



Book Review of: *On Being Human: Sexual Orientation and the Image of God*, C. Norman Kraus, Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011, 113 pp.

By Wayne Northey

Since receipt of this publication for review, same-sex marriage has been legalized in the United States. Canada had legalized same-sex marriage in 2005. Since, in both countries, the sky has not fallen...

Nonetheless, I approach reviewing this book with hesitation and trepidation. Same-sex marriage is still hugely contested in most church denominations.

C. Norman Kraus enters this discussion as an octogenarian, who, in his Mennonite denomination, is well aware of the minority position he takes.

He invited fellow octogenarian and pastor Martin Lehman to write the Foreword. It states:

Simply put, Kraus presents a case for the view that sexual orientation is an essential part of being human; that a human is not responsible for his or her sexual orientation; that homosexual identity is no more perverse than heterosexual identity, and [Christian] guidelines for both homo-erotic and hetero-erotic behaviours should be identical (p. viii).

I have both appreciated anything I've read in the past by the author, and I confess at the outset to find Kraus' book compelling. For Kraus, indicates Lehman, there is an ecclesial concern related to mission and more specifically evangelism. In the church's opposition to same-sex relationships, its "saving message is weakened and made less believable by excluding gay believers (p. ix)", contends Lehman. The rejoinder of course, is that gays and lesbians are not excluded from the church, rather same-sex relations are. But gays and lesbians tell a different real-life story.

If the church fails in heeding Kraus' message, Lehman contends that those who need Jesus may not believe him, the Holy Spirit will be grieved, the church's growth as a community of grace, joy, and peace will be slowed, and the flow of healing and hope from the church to the world will be restricted.

Lehman adds, "This sounds harsh, but it must be said (p. ix)."

I read recently a restatement by one church body of its opposition to same-sex marriage, in the context of the June 2015 court decision to permit same-sex marriage across the United States. It was compassionate, non-reactionary, and based the opposition on the analogy of Christ and the church in covenant relationship. In that statement, the church had to be "female" in order for the analogy to work.

I also witnessed recently the public testimonial of a lesbian woman in a committed lesbian relationship, and raising kids, upon her being received into membership in a church we used to be members of. We were around when the church decided to take the course Kraus holds out for in this small treatise.

I know the people involved in writing the restatement and in the testimonial. They are real and authentic in their Christian faith. Therein lies the rub for many. At the end of the review, I will briefly allude to a paper that presents the case, with reference to “queer inclusion”, that various moral positions are function of certain “moral” types, that explains why people often talk past each other on this matter (and on other ethical issues). The author of that paper writes that based heavily on the findings of social psychology and more recently neuro-psychology, a number of scholars have been explaining the variety of moralities on the basis of the intrinsic workings of the human brain (p. 1).

To put one consideration to rest: Kraus is not just adducing “new” scientific evidence, nor yielding to current cultural pressures in this treatise. Rather, Kraus is core *theological*: i.e., he looks at the character of God as analogue for his theological study, to which I shall turn presently. I only note now that the *perichoresis* of the Trinity as analogue for the queer debate, not only the analogue of Christ and the church where the church is woodenly female, can surely be used legitimately. One can ask, why cannot the analogy to Christ and the church work if the church is neither female nor male exclusively? The way the church body I alluded to uses the analogy presents as begging the very question of the queer issue. Why can the analogy not work in same-sex application?, is at least a valid question. Is the point of the analogy sexual orientation-based or relationship based?, is another question.

Lehman in the Foreword finally appeals to a process of deconstruction/reconstruction in relation to the same-sex debate. He adduces several biblical precedents of such (p. xiii), and more recent Mennonite (and wider church) examples around the role of women in the church. In the church body to which I alluded, many in that tradition whom I know personally, and many others, agree that that body’s support of empire and empire ways through violence and war must undergo a similar process of deconstruction/reconstruction if authentic Christian justice is to be upheld. Love that “does no harm to its neighbour” (Romans 13:10) by consistent New Testament teaching is the only way. (Another Mennonite, Willard Swartley, wrote a definitive New Testament study on that: *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics*. In *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, Richard Hays argues similarly against the church’s longstanding embrace of violence and war. (To be fair: both Swartley and Hays disagree in their various publications with same-sex union.))

Kraus asks at one point in his essay:

... but change from what? Are all the cultural and ethical developments from the second century CE onwards to be read as moral and religious degeneration? (p. 14)

It is generally acknowledged that the early church from the New Testament era until the era of Constantine was largely pacifist. In the era of Constantine pacifism was largely abandoned by the church. Would its mass re-embrace today by the church universal constitute moral degeneration? None of those I know in the tradition alluded to above would say so. On the contrary. Yet that church body claims change regarding the queer issue is non-negotiable, given longstanding Tradition. An outside observer is surely allowed to ask simply: Why? If there can be change around violence and war, despite Tradition, why not around same-sex relations?

