Cultural Intelligence – A Theological Framework for Our Thinking

Introduction

This title is concerned with areas (any areas) of contemporary thought or behaviour within society – *i.e.*, culture – that are of real and pressing relevance to us as a fellowship of churches / church leaders – to us as *Assemblies of God, UK*.

More than that, the areas of contemporary thought, involving major societal (*i.e.*, cultural) *shifts*, are areas that require considered (and considerable) theological care and attention, and, so, *intelligence*:

Hence the title: Cultural Intelligence – A Theological Framework for Our Thinking.

There are a whole range of areas that fit this category. One obvious area is racism, which of course came (back) to the fore with the death of George Floyd in May 2020. We addressed that in a theological paper back in Autumn 2020. There are many others we could think of – justice, equality, ecology, being just a few. [And we may look at a range of subjects in the future.]

I suspect, however, that if you asked most of us to identify the most immediate area of seismic cultural shift, to which we as a family or tribe need to offer a theological response, it would be this one: **sexual orientation and gender identity [and within that, SSM]**. This was apparent in the responses to our Church Health survey in Autumn 2021: it was the second largest area flagged up (27 out of 154 responses). Even this area, of course, is vast; and it is far from homogenous, as the letters of the alphabet (and the 'signs and numbers') show – LGBTQIA2S+:

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (and Transsexual), Queer (and Questioning), Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit, and the countless non-binary ways in which people choose to self-identify.

So in this particular paper, this is what we want to present:

A Theological Framework for Our Thinking on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

For anyone breathing in this theological conference, this is something about which you will have given considerable thought, and, probably, had considerable conversations. Everyone here will have 'a view' on this (some more, some less). Everyone here will be aware of the seismic cultural shifts in this area over the last 50 years. We will all be aware of the vast spectrum of Christian (and 'post-Christian') views on this area. We will also be aware of the massive *legal* implications of the cultural shifts in society. And we will probably be aware of some of the massive volume of literature and resources – both Christian and other – that are available on this subject.

And we want to 'speak into that' in this paper! Notice one thing here. This paper does not offer 'the answer', 'our answer', or even 'our thinking'. Rather, it offers a theological framework for our thinking. And for this, we are bound to tap into four things in particular:

- Our Pentecostal tradition (Not exclusively; and in the best sense of the word 'tradition')
- Our pooled experience of ministry and leadership
- Most importantly: the Bible our ultimate and final point of reference
- And, we need to add, the Holy Spirit [The Word of God is 'The Bible + the Holy Spirit']

We also want to add that, although this is a *theological* conference, its ultimate focus is *people*. This is *pastoral* – it is about people, for whom we care and tend, as shepherds do their sheep.

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Outline of Paper

In this paper I want to present four things.

- 1. Bibliography and resources
- 2. Current trend in British society and in British churches
- 3. The main 'evangelical' (and Pentecostal) view and a critique of that.
- 4. Four things we agree on (I think and I hope!)

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1. Bibliography and resources

First, I want to make sure we have a bibliography – a set of resources – that we can all use to help inform and develop our thinking. And so that's what I've put at the back of the paper. These resources are predominantly by Christian writers. They are *not*, however, all resources we (and by 'we', for these purposes I mean 'conservative evangelical') would tend to agree with. Some are – and I certainly include a number of 'evangelical conservative' resources. But they are intended to help us navigate the full spectrum of ideas.

I should add that the bibliography (and this paper) is designed specifically for this conference, *i.e.*, for church leaders. So you need to be discerning and wise with it. It contains a wide range of views! I have not attempted to 'categorise' the views, because that does not work in every instance. And because a broad reading helps us create a theological framework for our thinking!

I will not go through the bibliography here, or even refer to it again. But when you look at the paper on the *Assemblies of God* Intranet, do use the bibliography at the back to help inform (and perhaps even help form) your own understanding and response to questions in this vast and complex area. In some ways, the bibliography is the most important part of this paper.

Note: If you are aware of other useful publications or resources, please let me know.

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2. Current trends in British society and in British churches

Second, I want to take a snapshot of cultural shifts in British society, and in the British church.

