

What is the basis for differences in beliefs regarding the morality of homosexuality in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Roman Catholic Church?

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Criterion A: Rationale and Preliminary Research

I have been raised in a Catholic family, but one that always interacts with people of a variety of faiths. Among these have been people of different Christian denominations claiming to have a faith based on the teachings of the Bible, as my family does. Since all denominations of Christian faith are based out of the teachings recorded in the Bible, I often wonder the extent to which Lutheranism could possibly differ from Catholicism while both still claim to have roots in the teachings of the Bible.

The sources I will consult in this investigation will range from interviews with a Lutheran minister and a Catholic priest in my local area, in addition to preliminary research based on church positions regarding homosexuality from website evidence. While the religious authorities in my local area are not the highest-level of authority within their respective religions, they are viewed as respected teachers within their faith communities and hold religious perspective on biblical scripture crucial to my investigation. I crafted interview questions based on preliminary research from websites that allow access to official statements from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Roman Catholic Church. Access to these official statements allowed for broader understanding of religious perspective so that the research is not solely dependent upon findings from a single religious official from each faith community.

I noticed that both the Roman Catholic Church and the ELCA had distinctly different viewpoints on homosexuality. In 1991, the Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA resolved that, “Gay and lesbian people, as individuals created by God, are welcome to participate fully in the life of the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” (“Stances on LGBTQ Issues: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America”). On the other hand, however, the 1986 Letter to Bishops of the Catholic Church states, “Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder” (“Stances of Faiths on LGBTQ Issues: Roman Catholic Church”).

Both the Roman Catholic Church and the ELCA have different theological traditions of interpreting the Bible. The ELCA Churchwide Assembly, in 2013, voted to, “...encourage all ELCA synods, congregations, and members to add their voices in support of legislation that prohibits employment discrimination on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation or

gender identity” (“Stances of Faiths on LGBTQ Issues: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America”). The ELCA seems to derive a tradition from the Bible of general acceptance, without viewing homosexual orientation as a sin. Pope Benedict XVI approved a Vatican document in 2005, stating that the Catholic Church, “...cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality...Such persons, in fact, find themselves in a situation that gravely hinders them from relating correctly to men and women” (“Stances of Faiths on LGBTQ Issues: Roman Catholic Church”). The Roman Catholic Church seems to derive a different sort of understanding from the Bible—that the union of a man and woman is not only supported in the Bible, but has a natural purpose of shaping how society interacts.

Given these evident differences in beliefs, my research question is: What is the basis for differences in beliefs regarding the morality of homosexuality in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Roman Catholic Church? This investigation will address more nuanced beliefs in homosexuality in both faiths, and the roots are of these beliefs.

Criterion B: Plan for Study

My research question is: What is the basis for differences in beliefs regarding the morality of homosexuality in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Roman Catholic Church?

This investigation will first determine the extent to which the beliefs regarding homosexuality differ, and from there determine how each faith justifies their respective beliefs. Passages from the Bible will be especially important will in understanding the basis of each faith. However, this investigation will also concern any other factors that have influenced the beliefs, from historical landmarks in the religion to tradition.

I will accomplish this aim by interviewing both a Catholic priest and a Lutheran minister in my local community. I have prepared the same list of questions for each regarding basis for beliefs regarding homosexuality to ensure both interviews can be compared.¹ I intend to gather the biblical evidence both the ELCA and Roman Catholic Church use to support their argument regarding their stance on homosexuality, as well as commentary on any other relevant factors in the stances of each faith.

¹ The questions for both interviews are the following: What is the position of the Catholic/Lutheran Church on homosexuality? Is homosexuality thought of as harmful to the person in this life, or in their afterlife? What is the biblical basis for these beliefs? Are these beliefs rooted solely in the bible, or is there other doctrine that this belief has been based off of? Do you believe that for as long as the Catholic/Lutheran Church has existed that this belief has remained consistent? If not, what catalyzed this change and at what point in your faith's history did the change occur? How do these beliefs differ between those of Lutherans/Catholics? Is it a difference in interpretation?

