

Review of: "Christian Ethical Perspective on Sexual Orientation and Sexual Behavior"

Nicolas Zambrana-Tévar¹

¹ Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics, and Strategic Research

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Review of Prof. Daniel Dei's article Christian Ethical Perspective on Sexual Orientation and Sexual Behavior(<https://www.qeios.com/read/9FKIVN>)

Nicolás Zambrana-Tévar LLM(LSE), PhD(Navarra)

n.zambrana@kimep.kz

Professor Dei's point of departure in his article is his statement that "[m]ost Christian denominations differentiate homosexual orientation from homosexual behaviour". The author goes on to say that for these denominations being homosexual is not considered sinful but "the practice of homosexuality" is indeed sinful. The thesis, as well as the conclusion of the article is that "[s]exual orientation, inclination, attraction, and sexual acts, behaviors, or practices are acutely connected. In this vein, it becomes incongruent for a moral stance to condemn one but accept the other." (page 3).

It is true that, in Christian ethics, unconsented desires are never sinful. Prescriptions such as "though shall not covet thy neighbour's wife" or simply "you shall not hate" prohibit conscious decisions to direct our actions towards something which is considered wrong or an act of mental rejoicing but which must go beyond mere involuntary feelings or sensations. For instance, it would just be "disorderly" to feel hatred but it would be sinful to entertain those same feelings of hatred without struggling to keep them out of one's mind. It would also be obviously sinful to act upon those feelings of hatred and actually hurt the person we hate.

Professor Dei reflects on a number of passages from the Old and the New Testament like Mathew 5:28 – "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" –, from which he draws the conclusion that the Bible condemns not only certain types of sexual behavior – in this case, heterosexual adultery – but also condemns certain types of sexual orientation. Although this is relatively ambiguous in the article, the type of sexual orientation that, in the author's view, would be condemned in the abovementioned biblical passage is that of the lustful adulterer, regardless of whether he then goes on to have an actual adulterous sexual relationship. Since Christianity is based on the Bible and the Bible also condemns certain types of sexual orientation like homosexual orientation, the author concludes that Christian churches cannot in good logic preach that homosexuals are not sinning just for being homosexuals. Although such conclusion seems to be arguing in favour of an understanding of Christian sexual morality which is even more conservative than that of conservative Christians, the bulk of the article makes one think that the author is really trying to do exactly the opposite: denouncing that Bible-based Christianity is merciless and ignorant of how sexual identity really works. For instance, the author writes "[a] discordance between one's sexual orientation and sexual behavior could

lead to rejection and loneliness. Acceptance and inclusion of one's sexual identity depend on the prevailing culture. While individuals with same-sex orientation would be accepted in a sexually diverse culture, they will be excluded in a heteronormative culture." (page 8). Here the author seems to be saying that the moral assessment of sexual behaviour – and of sexual orientation – wholly depends on "the prevailing culture" which, in the case of the culture of Bible-based Christian groups and Christian nations, is clearly heteronormative. This means that the only sexual orientation accepted by Christianity is heterosexuality and that the only forms of sexual behaviour accepted are forms of heterosexual behaviour, even if there may be forms of heterosexual behaviour which are also rejected, such as adultery.

For Professor Dei, sexual orientation and sexual behaviour are nothing but, respectively, the covert and overt dimension of sexual expression which, in turn, is "how human beings experience and describe their sexuality" (page 4) and what "shapes people's identities" (page 1). The article also claims that "[t]he multidimensional relationship between sexual orientation and sexual behaviour implies that we cannot determine sexual identities from sexual behaviors. [...] Instead, one's preferred sexual orientation determines their sexual identity." (page 6).

Thus, sexual identity becomes the real and the most important criteria for moral assessment in matters of sexuality. Although the article does not say it in so many words, the appropriate conclusion is that Christianity should condemn homosexual acts if performed by heterosexuals but not if performed by homosexuals, because such acts are actually the appropriate form of sexual expression which corresponds to the sexual orientation of homosexuals and, therefore, to their sexual identity.

Such insistence and reliance on identity is the key to Professor Dei's criticism of Christian condemnation of homosexual acts. It is not only the alleged lack of logic of Christianity, in view of the cited passages from the Bible, but the underlying idea that appropriate moral behaviour is just behaviour in accordance with one's own true identity. In this regard, Professor Dei's denunciation of Christian heteronormative morality as simply the prevailing culture of a given civilization is one of the driving forces in the monumental work of Michel Foucault and it has been tremendously influential, arguing from history that morality and ethics lack any objective basis. On the other hand, the pervasive references to sexual identity and, implicitly, to the need to behave in accordance with one's identity, can be described as some sort of ethics of authenticity which strongly reminds of Jean Paul Sartre and which have been as influential as Foucault in the field of sexual morality.

Sartre explicitly denies that there is such thing as human nature, which in turn makes it impossible to define the good as that which befits the agent's nature. An objective moral order is thus impossible. On the other hand, Sartre makes a staunch defence of absolute freedom as being both the blessing and the curse of human existence. Being free would in fact be the only feature that sets humans apart from other beings in this world. The only morally acceptable choices would be those which are truly authentic and spontaneous, those which are made freely and not on the basis of any rational or irrational norms or goals in mind. For Sartre, human existence is a permanent – and exhausting – process of deciding who we are as a result of our choices.