British society

In the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, homosexual acts between two consenting adults over the age of 21 were permitted. Homosexual practice was no longer a crime. The AoC was lowered to 16 in 2000.

In 2004, the Civil Partnership Act allowed same-sex couples to have the same legal rights as married men and women.

In 2013, same-sex marriage was legalised in England and Wales; in 2014 in Scotland; in 2020 in NI.

And to bring us bang up to date:

At the start of 2022, all convictions for consensual same-sex sexual activity were wiped from records. And just four days ago the Scottish Parliament recommended a ban on LGBT+ 'conversion therapy'.

More recently, there has also been an increasing emphasis on transgender rights and non-binary identities. In this area, it is interesting to note the 'backlash' from 'first generation' feminists (e.g., Germaine Greer, J. K. Rowling) against 'third generation' feminists (womanists); and from the scientific community against a non-binary view of biological gender. This conversation, I suspect, is not over.

But it remains. There has been a clear, seismic, societal, cultural shift in the areas of sexual orientation and gender identity! It arguably takes its point of departure from the start of the postmodern era. This in turn means there is a clear generational gap here – get Christian (Pentecostal) grandparents talking to their Christian (Pentecostal) grandchildren, and you will see!

In popular culture too, the shift is clear to see. From the BBC's Strictly Come Dancing series in 2020 and in 2021, to RuPaul's Drag Race, to the 2021 series It's a Sin, the fascination with Tom Daley's knitting (!), the shout out to all non-binaries by Olly Alexander at the BBC New Year's Eve celebrations in 2021, the trajectory of acceptance and inclusion – in a way that receives no 'kick-back' whatsoever from the younger generation – is clear to see.

The BBC may or may not have a bias and agenda; but it is certainly a reflection of the current Zeitgeist.

[Even yesterday: our 'GM Update' noted our concerns about the Conversion Therapy (Prohibition) Bill. (Notice how we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Evangelical Alliance on this.) And then I happen to switch on 'The PM programme' on BBC Radio 4, and hear Dame Angela Eagle (Labour MP) talking with Evan Davis about the bill: "50% of conversion therapy is done from a religious belief ... that tries to persuade a person who has got feelings for same-sex attraction ... that this is somehow wrong and disordered and evil ..." ¹ In other words, the conversation is current!]

The British church

The Gay Christian Movement was founded in 1976, in London. In 2017 it was renamed as OneBodyOneFaith. (This is based on Ephesians 4:4-6, among other verses.) It is now based in Newark.

The 'inclusive' Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) was effectively founded in California (the 'left side') by Troy Perry in 1968. They now have nine churches in the UK, all in urban cities. Oasis Global was founded by Steve Chalke in 1985, and is proactively inclusive in its views on same-sex marriage.

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¹ https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0013sxb, 52.05 minutes in.

We might consider these as 'left of centre', 'fringe' Christian expressions.

But now include *Greenbelt* and its inclusive expression, *OUT at Greenbelt*. (Alright, 'out there'.) Now include the Quakers. (Alright, we might consider them 'post-Christian') Now include the Methodist Church.

In June 2021 the Methodist conference voted to allow same-sex marriages to be conducted in Methodist churches. (There were 254 votes in favour, and 46 against.)

Now include the Church of England.

It defines marriage as between a man and a woman; but it supports same-sex civil partnerships. It allows same-sex civil partnerships for gay priests. (The Bishop of Grantham is the first openly gay bishop.) It allows prayers to follow a same-sex civil marriage. And it approves of services to celebrate a person's gender transition. ²

And it is clear that non-traditional views on sexual orientation and gender identity are no longer 'fringe' in the Christian British setting!