Criterion C: Summary of Significant Findings

According to Reverend Kevin Duggan from Mary Queen of Peace Roman Catholic Church, human sexuality was created by God for the means of both unity and procreation—since homosexual behaviors innately cannot lead to procreation, they are seen as sinful (Duggan).² Homosexuality by itself, while considered disordered, is not a sin if the desires are not manifested by action, since desires and orientations are not the choice of the individual (Duggan).³ For these reasons, the Roman Catholic Church does not support same-sex marriage or any sexual actions between individuals of the same-sex (Duggan). These beliefs are held by all of the clergy within the Catholic Church, and is summarized in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#2357 – 2359) (Duggan).

As the biblical basis for these beliefs, Reverend Duggan referenced specific books in the Old and New Testament that the Catholic Church connects to the idea of homosexual actions as sinful (Duggan).⁴ However, the Catholic Church does not have a *Sola Scriptura* methodology in determining morality within the church, as it also heavily depends on the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the Sacred Tradition and of the Pope and Bishops through the Sacred Magisterium (Duggan).⁵

In an interview with Mr. Lund, a former Lutheran minister, Mr. Lund emphasized a belief in fluid sexuality, and that many people, even those considered heterosexual, have a variety of

² According to Reverend Duggan, “The Catholic Church teaches that our human sexuality is ordered toward (created for) two distinct but inseparable ends—love (unity) and life (procreation)—and that these two ends can only be rightly attained in the context of the marriage relationship between one man (male) and one woman (female). Only in a heterosexual marriage relationship can the two ultimate ends (highest purposes) of our human sexuality be realized in a way that is morally justifiable and humanly authentic” (Duggan).

³ Reverend Duggan emphasizes, “The Catholic Church holds however that, while not sinful per se, homosexual attractions are disordered in that they are oriented toward actions that cannot achieve the goal that our human sexuality is ordered toward by God who created it...A homosexual orientation, and the sexual activity that it inclines toward, seeks the love, but it cannot lead to the life-giving end that our sexuality exists for. It is in this sense that the Catholic Church regards homosexuality as ‘disordered’” (Duggan).

⁴ Reverend Duggan referenced “...the creation stories in the Book of Genesis (chapters 1-3) wherein God is described as creating the human person ‘male and female’, and how the man and the woman were made for each other, and were commanded to ‘be fruitful’” as well as the letters of St. Paul and teachings of Jesus in the New Testament that support his teaching on the life-long and indissoluble character of marriage” (Duggan).

⁵ According to Reverend Duggan, “The Catholic Church, does not rely on a *Sola Scriptura* (‘the Scriptures alone’) approach to religious and moral teaching. The Catholic Church, in addition to recognizing and valuing the Sacred Scriptures (the Bible) as important and revelatory, also recognizes and values both the Sacred Tradition (the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit) and the Sacred Magisterium (the Pope and the Bishops) as equal and interdependent contributors in the search for and discernment of religious and moral truth...[through] philosophical reflection, the study of natural law, scientific investigation and prayerful discernment in its effort to know, teach and live the truth” (Duggan).

impure sexual temptations, some involving members of the same sex (Lund). The desires by themselves are not viewed as harmful, as they are seen as a normal part of life for all (Lund). However, action based on these desires can be unhealthy, and Lutheranism focuses on controlling these desires of the flesh for the sake of familial structure and social peace (Lund). Therefore, homosexuality is seen as a sin in the ELCA as well (Lund).⁶

Mr. Lund also highlighted specific Biblical passages that support the ELCA view of homosexuality (Lund).⁷ He emphasizes how the Bible condemns action, but does not condemn homosexuality in itself (Lund).⁸ However, due to the Protestant Reformation and continual breaks within the Protestant denominations, there are often split views due to a lack of explicit teachings of what is sexually moral as different people pursue a pure teaching from the Bible (Lund).⁹

⁶ God calls us to a holy life, which means a virtuous, ordered, peaceful and productive life, and sin is falling short of God's call and design for our lives. Of the seven cardinal sins, sexual sin is not seen as the worst...sinners can be forgiven through the grace of God and the work of Jesus Christ, forgiven of any and all sins" (Lund).

