

## ON BREAKING THE RULES – A FEMINIST REPLY TO

J. M. CAMERON

DAPHNE NASH, A. BIRCHALL, J. GARCIA,

J. SHAY, A. WEST

In a recent article, J. M. Cameron exposed structures of dualist thought in four areas: the Resurrection, death, sexual morality and ethics.<sup>1</sup> He argued that the conceptual division of the body from the soul, of the good from the rest, and of acts from motives has been prominent in Western thought since pre-Christian times and still informs some popular attitudes to morality. Treating the body as separate from the soul is, however, profoundly contrary to orthodox Christian teaching; human beings are not a soul in a body or a body with a ghostly motor, but a single indissoluble entity; similarly, actions are not physical movements with a motive, but activities constitutive of a human, linguistic, symbol-forming community. "An action is something we do freely, intentionally, and with a meaning that depends not upon the whim of the actor but upon the commonly understood 'language' of the human community within which men act." (p. 18)

With this analysis there can be little serious disagreement; but Cameron's treatment of sexual morality and ethics gives rise to serious concern. It implicitly precludes creative breaking of traditional rules of behaviour. Similarly, in his treatment of the role of sex in personal relations he may be seen to be deploying the very dualist modes of thought which he is criticising. In this article we would like to explore some ways in which traditional moral values must be challenged because of the restrictions they place upon the growth of love both in society and in the church.

The unifying theme of Cameron's article is the prevalence of dualist modes of thought in theology and ethics. Our single central criticism of his treatment of sexual morality and ethics is that although he is explicitly aware of the importance of the symbol-forming, linguistic and social dimension of all human behaviour, it is consistently left peripheral to his discussion. His treatment of ethics concentrates largely on questions about motives and the importance of the outward form of actions, so that he is caught up in the polarised dualism he attacks, and is unable to allow for the possibility of radical social change initiated by the deliberate ac-

<sup>1</sup> 'Body and Person', *New Blackfriars* January 1978, pp. 5-20. This article is the product of discussions by a group of women on questions of theology and ethics.

tion of human beings; we return to this point later in this article.

It is in his treatment of sexual morality that Cameron most clearly reveals a deeply rooted dualist mode of argument. In his discussion of marriage (p. 16) he separates out the sexual and non-sexual aspects of the relationship in a manner that can only be described as dualist. "In the Biblical tradition, by contrast, it is the sexual relation between man and woman that constitutes the relation of marriage, and the love of friendship . . . is an added grace that belongs to the perfection of marriage but isn't constitutive of it". The attempt to separate sex and friendship in this way must be seen in the light of Cameron's attitude to the biological function of sexuality as revealed on p. 13, "sexuality, with what justifies it functionally, procreation . . ." and p. 16, "It is clear that the reproductive function of sex is what we share with the other animals and with the plants". Cameron seems here to be operating with the polarities sex-animal-procreation/friendship-grace-love.

This position may be criticised on several grounds. Firstly, human and animal (much less, plant) sexuality cannot be directly compared, since in each species sexuality takes its meaning from its place in the life cycle, and, where appropriate, the society, of the species; in the case of human society, one cannot separate any act from its symbolic and community-forming (or destroying) significance. To tie the significance of human sexuality to its biological function, which of course is one aspect of it, is excessively limiting, and ignores its wider social meaning. It also risks committing the error of arguing from 'nature' (what we share with the animals) to what ought to happen in human society. To argue from the reproductive function of sex in all living creatures to the function sexuality ought to have in human society would be erroneous: plants have no volition; and it cannot be shown, except by anthropomorphic fantasy, that animals mate because they want to produce offspring, i.e. to fulfil the 'functional justification' of sexuality. They mate because they need to, as they need to eat and shelter and sleep. To make procreative sex the principal ground of marriage for the reason that it is natural would clearly be unsatisfactory, and other reasons must therefore be sought to justify the traditional position.