The evangelical and Pentecostal denominations are in many ways increasingly a distinct grouping in this respect. *Elim* has written this into its constitution:

Elim upholds the biblical and historical definition of marriage as being the union of a man and a woman. Therefore Elim does not recognise marriage between persons of the same sex and no Elim church shall be permitted to hold such a ceremony and neither shall any Elim minister be permitted to officiate at such a ceremony including any blessing of a same sex union. ³

The *de facto* position of *Assemblies of God* is effectively the same. (We refer to 'spouse' in our wording on Marital Status in 9.1.2 of our Bye-Laws, and in our Code of Ethics. But I think we would all accept the historical reality that this language is because we did not even envisage the possibility that anything other than heterosexual marriage was an option.) This position is also held by all other Pentecostal denominations in the UK. (The only exception I can find is something called *Affirming Pentecostal Church International.*) And the position of the *Evangelical Alliance* is essentially the same too. ⁴

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² The most recent work produced by the Church of England is its *Living in Love and Faith* resource (2020). This presents *Christian Teaching and Learning about Identity, Sexuality, Relationships and Marriage*.

³ Elim Constitution: "Working Arrangements – III. The Minister and His Church – 7. Marriage"

⁴ https://www.eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/biblical-and-pastoral-responses-to-homosexuality

3. The main 'evangelical' (and Pentecostal) view

What, then, is the main theological view of the 'evangelical and Pentecostal' church grouping towards people who are gay? (And, of course, this includes Christians – that is to say, brothers and sisters in Christ – and Christians in our personal 'spiritual family' [our local church] and our physical family.) I'm saying this just to be clear how personal, pastoral, and immediate this is to all of us.

I'm summarising here, so forgive me for any over-generalisation, simplification, etc.

Essentially, this is our main 'compassionate' view: We 'love the sinner, hate the sin'.

That is to say, same-sex orientation (and even gender dysphoria) is an accepted *reality*. The individual is encouraged as they live with this, or work through it, with pastoral love, care and support. But what is not accepted is any same-sex practice or expression. Much the same applies to physical gender re-alignment. (There is one notable exception – someone born in a physical intersex state.) That is to say, same-sex practice (and changing one's gender [other than for physical intersex reasons]) is, ultimately, sin. And if 'sin' is too harsh, we would say, 'wrong', 'broken', 'incomplete', 'not ideal'. In brief: We accept the *orientation*, and the person; but we don't accept the *practice*.

For many Pentecostals and evangelicals, it would be a sin even to question the second part of this:

The right discussion simply involves how we navigate what we know to be true and what the Bible clearly teaches.

So what could be the alternative views we might consider (to this 'evangelical compassionate' view)?

Going in one direction, there is a more **stringent** view – and probably the one the previous Pentecostal generation held. That is to say, the orientation itself is 'wrong', or 'broken', or 'sin', or even 'demonic'. (And, of course, this is where the 'gay conversion' conversations lie.) I do not find any significant take-up of this view in 'mainstream' Pentecostal circles – it is simply too 'uncompassionate', and even 'psychologically damaging' to be right.

Going in the other direction, there is a more **accepting** view — and the view increasingly adopted by Christian groupings outside the 'evangelical, Pentecostal' grouping. That is to say, same-sex practice itself is perfectly acceptable, at least in the context of 'marriage'. It is viewed in exactly the same way as heterosexual sex. (And the same would extend to gender identity — someone is who they say they are, irrespective of biological gender or even 'Creation norms'.) I don't find any significant take-up of this view in current 'mainstream' Pentecostal circles either. (Looking at their resources, I suspect the next church group to go in this direction is the *Baptist Union*.) It simply ignores thousands of years of Christian (and Judaeo-Christian) tradition and belief, and it ignores what the Bible clearly states to be the case. ⁵

Indeed, to 'go with the flow' (of both wider society and of church groupings outside the evangelical tradition) and adopt the more accepting view *would* require a 're-contextualising' or 'different reading' of [at least seven] key biblical texts. (Of course, we might say that is precisely what has happened in our tradition in the past. Go back in Pentecostal time, and see how our *biblical interpretation* of women in leadership, divorce and re-marriage, and even head-coverings has changed.)

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⁵ There are seven passages (aka "terror texts") in particular we tend to refer to:

Genesis 9:20-27; 19:1-11; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:10.

You can see, however, there may be a couple of issues with our 'evangelical compassionate' view:

- 1. To accept my *orientation* (*i.e.*, there's nothing 'wrong' with *that*) but not accept my *practice* (*i.e.*, there *is* something wrong with that) is perhaps somewhat contradictory and disingenuous. If the *expression* of my orientation is wrong, then *clearly* my orientation is wrong. And that means you don't really accept me. The words of acceptance are just words.
- 2. To allow a sexual orientation, but not allow expression of it actually commits someone to a life of celibacy. But what if someone does not have the gift of celibacy? (See *1 Corinthians* 7:7.) We have just turned a good person into a criminal.

