to express it; indeed, let's go even further and bracket questions of Ur-texts and translations: the key thing is that God intended the Scriptures as we have them: 'Thus saith the Lord'. Let this be the well-centre to which and from which the fuzzy sheep of scholastic questions are drawn and depart.

### **Genesis and Evolution**

If Scripture is included in revelation, and is therefore revelatory, this means that it gives us access to things which are in principle inaccessible by any other means (though hints and shadows may be found elsewhere). Careful attention must be given to the forms through which Scripture reveals things, including narrative, propositional and poetic forms, understood not by our own modernist categories but by the categories through which Scripture was written. This is not to neglect the importance of reception history, but it is to prize first the 'literal' sense of Scripture, supplemented by historical criticism.

Let's take the early chapters of Genesis, for example. Whereas in modernist categories it would come under the title of 'history' or 'mythology'—and the divisions between Fundamentalists and Liberals map out onto this modernist distinction—reading it according to comparable texts and its own shape indicates a strange form: historical mythology. Not mythical history—the pretemporal chronicles of the gods giving narrative form to ontological structures—but rather the writing of temporal history using mythological tropes. ([William Lane Craig](#) demonstrates how this is the case in fuller detail than I can go into here). This means that though there are the trans-temporal structures of myth present, meaning that the story of the Adam and Eve and the snake have a cross-cultural practical application, and that it is not a 'journalistic account' of history, it is also *the revelation* of a historical 'event'. The narrative and propositional structure of the rest of Scripture relies on the fundamental take that humanity has been 'deformed' from its original goodness. This works itself out in a wide variety of ways—sexuality included. As such, it is not just a 'revelation' of the human condition (we don't need revelation to help us understand that), nor of some structural anthropological process (such as scapegoating), but rather of a happening in human history.

But how does this match-up with the fossil and genetic evidences for evolution? I find both Craig and [John Walton](#) helpful here for showing how the Biblical text is neither the haphazard and awkward combining of two incompatible creation stories, nor a simple literal tale, but rather a deliberate distinction between the humanity of Genesis One and the individual 'Adam' of Genesis 2-3. Whilst this does not indicate anything but itself, it does perhaps help the reader 'harmonise' the text with contemporary scientific findings. Genesis 1-3 reveals the 'goodness' of humanity that was 'corrupted' in historical time. This has been given excellent development in the writings of Augustine and his Medieval successors

(though the paeans to the perfection of Adam in Protestant Scholasticism are overripe and not grounded in proper exegesis of the biblical text).

Is this compatible with our evolutionary history? There have been several accounts of how this may have happened. Some, like Craig, place the Fall of 'Historical Adam' in the early stages of hominid development, about 800,000 years ago. Others, like [C.S. Lewis](#) place the Fall far later in our development, around 50,000 years ago. Like Lewis, [James K.A. Smith](#) imagines it closer to the present than Craig, but nevertheless stretches the Fall out over several thousand years through a long period of 'testing' of a particular *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* group or collection of groups in the Rift Valley. Walton and [Henri Blocher](#) make it a single event by a single Adamic individual/couple (who knows—it may have been both long and short!).

It may have been the case that the unfallen 'goodness' of humanity developed naturally from evolutionary origins; alternatively, as with the Roman Catholic account, it may be that humanity reached a particular level of development at which the 'rational soul' was implanted (as with Genesis 2). I'm not too bothered here about *how* it happened; I'm more concerned with arguing that there is a compatibility between a historical Fall from Original Goodness and contemporary science, if revelation is not ruled out here.

Genetics may help here, especially in the Scriptural link between traits in our pre-Hominid past and our contemporary Falleness. It is not too difficult to conceive that certain patterns of behaviour in animals are an evolutionary 'good'; however, once transferred to humanity they are 'bad' (for example, promiscuousness). Without the notion of a historical Fall, it is difficult to conceive how this could be the case without some Whiggish progressive notion of humanity, as seen in the Gnostic account above. As such it is not too difficult to consider a situation where either naturally or through some kind of divine intervention of ensouling, the outer reaches of the brain—such as, say, the prefrontal cortex—had much greater control over the inner, more primitive levels. That this seems to be a present possibility through practices such as meditation, as [Andrew Newberg](#) has argued, indicates within the perspective of revelation that it may be a natural trait humanity has lost through the Fall. It may be the case that certain primitive genetic traits were 'unlocked' by some act(s) of traumatic disobedience, like the way a traumatic event can 'unlock' a natural genetic condition such as coeliac disease. In a kind of Neo-Augustinian move, we can read this as being 'passed on'. Alternatively it may 'corrupt' the divinely-intended trajectory of human development were we to take an earlier hominid framework for the 'Historical Adam'.

A different alternative may be that the Fall is the impatient 'jumpstarting' of human development. We could consider the supposed 'Great Leap Forward' a premature 'punctuated equilibrium' (to refer to Stephen Jay Gould), in which humanity decided to 'advance' before it was 'ready', in disobedience to divine commands. This is hinted at by the interpretation of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil which argues that the command against eating is not a perpetual ban, but rather time-specific until humanity, nurtured through trusting and obeying direct divine wisdom, was 'mature enough' to eat of it—i.e. had reached a stage of development able to discern goodness rightly without direct divine command. Although vulnerable to questions regarding the extent of climate change impacting human development, such an approach would nevertheless perhaps explain the problem of childbearing and the Fall in Gen. 3.16b. If the Fall is a premature development

because of human disobedience to the divine timetable for human evolution, we may consider that the mismatch between the size of a baby's head and a woman's pelvis is not simply a tragedy, but rather the results of a primordial decision which jumpstarted human development before natural selection had found an equilibrium. If so, Gen. 3.16b is not simply a just-so story, but even there may have a revelational insight otherwise hidden from scientific observation.