Identification of human sexuality as that which we share with the rest of the higher organisms for the purpose of reproduction also forces another mistaken separation, in this case that of genital sex from other forms of relations between human beings, bodily and verbal. Human beings are embodied as males and females; they cannot escape from their sexuality, and any personal contact between them necessarily has sexual significance. It is surely wrong, therefore, to separate the non-procreative aspects of human sexuality—pleasure, comfort, relief of tension on the positive side; domination, selfishness and insult on the other—from the

procreative, just as it is wrong to separate the significance and motive of any other action from its outward form. Creating a hierarchy of sexual actions, classed by their outward form into the good and the rest is not unlike the Gnostic separation of the Perfect from the rest which Cameron condemns (p. 11).

Even in the case of genital sex, sexual activity and procreation have always been separable in human society. Sex has personal and social significance beyond the purely procreative, the content of which has varied from one civilisation to another. This separation has therefore, for example, enabled homosexuals or the barren and elderly to enjoy its other benefits. Cameron alludes somewhat disparagingly (p. 16) to the fact that since the widespread availability of effective contraception, there has been questioning, especially from women, of the traditional definition of marriage as founded on reproductive sexual relations. It cannot be denied that serious questioning of traditional teaching on marriage, and the suggestion of alternatives, have taken on a new urgency since the advent of effective contraception, but the central reason for wishing to criticise the traditional model for marriage is that it has been the chief instrument of patriarchal repression of women and denial of their full bodily and personal humanity, which the Gospel affirms. Any call for a return to a traditional, Biblical understanding of marriage rings hollow in the face of contemporary suffering and disillusionment with marriage, and is of little help to those striving to reconstruct a Christian theology of sexuality. We need then to ask how we are to understand the traditional ideal of a marriage where the partners become one flesh in a permanent and procreative union, in an age of contraceptive technology which permits the choice of whether or not, and when, to have children. An answer which ignores the new possibilities that contraception gives to women is certainly inadequate: equally inadequate is the all-too-frequent co-option of contraceptive technology into a new version of the age-old exploitation of women, which makes us a feature of the consume-and-discard mentality and organisation of capitalistic society.

Effective contraception has meant that procreation can be separated at will from most sexual activity between heterosexuals, and this major change has long-term implications which must be taken seriously in the development of moral theory. Not all loving relations are straightforwardly monogamous, procreative and heterosexual, yet those that are not are widely treated as less than fully human or mature in conservative circles. Conversely, not all relations that *are* straightforwardly heterosexual are loving and mature. Brutal and oppressive sexual behaviour has for long been all but invisible to society outside the parties involved because of the special private status granted to marriage and sexual activity. Yet such behaviour should come under the same rules as any other

human behaviour; there is hope yet that rape within marriage will be recognised as a criminal assault.

There are further important questions which effective contraception makes meaningful. Historically, marriage has been the institution within which children are reared. Before the ready availability of effective contraception, children were the inevitable outcome of most sexual relations between adult men and women, and in any case children have been needed in many societies to provide family labour, to support the aged and to ensure the orderly transmission of property. As an institution, marriage has therefore been protected by the state and by the Church as the ideal for interpersonal relations between adults, and marriage has had at its core the procreative function. Sterile marriages of various sorts were presumably blessed by analogy with the great majority which were not. Within this historical context the many non-procreative forms of sexual activity were proscribed as unnatural or undesirable and deviant. But sexual or bodily affection has other functions than the procreative, and the emphasis on one particular type of sexual union as the ideal for expressing personal commitment, however predominant it may be in a society, is conducive to a pernicious moral separation of sexual acts which are procreative from the rest.

Dissatisfaction with traditional formulations, therefore, together with the possibility of choice in the matter of child-bearing, opens the question of the sorts of institutions which might better express the range of important personal relations. For instance, parenthood—the establishment of a long-term relationship between adults and their children—may need to be seen as a phase or status in life structurally separate from (though in many cases following upon) the personal commitment of adult persons to one another. Whereas traditionally marriage has presupposed parenthood, thereby combining personal commitment with reproduction, it may in future be seen as important to celebrate separately, perhaps even at sacramental level, the initiation of a long-term personal commitment and the initiation of parenthood.

The separation of sex from procreation is therefore of great importance in the development of the meaning of marriage and sexual morality, and it is therefore quite inappropriate to separate procreative heterosexual sex from all other forms which sexual relations may take.