Without the gift of celibacy, we ultimately need – and have a right to – the beautiful gift of a *legitimate sexual expression*. And, as the Roman Catholic priestly vow of celibacy shows us, if we do not have the potential for access to a legitimate sexual expression, we will ultimately pursue an *illegitimate sexual expression*. (*Cf. 1 Corinthians* 7:3-5, 9.)

(And you have already told me my same-sex orientation is legitimate, because you've said it is not 'sin' or 'wrong'; so you won't try to change me, and neither will the Holy Spirit!)

Incidentally, we sometimes defend our position by making comparative statements about heterosexual practice on the one side. That is to say:

"But we're saying nothing different to homosexuals than we are saying to heterosexuals – just wait till you're married (to someone of the opposite sex!)" But we *are*! We are saying that someone cannot ever give expression to their orientation and desires (which we've validated as not being 'sinful' or 'wrong' or 'broken' – or, at least, we are 'not getting drawn' on that). We have committed them – condemned them – to a life of celibacy.

Now listen, some gay Christians do that. The Anglican minister, Sean Doherty, is a good, public example of this. He is 'same-sex attracted' (not 'gay'), but is in a heterosexual marriage (with four children); and in the same way that a heterosexual husband needs to watch his behaviour with other women, Sean needs to watch his behaviour with other men. Sam Allberry has made much the same choice. Other gay Christians choose a life of celibacy. (*Matthew* 19:12 is sometimes applied in this respect.) ⁶

And we would always agree that individuals need to obey their conscience in such matters. (*Romans* 14:23: "Whatever is not of faith is sin.")

But to impose a choice or decision based on personal conscience on someone else – *everyone* else – is different! That brings us back to unfair, and impossible, imposition.

We also sometimes defend our position with reference to paedophilia on the other side. [I need to be very careful and clear here: in no way are we comparing homosexuality to paedophilia.] That is to say:

"But we're saying nothing different to homosexuals than we are saying to people with paedophilic tendencies – you cannot express your tendencies ever, in any way." But we *are*. Because regarding paedophilia, we would be unanimous (as would wider society) that both the practice is wrong *and* the orientation is wrong. Very wrong. The orientation needs fixing, it needs changing (*i.e.*, 'converting').

[And why do we say this? Because by definition paedophilic tendencies are directed towards abuse (child abuse) and non-consent. So we cannot put the two in the same bracket.]

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⁶ "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

Specifically regarding same-sex practice, then, what is the ultimate question for us to consider in all this? Our answer to this will ultimately determine all our other answers to it.

Let me suggest, it is not: 'What do we think of same-sex practice?'

Rather, it is: 'What do we think of same-sex orientation, or attraction?'

In our current 'compassionate evangelical' view, we might not use the word 'sin' for it. But we would have to use the word 'temptation [to sin]' or 'wrong urge', or something. But surely, temptation that is a 'constant' – an orientation (like an addiction or a bad habit) – is 'wrong' or 'broken'. It needs correcting, or fixing, or at least constantly resisting.

So this is the question:

Is same-sex orientation (i.e., sexual attraction) in some way 'wrong' or 'broken'? Everything else is a 'trickle-down' from this question.

If we say 'Yes', then in the final analysis the orientation must be managed, even resisted, and maybe even re-oriented.

If we say 'No', then in the final analysis we are going to allow legitimate physical expression of it, *i.e.*, marriage – life-long covenantal relationship, whose unique physical expression is sexual union.

That is the theological framework we need to navigate.

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4. Four things we agree on

Let me finish this paper with a consideration of the things on which we agree. (I hope and pray!)

i. Marriage

We agree on the unique status of marriage. A life-long covenantal relationship (traditional view, and our view: between a man and a woman), whose unique physical expression is sexual union.