### **Fallenness and the Church**

These are, of course, hypotheses. Nevertheless, such explanations, which take seriously both contemporary science as well as the revelatory nature of the Scriptures—i.e. an event which in principle could not be discovered by science or General Revelation—may also make sense of some of Bell's arguments regarding animals demonstrating same-sex sexual attraction. Although the science of the evolutionary development of homosexual behaviour is not yet clear, it may have an evolutionary function which is very beneficial for the development of species. This does not mean it is intended for humanity anymore promiscuity or a whole host of other traits was intended. Perhaps a form of healthy sublimation is the natural state of humanity, but Fallenness means that this has been lost to both psychologically damaging repression and an impulsion to act? This would accord with the near univocal presentation of Scripture on the matter.

Nevertheless, this is not just a matter of sexuality, but to a whole variety of our psychological patterns. Such is the brokenness of humanity. And it is important to know that this fragmented brokenness inflicts us all. Bell is right: LGBTQI people 'are not more mired in sin than others are—they are God's beloved children' (215). We are all broken by sin; both Jesus' parable of a log in the eye and the desert father Abba Pior's sack of sand comes to mind. In the words of Preston Sprinkle, 'Love the sinner, hate the sin in me'. If Fallenness is as systematic as what such a picture would indicate, we should not expect too much goodness even from the Church. Bell writes:

The structural oppression of LGBTQI people is, in many ways, just one facet of a wider sickness, a sickness that threatens to overwhelm us if it is not both recognised and fought against. The Church doesn't need to be like this—indeed, it surely cannot survive much longer if the rot continues to spread. (214)

I get surprised by little comments like this in the book, much like the comment 'We don't appear to have learnt' noted at the beginning of Part I of this review. The 'sickness' which threatens to overwhelm, of which the structural oppression of LGBTQI people is but a facet, is sin. Until the Parousia, oppression and the sickness of sin will be with us. This is not to say that a laissez-faire approach to sin should be adopted; but it is to say that we should not be surprised at sin in the Church. And that Bell can write, the Church 'cannot survive much longer if the rot continues to spread' sounds to me like a denial of Jesus' promise that the 'gates of hell shall not prevail against it' (Matt. 16.18). What of grace? What of preservation? Is it not the healing work of the Holy Spirit, applying the lather of the atonement through the sacramental actions of the Church, who keeps us from 'rotting' in sin, a foretaste and first-fruit of the glory and freedom which awaits us in the New Creation?

Reading comments like the above has made me realise I have a fundamentally different understanding of the Gospel to Bell: our differences over same-sex sexual practice are but

the presenting issue for a deep and complex faultline over questions including revelation, Scripture, the Fall, salvation, pneumatology, ecclesiology, preservation, and the relationship between science and faith. In the words of the recently departed [Tim Keller](#), ‘The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.’

## Conclusion

You’re perhaps wondering why I have spent so long reviewing what is actually a relatively short book. This is because, despite all its very many faults in the book as outlined especially in Part II of this review, it is an excellent summary of the kind of arguments presented by revisionists on sexuality—not just in the Church of England, but further afield too. You will see similar arguments made by bishops in General Synod, the Twittersphere, Facebook, and endless blogs. Were it not for its near diatribe-like polemic, I would have happily recommended this to my PCC as a ‘typical’ revisionist account (sadly, even on that front it is ‘typical’). Like many revisionist theologies, it does the following:

- Makes a strawman argument of the conservative opposition, and in so doing Others them (a technique which conservatives are equally capable of in doing with their Revisionist opponents);
- Ignores or is ignorant of its own geneatheological history rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> Century German liberalism;
- Has an understanding of ‘stoolism’ which is very different from the classical Anglican models it purports to emulate; furthermore, using a model of the Scripture-tradition-reason triad far closer to Socinianism than to anything in Hooker or his successors;
- Simultaneously praises Scripture whilst making every effort to relativise its importance on the issue of sexuality (but inconsistently not using the same tools for other doctrinal loci), and making little effort to work out an ontology of Scripture;
- Has a weak understanding of the relationship between science and revelation, meaning that concepts of the Fall (and sin) become vulnerable to the theoretical acid of evolutionary theory; this in turn makes the Fall systematically unnecessary, and therefore gives way to what could be considered a Neo-Gnostic revelational progressivism;
- Blurs the distinction between the ethical perspective of the cultural intelligentsia and divine revelation.

In the final part of this review, I have tried to focus on one particular—but fundamental—area of Bell’s argument, that is the relationship between biological sciences and biblical revelation. Emphasising the unity of Scripture and revelation, I have argued that one can make a hypothetical case for Fallenness that fits both the historical-mythology revelation of Genesis and contemporary evolutionary science. This in turn can help give theologically grounded answers for why presence of same-sex sexual activity amongst animals, amongst a whole host of things, does not necessarily mean ‘divine blessing’ when translated to humanity. Furthermore, it helps connect the near univocal witness of Scripture to contemporary evolutionary sciences. As I argued beforehand, more work would need to be

done for a fuller response, especially in the psychological aspects. Hopefully, this may give a foundation for such a response.

This has been less of a traditional 'review' and more a sustained engagement with a text in which the fault-lines of contemporary Anglicanism are made bare. I am grateful that Bell has written this book, especially for helping make the revisionist case so clear. It has provoked me to articulate some of the swirling thoughts in my mind, as well as the fuller response needed to the revisionist argument. In reading it and thinking through the implications, my belief that a change in ecclesial policy on matters of same-sex sexual activity would be a departure from orthodox Christianity as historically understood has been (ironically) deepened and enriched.