“The sexual difference is a bodily difference that belongs to what we are in creation; and I discern in much that is now written about relations between men an attitude that moves from a light depreciation of the importance of this difference to a deep hostility to attaching importance to this difference, a difference which has historically, so it is believed, been a badge of servitude for women” (p. 16).

In arguing thus, Cameron has missed the point of one of the most important positions proposed by his opponents. Even within the women's movement there are few who would deny that men and women are different, or that this difference is significant. Because our only existence is bodily, and takes its meaning from a community which is both fecund and exploitative, it is patently absurd to deny the importance of gender and sexuality. What is hotly disputed, however, is *what* significance should be attached to sexual differences, and it is this question that Cameron has evaded. There is much hostility not towards attaching importance as such to the difference in the sexes, but towards the way in which gender differences have been used in our, as in most other, societies to separate those who shall dominate from those who shall submit, and to determine permitted roles for individuals in society in a way which is plainly repressive.

Because he has passed over this point, Cameron further misrepresents the character of women's outrage at the Vatican statement on women and the priesthood (p. 17), "I thought it symptomatic of deep convictions of a Gnostic kind that the section of the recent Vatican statement on the ordination of women that roused extreme fury was that in which it was suggested, not as a demonstrative argument but as a persuasive one, that maleness might conceivably have some connection with the aptness of a human being for the ministerial priesthood". One is prompted to ask in what maleness consists in this context. If it is purely a matter of anatomy, it is wholly arbitrary that one gender should be excluded from the ministry, especially a celibate one, although Cameron's overall treatment of sexuality suggests that it is indeed reproductive function that defines maleness. But this is not the issue which has outraged women, and the outrage is not of Gnostic origins. It is not men's role in reproduction, but the welter of repressive social significance articulated around their gender, which has determined their position both in secular and religious leadership.

It is a source of outrage that the priesthood should go on according special privilege to the dominative socio-sexual value attached to maleness in our society. It is precisely because the very suggestion of ordaining women into the priesthood threatens this powerful symbolism of the all-male clergy that the issue raises such furious emotions. If all that women were requesting was a purely administrative change, like admitting women to Oxbridge men's colleges, it is unlikely that they would have met with such violent gut-reaction as is roused whenever the issue is broached in earnest. The male ministry bears a heavy load of symbolism peculiar to the Western capitalist male; it is a symbol of leadership, authority, and the right to teach and preach and provide for the (spiritual) needs of the faithful by work which a man alone has the

right to do. From all of this women are excluded to a greater or lesser extent, as they are from comparable male preserves in most other walks of life and for similar reasons.

The present public image of the Western clergy evokes Christ the King rather than the suffering servant. Yet the Christian ministry has always had functions which may readily be recognised as 'female', and which are at the centre of the Gospel message for the ministry. These often characterise individual clergymen, but they are not prominently displayed in the public persona of the hierarchy. This is a serious failing because of the role which the Church plays in providing models for admirable human behaviour. Christ's ministry was by no means a model of self-assertive authority. Among the many explicit Gospel statements of the obligation to serve and take the back row and be the least among men there is the account of Christ's washing of his disciples' feet—a demeaning job normally performed by women for their menfolk—which emphasises the anti-authoritarian character appropriate to the Christian ministry. There can be no good reason why a woman should not represent these qualities of the priesthood, and given the content of prevailing sexual symbolism, she would represent them particularly well as a priest. Women's outrage at the assertion that maleness is peculiarly appropriate to the ministerial priesthood is not therefore a matter of Gnostic convictions, as though to deny the real and symbolic differences between men and women. It is a rejection of the confinement of the priesthood to men, which grants undue privilege to a set of social and moral values which, precisely because they coincide with the authoritarian values associated with maleness in society at large, effectively force into second place the values of service and nurture which are central to the Gospel message. A church with claims to preaching the Gospel ought to accord women a full part as leaders of the Christian community; it is the failure of several of the largest institutional churches to yield to this claim that has caused the outrage, because in their failure they only reinforce the social and religious structures which keep women in a dependent and oppressed position.