Genesis 2:23-24: The man said, "This is now bone [out] of my bones, and flesh [out] of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman' (אַשָּׁה; 'female man'), for she was taken out of 'man' (אַיּאָיָה; 'male man').' For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his woman, and they will [once again] become one flesh.

In other words, marriage is the reversal of the separating out of the woman (Eve) from the man (Adam) at the beginning of creation. They are, once again, 'one flesh'!

And notice the fundamental (and primary) purpose of sexual union. It is not procreation — which we take from Roman Catholic teaching, although not the implications (for things such as contraception). Rather, it is the physical expression of what marriage is — two people becoming "one flesh".

Genesis 2:24: The man and the woman were both naked, and were not ashamed.

This is not a 'throw-away' line about the first nudist camp. This is the grand finale, the final words, of the whole creation event! The husband and wife are uninhibited together!

Jesus repeats these words, of course, and adds a few of his own:

Mark 10:9: "Therefore, what God has [re-]joined together, let no-one separate."

And we are all agreed that sexual union, intimacy, is exclusively designed for marriage.

I Corinthians 7:9: "It's better to marry than to burn [with passion]."

Hebrews 13:4: "The marriage bed is undefiled" (implying other sexual beds are)

ii. Binary biological gender

Without pre-empting the discussions related to 'trans' conversations (transgender, transsexual, gender realignment, *etc.*), we would all accept the binary biological genders of male and female. (*Genesis* 1:27: "Male and female he made them.")

Even this, however, needs some caveats:

- We recognise there can be exceptional situations here, involving someone born 'intersex'.
- According to the creation account in *Genesis* 2:4b-24, the 'male and female' are in the one person Adam until God separates the woman out from the man.
- This division may well only exist 'this side of heaven'. (Galatians 3:28; Mark 12:25)
- Just because something is a 'Creation norm', that does not necessarily make it a 'moral norm'. (Otherwise we would say that people that are single, or do not have children are morally deficient.)
- And in all events, we do have to receive new disciples 'as they are' (1 Corinthians 7:20: "Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called." This relates explicitly to circumcision; but the application to previous gender realignment is clear.)

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iii. The Ten Commandments (The Decalogue)

We all agree with the Ten Commandments! (Exodus 20:2-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21)

We might have a discussion about how exactly we 'keep the Sabbath' (*Romans* 14:5-6; *Hebrews* 4:10); and we would agree that the internalised Holy Spirit takes us further – to the 'fruit of the Spirit' (*Galatians* 5:22-23) and the 'law of love' (*Romans* 13:8; *Galatians* 5:14).

But in all respects the Ten Commandments are not up for negotiation. (Cf. Matthew 22:37-40.)

And the sixth one – the second one regarding how we treat other people – is very clear about our sexual behaviour. "You shall not commit adultery."

['Mrs Brown' says in one episode, Jesus never told two people they cannot love each other. And I remember instinctively saying to the TV, 'Yes he did.']

iv. Four prohibited sexual behaviours (and orientations)

In light of the above three points, we can consider the following four sexual behaviours to be wrong. That is to say, the following is a list of sexual behaviour patterns that are diametrically opposed to the Bible, Christian theology, and the Kingdom of God.

This is based on two fundamental principles, one of which we've already addressed:

- 1. Legitimate sexual practice occurs within the context of a lifelong covenant commitment, *i.e.*, marriage. God intended it as the physical expression of two people becoming [once again] "one flesh".
- 2. Every human being is of equal and inestimable value we are made in the image of God, and Jesus died for everyone. This means that everyone has the right to be treated with dignity and respect. It also means that all sexual practice requires explicit consent, and should be motivated by mutual enjoyment rather than by mere self-gratification.

Again, then, sexual behaviour patterns that involve any of the following – either explicitly or implicitly – are thoroughly inconsistent with the Christian message:

a. Paedophilic

This involves sexual behaviour with a child or minor. The current legal age of this in the UK is anyone under the age of 16. We would consider this to be the absolute minimum age. By very definition, such behaviour involves non-consent and abuse.