The author states in his Preface that he hopes the work will be used as study guide for analysis and dialogue, not argument, that his purpose is didactic not polemic. He indeed is irenic throughout. I say nonetheless in response: Lots of luck! I think I am accurate that there has been no more vexed issue in the history of the worldwide church than same-sex union. Only one other issue came close, in the fourth and fifth centuries: the Donatist controversy. (Sadly, Augustine, who so contributed to the West's and the Western church's hang-ups about sex in general, took an extremely harsh position against the Donatists, one that led to his giving his blessing to use of coercive punishment, including lethal violence, to be rid of the Donatists.)

In response to the fact that the church universal has always largely opposed same-sex relationships, Kraus states regarding the gay issue

that the church has followed traditional cultural patterns more assiduously than it has explored the theological implications of the historicity of the biblical message (p. xv).

No small claim. Sexual orientation should not be pivotal, Kraus claims, rather, what it means to follow Christ should be central. Kraus mentions in the Preface four other dialogue partners whom we meet at the end of the book, who share Kraus' conclusions, though would not necessarily endorse everything in "my original essay (p. xvi)."

In the Introduction, Kraus avers that

how the church deals with the inclusion or exclusion of minority sexual variants becomes a test of its authenticity as the body of Christ – the New Testament image it claims to represent in the world (p. 3).

Kraus argues that

Personal character that reflects the image of God in social relationships is the authenticating mark of moral behaviour (p. 4).

Shalom is ever a human reflection of the Trinitarian image of God, according to Kraus. But cultural outlooks change. Kraus believes that cultural outlooks have coloured the issue in the past. He directs our gaze beyond those outlooks (past and present – "According to Scripture, both ancient and modern alike stand under the judgment of God (p. 22).") to an alternative theological approach with *shalom* the singular mark of God-likeness.

The author nonetheless spends Chapter 2 on the changing cultural outlook of contemporary society. He acknowledges the anxieties and fears of the church's feeling pressure to change. He writes as a heterosexual male. He adduces the "profound revelation of the *incarnation* (p. 20)", stating:

Our calling is to be *human* like Jesus whom we are invited to follow, but that does not mean we are to mimic his ancient peculiarities (p. 20)."

Jesus clearly, for instance, shared in embrace of the ancient cosmology of his time. On the other hand,

When Jesus challenged the prerogatives of men based on such [just adduced] ancient assumptions about what is "natural," it caused consternation among his disciples (Matthew 19:10 – 11); and many more cultural assumptions have been overturned in the intervening centuries! (p. 22)

What Kraus holds out for is

how God's word to an *ancient* culture should be interpreted and applied in *modern* culture. And this requires an astute evaluation of modern cultural presuppositions, biological realities, and social relationships as well as those of the ancients (pp. 22 & 23, emphasis in original).

Kraus exemplifies this approach in this essay.

I know a solid Christian who has both homosexual friends and a lesbian daughter, whom he loves without judgment. Yet he is strongly opposed to the "gay agenda" in the wider church. In response to such reality, Kraus writes:

This publicizing of the [same-sex] movement is often criticized in the churches as its "politicization," but it may just as properly be seen as the correction of social injustice (p. 24).

I cannot fault that observation.

Kraus contrasts a current understanding of gay practice with ancient understandings. He writes:

It [current understanding] focuses on personal and social consequences – whether the behaviour involves social and personal manipulation and abuse – rather than the literal proscriptions of an ancient culture (p. 25).

Kraus claims that ancient culture, the context of biblical taboos, considered sexuality as sexual *behaviour* (the act itself)... Thus taboos were put in place to regulate the sexual *act* of genital intimacy to control the orientation (passion) (pp. 25 & 26, emphasis in original).

Kraus poses several questions in consequence, one of which is:

Or should it [homosexual orientation] be given a clinical definition, which implies a human predisposition of a small minority without moral implications? (p. 26)

Conservative religion and some secular authorities (NARTH – National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality, an American organization, for instance) identify same-sex behaviour as part of original sin (religious), or as a psychological condition amenable to treatment/cure (secular). Kraus understandably asks:

Should, therefore, the moral and religious nature of same-sex affectional behaviour be judged by the physical act itself, or by the ethical relationship constituted by the act? (p. 26)

Kraus' response is clear:

For those who believe in the God of the Bible, as I do, the restatement of the moral issue in terms of social and personal relationships rather than physical anatomy and sex acts is not a negation of the biblical taboos. Rather it is an interpretation and social adaptation to modernity in the spirit of Christ. It simply defines more precisely the compassionate nonviolent specifications of loving ones [*sic*] neighbor (and enemy) as oneself in the modern world (p. 27).

The author rejects social designations of "unnatural" when applied to same-sex behaviour as premodern and invalid. On the other hand, he rejects as well prevailing political/legal positions as determinative of the church's position. He gives as example until very recently a Virginian law forbidding Blacks and Whites to intermarry or to worship together in organized

congregations. He approvingly adduces Stanley Hauerwas' and William Willimon's *Resident Aliens*, especially its subtitle: *A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something Is Wrong*. He applies the subtitle to the gay issue.