If Cameron, by implication, would not welcome the claims of women upon the ministry, much less would he seem to admit the possibility of challenge to traditional standards of morality. He characterises the 'new morality' (p. 14ff) as an emphasis on the positive, even salvific, virtues of "sexual behaviour forbidden by the Torah", such as masturbation, oral sex and homosexual intercourse. He argues that although it seems to be a celebration of the goodness of bodily creation, in reaction to a sort of Gnostic asceticism resultant on the identification of the soul as the 'real' man, the more serious of two rationales for the major change in moral values represented by the 'new morality' is based on what is in fact



a purely dualist concept of persons. The other rationale, pure hedonism, is rightly dismissed. He argues that the concept of person is rarely discussed in the literature, but it seems to him that it is 'persons' (the rational, free, self-transcendent element in people) who relate to one another; their bodies are incidental to the relationship, and what they do with them is purely a matter of taste. In effect, Cameron is arguing that there has been a recrudescence of antinomianism.

Now it may well be that there are people who argue in this way, and in so far as they do, they are expounding a kind of liberalism which appeals in the final resort to private conscience as arbiter of action, and rationalises the status quo, however outrageous it might be; such liberalism is politically, morally and spiritually bankrupt. But as an account of the more serious arguments in favour of changes in what may be regarded as morally acceptable conduct, Cameron's analysis would be a gross caricature. The concept of person is not the same as that of soul; it is an attempt to find a word to express an embodied unit of humanity without role-begging overtones. It also symbolises hope for the initiation of a new society in which gender will not determine social role as it does at the moment. Dissatisfaction—both with the social roles permitted to women in our society and with the moral values attached to sexual activity of different sorts has led to the questioning of traditional values and the search for alternatives, in the context of which the concept of 'person' outlined here may be seen to be important.

The questioning of traditional morality in practice as well as in theory has not unnaturally caused concern; "such a profound change in morality seems to require some kind of rationale" (p. 15). Here, and throughout the rest of the article, Cameron treats morality as though it were coextensive with a set of injunctions and prohibitions (for instance the Torah, or perhaps the Catechism); whether or not, given a different context, Cameron would defend such a definition of morality, it is the most pervasive concept in the article at hand. There are, and must be if morality is to have any content at all, some absolute injunctions and prohibitions: love God, neighbour and oneself; do not torture. But there are relatively few rules that can be expressed without qualification in this way. The enormous range of injunctions and prohibitions that under most normal circumstances help to direct one in the direction of loving behaviour are nonetheless subject to question if circumstances change. This is certainly the case with the rules governing sexual behaviour. The moral sense of a community, like its capacity to love, is continually growing and therefore changing; moral laws may be regarded as rules of meaning for the word 'love'.<sup>2</sup> Positive value attributed to hitherto unmention-

<sup>2</sup> Herbert McCabe, *Law, Love and Language* (London 1960) p. 29.

able sexual acts may be regarded not so much as a change in morality, in the sense of a change in a code of behaviour, as an attempt to extend ethical discussion to areas previously outside the bounds of discussion, and thus to apply the same criteria for structuring human sexual behaviour in these areas as were once confined to monogamous heterosexual love. It is not so much a change in morality as an extension of morality.

Morality must therefore be treated as a growing concept. Yet it is this that Cameron's position seems not to allow for, and this is most evident in his treatment of ethics. He rightly condemns the judgment of acts on the basis of the motive of the actors, as though actions were purely private and not constitutive of a community with its existing rules of meaning. Every action plays a part—constructive or destructive—in the community and therefore comes under ethical judgment. The existing codes of moral injunctions and prohibitions act as guides to acceptable human behaviour; some actions (for instance torture or murder) are outlawed under any circumstances as excluding love; most other actions are at least ambiguous, and take their significance from the wider context in which they occur. Sexual intercourse may be an act of love or of rape, but it is not only the motive of the actors that determines which it is, even though the motive is important. Definition of the action in moral terms pivots round whether the action is the sort of action which a loving society would practise, and there must be a continuous reassessment of ambiguous activities which may come to be seen in practice as having creative and loving significance.