The Bible is very clear about the consequences for someone inflicting such damage on young lives. (*E.g.*, *Mark* 10:13-16; *Matthew* 18:10.)

b. Predatory

This involves the grooming of anyone for sexual purposes. It is to be distinguished from legitimate romantic gestures in that it is coercive, involves the abuse of power dynamics, and is not based on mutual friendship and love.

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c. Promiscuous

The primary purpose of sex is as a physical expression of two people becoming 'one flesh' (*Genesis* 2:24-25). Moreover, the Ten Commandments (*Exodus* 20:2-17 // *Deuteronomy* 5:7-21) are a reflection of the character of God, summed up in the New Testament as the two greatest commandments (*Matthew* 22:37-40).

This means that the biblically legitimate setting for sexual enjoyment between two people is in the context of a life-long covenant commitment, *i.e.*, marriage. For this reason, all sexual unions outside of this exclusive setting are not in keeping with the Christian faith.

d. Perverted

This involves any sexual behaviour that is degrading, humiliating, abusive, or non-consensual. At the extreme end, it includes bestiality. It could also, however, include other acts that are designed essentially to achieve a new sexual 'high' / 'kick', which are not in keeping with a person's marital covenant promises.

(One recent awful example of this in the UK is the crimes committed by David Fuller in 2021. Interestingly, a BBC reporter described them as "transgressive" – a very biblical term.) (I would also include 'selfish sexual kicks' with that, and make reference to some of the seven 'terror texts', especially *Romans* 1:26-27. Let me use me as an example.)

Three further notes:

- i. We understand that the above sexual behaviours or behaviour patterns may find a solitary or 'virtual' expression rather than a physical expression involving two people. Most obviously, this includes the digital viewing of pornography or degrading material. Such acts would at least in the eyes of God be treated in the same light as the above. (*Cf. Matthew* 5:28.)
- ii. We consider a life-long covenant of faithfulness (including sexual faithfulness), *i.e.*, marriage, to be the exclusive legitimate setting for sexual behaviour. (*E.g.*, See 1 Corinthians 7:2-4, 9; Hebrews 13:4.) That is not to say, however, that all sexual behaviour within a marriage is permitted. Rather, it is to say that all sexual behaviour within a marriage to which both partners fully and freely assent and consent is permitted. And only this behaviour is permitted. (*E.g.*, Ephesians 5:25-33; 1 Peter 3:7.) So, for example, if a spouse were to have sex with their partner without consent, this would constitute rape (not 'rights'). (*Cf. 1 Corinthians* 7:4.)
- iii. It is a widely held traditional Christian belief that the primary purpose of sexual union is for procreation children. I do not accept this. I accept, rather, that procreation is the secondary purpose of sexual union (*Genesis* 1:22). The primary purpose is to serve as the physical expression of two people becoming "one flesh", in a life-long, committed, exclusive, covenant relationship (*Genesis* 2:24-25). This means that a legitimate act of sexual fulfilment does not require the possibility of pregnancy.

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Conclusion

So there is plenty we would all agree on – more than the things we would disagree on.

My prayer – our prayer – is that in all these conversation, the good news about Jesus Christ, who died for our sins according to the scripture, the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of God, and the Body of Christ, his church, all increase. For the sake of his name, and the world he loves.

"And of the increase of his government there will be no end." (Isaiah 9:7)

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(Note: This is the most recent work by the Church of England on 'identity, sexuality, relationships,

and marriage'. There is an accompanying website. See on the next page.)

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⁷ Douglas Murray is a non-Christian writer. He offers a corrective to some current societal shifts.

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This is a collection of wider resources produced by the Baptist Union.

https://www.psephizo.com/tag/gay/

This is a useful site, run by a more 'conservative' Anglican minister and academic, Ian Paul.

$\underline{https://www.wheaton.edu/academics/school-of-psychology-counseling-and-family-therapy/sexual-and-gender-identity-institute/$

This is the site of the Sexual & Gender Identity Institute, run by Wheaton College, Illinois.

https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith

This is the site of the Church of England's recent (2020) set of teaching resources on 'identity, sexuality, relationships, and marriage'.

https://www.eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/biblical-and-pastoral-responses-to-homosexuality

This is a resource provided by the *Evangelical Alliance* for pastors responding to homosexuality.

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