⁷ According to Mr. Lund, "In the New Testament, the apostle Paul repeats the Jewish Levitical tradition (especially in Romans) and calls people to sexual discipline and faithfulness...Paul seems to see sexual disorder as just one part of the chaotic world of paganism in the Roman empire, where people do whatever they want without caring about the design or purpose or the call of God. There is no record of Jesus speaking directly about the boundaries and rules of sexual behavior, though he seems (as in other areas as well) to be a traditional Jew. In John he talks gently to the adulterous woman at the well, expresses compassion and forgiveness to her, but tells her to 'go and don't sin anymore' (Lund).

⁸ According to Mr. Lund, "Biblical communities have focused on sexual actions, on behavior, which can be somewhat regulated, as opposed to trying to somehow forbid the desires themselves, which cannot be regulated" (Lund).

⁹ According to Mr. Lund, The Protestant Reformation, because of the many abuses of the Medieval Catholic Church (as an institution), starting with Luther, said that the Scripture alone, not tradition, should be the guideline for all faith and practice. So an answer to everything had to be found in the Bible...In sexual matters, of course, this has not been helpful, since the Bible has relatively little to say....churches keep splintering as people become sure they have now found the 'true' Gospel message that layers of tradition have corrupted" (Lund).

Part D: Critical Reflection and Evaluation

The interviews provided a new level of insight into the beliefs of the ELCA and Roman Catholic Church regarding homosexuality. Both religions indicate that homosexual thoughts are not sinful since they are not a choice of the individual, but that they are sinful if manifested in action. Like many innate desires humans have for worldly gratification, both Catholics and ELCA on the whole reject homosexual action or marriage as sin.

Both interviews show less emphasis on scripture than expected. There was some mention in both interviews of God's creation of Adam and Eve for each other in Genesis and also the letters of St. Paul in the New Testament, with limited reference to Jesus' teachings in the Gospels. While both interviews made passing references to passages in the Bible, both seemed to focus more on factors outside of the Bible itself, since the teachings within the scripture are not explicit and can be interpreted in a variety of ways. In Catholicism, this idea of a "natural truth" is extracted from traditions and officials within the church as well as the scripture. This stems from the belief that Jesus created the popes as his successors, starting with Peter, and therefore validating their judgement on future issues arising within the faith. Therefore, the beliefs of homosexuality are less explicitly stated and rather extrapolated by officials within the Church. The ELCA takes a similar approach, but as it was born out of a rejection of tradition in response to offenses committed by the early Catholic Church, there is a less unified consensus. The Bible therefore lends itself to a variety of interpretations, allowing some ELCA parishes to perform same-sex marriage, while others can refuse. Both denominations in general view homosexual behavior as a deterioration of morality that would lead the world away from God, since our sexuality was created for those of the opposite sex within a marriage and for the purposes of procreation.

While the results of the interview confirmed the prior research on the Roman Catholic stance on homosexuality, the results of this investigation did not align with the original research on the ELCA stance on homosexuality. The preliminary research indicated that the ELCA was accepting of homosexual behavior, while Mr. Lund explained it as a sexual sin. The cause of the inconsistencies in answers to the research question from an ELCA perspective may be due to the limitations of the sources used. Both the article used for preliminary research and the interview with Mr. Lund convey religious ideas from differing points of view. These points of view were

also limited to text accessed online, preventing clarification of points and may have resulted in misinterpretation. These sources are not confirmed to be representative of all believers, as individual views may harbor other influences outside of the religion. The separation between cultural and religious influences on sources is difficult to distinguish—therefore, making definite statements about the religion is difficult.

The inconsistency of research results regarding the ELCA also may reflect the lack of unity within the ELCA itself. While the Catholic Church has a strict hierarchy, with the Pope at the top, followed by archbishops, bishops, then priests, views have remained consistent throughout the world. However, the ELCA is less centralized, and as a protestant denomination, roots less in the tradition of the past and more in interpretation of the text, which varies between individuals. Therefore, the lack of hierarchy within the ELCA stemming from tradition rather than explicit Biblical teaching may make a unified consensus within the ELCA difficult to establish.

Future research could include more extensive exploration of the ELCA stance on homosexuality. In order to come to a more definite conclusion, a larger number of ministers could be interviewed about scripture interpretation. Also, the historical traditions within the Catholic Church regarding homosexuality could be examined in order to determine to what extent they have influenced modern views over the scripture itself.

Works Cited

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