But the ethics of authenticity actually have their limits as a justification for homosexual behaviour. Practicing homosexual sex would indeed be morally acceptable if a decision in that regard had been made truly freely and not on the basis of any external influences like education or even on the basis of our own rational understanding of human sexuality. However, to be truly authentic would exclude a final and unchangeable decision on one's sexual orientation. Although Professor Dei

includes sexual or gender fluidity in the catalogue of existing sexual identities, such fluidity would be the only authentic and the only truly free approach to sexuality.

Nevertheless, the article indicates that “[t]heories about the cause of sexual orientation are based on hormonal, genetic, and environmental factors. Regardless of the uncertainty, scholars generally favor biological theories over other theories.” In the end, if one is biologically determined to have a homosexual orientation, it would be morally correct to express one’s sexuality through homosexual practices. However, a radical racist could rightfully argue that his hatred of other races is part of who he is, i.e. part of his identity, and that would hardly justify him. Moreover, if some scientist ever claimed to have discovered the gene of racism, that would tell us little about the moral acceptability of racism. In the same vein, claiming that sexual morality wholly depends on the prevailing moral values of a given historical period – cultural relativism – may tell us something about the origin of those moral values but does not prevent us from agreeing or disagreeing with them, at the risk of making the same historical mistakes over and over again.

For Professor Dei, sexual orientation and sexual attraction are closely related but this poses the question of whether the same paradigm of moral assessment used in his article can be used in other aspects of human life. If homosexual acts are morally correct if and only if the agent is truly homosexual, i.e. if his actions pursue that to which he is truly attracted, would not a whole other range of human acts be morally permissible, provided the biology of the agent has predetermined that he feels attracted to them? Such way of thinking would obviously exclude any enquiry about the intrinsic morality of the acts themselves.

Expressing your sexuality with sincerity and truthfulness to one’s sexual orientation can never in itself be a proper justification for sexual acts themselves, in the same way that being true to one’s inclination to laziness does not justify or condemn acts of sloth. In order to assess the morality of an act of diligence or of an act of sloth, the morality of work as such needs to be assessed. If we concluded that work was something morally reprehensible, an inclination to stay in bed all day would actually be a desirable moral habit; indeed, it would be a virtue.

This is very different from saying that a person who, through no fault of its own, has a strong inclination towards an intrinsically immoral conduct, would have less or no responsibility for behaving that way. Again, although Professor Dei seems to think otherwise, there is nothing in the Bible against this kind of differentiation between subjective moral responsibility for a certain act and the intrinsic good or evil of the act itself.

In this regard, Aristotle’s teleological eudaimonism is in line with the teachings of many Christian denominations. Aristotle defines good as that towards which all things aim or are inclined to. However, the kind of inclination he is talking about in the Nichomachean ethics has little to do with the subjective attraction in which sexual orientation partly consists, for Professor Dei. A sensitive living being like an animal or a human may actually feel an inclination, in the sense of a physical desire towards the possession of some good like water, food or sleep. However, such feeling is far from being the justification to direct our will towards the possession of those goods. For Aristotle, a non-sensitive being such as a plant would be equally inclined towards water and water would be a good for the plant, even where the plant cannot feel thirst. Instead, and at least in the case of sensible living beings, such feelings may reveal their functions and needs, the fulfilment of which move them closer to perfection in accordance with their own nature, i.e. with the capabilities they possess and can develop.

Therefore, even in the absence of any desire for sexual pleasure or in the absence of any drive towards expressing

oneself in accordance with a particular kind of sexual attraction, what is relevant is identifying the kind of need, function or capability that sex represents for sexed living beings. If we then examine sexual acts themselves we will inevitably come to the conclusion that, indeed, such sexual acts are a form of self-expression or, more accurately, a form of expressing our love for another human being, as well as a form of seeking sexual gratification. Both – love and pleasure – would be good because they are part and parcel of the sexual act itself and because they fulfil a certain capability and a certain need of every human being as a human being: the need for self-expression, love and pleasure.

However, such approach to sex would be incomplete without acknowledging that procreation is also another function, another element and dimension of sexual relationships, regardless of whether the individuals engaged in a sexual act are aware of it, regardless of whether they intend to procreate and regardless of whether the sexual act in fact leads to the creation of a new human being. Procreation is a part of sex in the same way that pleasure or love are. The voluntary absence of any of those elements is what makes a sexual act morally unacceptable. This approach excludes homosexual relationships because, even if the participants obtain pleasure from them and even if they may truly express love for each other, the possibility of procreation is physically, invariably, excluded from the act. Something is missing for a wholesome and therefore morally acceptable sexual relationship.

Similarly, the morality of eating must take count of what eating is and what functions or needs it satisfies for the human being. For instance, eating and voluntarily vomiting the ingested food in order to avoid gaining weight would be wrong because nurturing oneself is of the very essence in the act of eating. The same line of reasoning would apply to homosexual relations or to contraception. However, sexual intercourse which does not lead to procreation, for whatever reason, or sex between sterile individuals, would not be morally wrong, not only because sterility is an illness, rather than a characteristic of human beings and of their sexuality, but because the fact that sex between man and woman may or may not lead to procreation is also part of what sex is and of what it involves.

In summary, there is no contradiction between the assertion that homosexual acts are wrong while at the same time being conscious that involuntary desires or inclinations cannot give rise to moral responsibility. On the other hand, the concept of sexual identity does not provide a sufficient justification for homosexual acts because any human act must be judged objectively and its morality does not depend on the extent to which it corresponds to the type of identity that one has or chooses for himself.