It is for this reason that to conceive of moral law as a set of fixed rules is profoundly reactionary: the rules should reveal love and loving behaviour, not restrict the growth of the understanding of love by hemming it in with an inflexible code of behaviour. Communities must have rules which it is a serious matter to break, and in many if not most cases breaking of the rules is destructive rather than constructive where the rules have been generated as guides to what constitutes loving behaviour. But Cameron does not allow for any breaking of rules at all (p. 19-20). He proposed some cases where we seem to have a strong case for disregarding a commonplace moral injunction or prohibition, but claims that the justification given for the action in cases such as bombing cities or being party to adultery is normally at least dishonest, in that it involves mis-description (I am not dropping bombs to kill people but to prevent the war continuing; I am not party to adultery but trying not to lose my job with the adulterer). The crux of his argument is that it is actions that have consequences that are on the whole predictable that come under moral judgment, and that since we do not control the world and human history, and since it is a matter of common experience that



long-term expectations are rarely fulfilled in the form in which we envisage them, we never have good reasons based on our intention to bring about some new set of circumstances for disregarding straightforward moral rules, *unless we can conceive of intention in some other way* (our italics). Intention was defined as having meaning only if, for the most part, the desired circumstances are brought about by acting on the intention.

Before any revolution it is impossible to justify the breaking of the rules of the society using its own language and system of meaning.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, as Christians we must assert that there is a kind of rule-breaking which yet upholds the tradition of a communal and historical formulation of the moral law in practice. This kind of rule-breaking conceives of its action not as breaking the moral law but as upholding it in circumstance that are new and therefore without the possibility of precedent. That is surely what Jesus meant when he said that he had come not to do away with the law but to fulfil it, and one way in which he enraged orthodox practitioners of his religion to the point of demanding his death was by breaking absolute moral and religious prohibitions such as working on the Sabbath and eating with sinners, in order to exercise the demands of love.

Cameron's definition of a latter-day saint (p. 20) as one who sets aside "all calculation, who may even look upon the promptings of affection for those most immediately connected with him as temptations; and choose in almost total darkness nevertheless to act in obedience to the commonplaces of the moral law" does not, it seems, allow for the prophet who breaks the rules in the face of rejection by society in order to respond to the demands of love and to enact what may in retrospect come to be seen as behaviour creative of a better society. A revolutionary movement must be prepared to act prophetically in the process of change for the good, even when it means breaking traditional prohibitions and when there are few if any good models to follow. Surely one can intend to bring about change, even though the change may not come immediately, its outcome is unpredictable, and one has to face the fact that all the best intentions are subject to absorption in the status quo. One must be free to break the rules creatively when the circumstances of society change, as they have in the last generation in the matter of sexual morality. Until a new tradition is generated, perfectly loving people whose personal relations are expressed in unapproved forms are bound to be classed as deviants, and it is an important task to challenge this situation and help to bring about conditions wherein the important question whether or not the parties to a relationship are loving and supportive of each other and their neighbours, will not be judged heavily

<sup>3</sup> McCabe, *Op. cit.* p.24ff.

on the basis of whether they are indulging in some particular forms of approved sexual activity.

There is, finally, one way in which Cameron's bleak separation, already alluded to, of the sexual relation of marriage from the grace which is the love of friendship, points nonetheless to an important truth for Christians. It is not that friendship is an optional extra in marriage, although the love of friendship as an ideal cannot constitute marriage as it is traditionally defined. But it is precisely the meaning of the Christian tradition that it speaks of the love that goes beyond the law, or the mere form of an institution. For Christians to say that grace is an integral part of marriage is an acknowledgment that the love of marriage is not achieved by our own effort but is a participation in the love of God. Unequal power relationships militate against the growth of love, and marriages without grace are sexist marriages. Many marriages are and have been just that, whether or not they have produced children. It is important, therefore, continually to reinterpret the meaning and possibility that sacramental marriage affords, and within this framework redefinition of what constitutes acceptable sexual practice between persons of either sex, married or not, must take place. What goes on sexually, as in other ways, is not merely a matter of individual taste, but is the provisional praxis of the moral law of the Christian community in the bodies of its members.

# **PAUL QUAIL STAINED GLASS**

**CONTEMPORARY AND TRADITIONAL DESIGNS**

**RESTORATION AND LEADED LIGHTS**

**1 Holt Road**

**BRISTON**

**Norfolk**

**Tel. Melton Constable 826**

**(STD 026 386)**