Chapter 3 takes on the Augustinian tradition of biblical understanding, in particular "its interpretation of the fall of Adam as a historical occurrence rather than as a human condition (p. 29)." In this hermeneutical paradigm,

God's image and intention is [*sic*] associated with the complementary genital structure of the first man and woman, and all same-sex erotic urges are considered moral flaws caused by the sin of the first human parents (p. 29).

Heterosexuality is thus identified

with God's creation intent, and same-sex sexuality by default becomes a moral deficit (p. 29).

A key interpretative move is adduced by Kraus that

requires us to go beyond the simple word studies of biblical prooftexts to establish precisely what the text meant in its original setting, and whether the post-Nicaean theologians got it right (p. 29).

Kraus adduces here the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction. He states simply:

Indeed, this work of deconstructing-reconstructing in the spirit of Christ is precisely the work of the Holy Spirit in the church (pp. 29 & 30).

That said, he proceeds directly to reject outright the "Augustinian paradigm of a corrupted humanity floundering in sexual concupiscence" as a legitimate way to frame the question of human sexuality. For Augustine, sexual intimacy, even at its best and (heterosexual) most legitimate is still suspect. (Augustine wrestled all his life with sexual addiction, and his "preferential option" of celibacy had more to do with personal demons than with theology. Sadly, his sexual hang-ups profoundly impacted the church universal ever afterwards.)

Kraus concludes:

Sexual sin lies not in the satisfaction of the erotic physical orientation – either its hetero- or homosexual embodiment – but in its selfish, narcissistic abuse (p. 30).

Kraus continues with a section entitled "What about the Fall?". He points out that even lefthandedness until the mid-20th century was considered "unnatural". It is therefore

not surprising that variant gender self-identities and sexual preferences are considered shameful perversions of the *natural order*. And it is easy for those who interpret and apply Scripture literally to find cultural precedents in selected texts of the Bible that support this bias (p. 33, emphasis in original).

Kraus rejects any understanding of (original) sin that is chronological, or that claims it results in psychosomatic corruption. He draws on an earlier publication, *God our Savior*, to argue that

Sin is an existential and relational concept, not an essential and ontic one... It should not be identified with specific acts, which in different cultures and situations can and do have different personal meanings (p. 34).

(This reviewer's input: Sin's inversion is the classic text in II Corinthians 5:17 – 21, if the text is read properly: "If anyone is in Christ *there is a new creation...*" The old creation experienced

sin, namely brokenness of relationship; the new creation experiences restoration of relationship, or “restorative justice”, in relation to God (*theological*); to oneself (*psychological*); to others (*sociological*); to the good earth and even the cosmos (*ecological* and *cosmological*). Put differently: sin’s antidote is

shalom in interpersonal relationships, that is, an attitude or orientation and social structure that discourages selfish disregard of the true worth of others and maximizes compassionate responsibility for the whole human community (p. 44).

Shalom, according to the II Cor. 5:17 – 21 text, is to be applied to all human relationships as indicated above, and is ideally the central “creation/new creation” reality of humanity in God’s image.)

Augustine felt the sin of concupiscence in the sexual act was only mitigated if the intent was procreation, which by its nature could not permit same-sex acts. Even sexual desire is morally tainted. Thus sex with contraceptives is wrong. Ironically, conservative Protestants still are impacted by Augustine, but not to the point of refusing contraceptives. Thus Protestants at least already have applied their own deconstruction/reconstruction in response to traditional Augustinian morality. Kraus states that

Whether intended or not, these exceptions create an implicit possibility for the moral and spiritual reevaluation of all sexual intimacy and the redefinition of family relationships (p. 35).

Kraus also challenges the moral distinction between “attraction” (i.e. temptation) and “practice” which must always be resisted. He challenges easy identification of same-sex relationship with alcoholism and pedophilia (*practices*), and otherwise *temptations* such as sadomasochism or pornography.

So Kraus interprets the Fall, not as a loss of primordial perfection, rather as a finite state of creation with “vulnerability to mistakes, decay, and death (p. 36).” Eden is a state in this case of finite innocence that by definition is imperfect. “In fact,” argues Kraus, “the whole biblical narrative assumes that creation is the beginning of an eschatological plan terminating in perfection, not beginning with it (p. 36).” One might consequently say that creation was declared “good”, but not (yet) perfect. This has widespread implications, namely that [not] all physical and psychological human imperfections, blemishes, and deficiencies are the result of an antediluvian self-inflicted moral corruption (fall from perfection) rather than inherent finitude... The fatal error of the fundamentalistic Augustinian tradition of recent centuries is that it assumes finite creatures – Adam and Eve – were created perfect, not just innocent (p. 37).

In this context, at minimum “sexual diversity [consequently] stems from the limitation and irregularities of finite possibilities rather than moral corruption (p. 37).”

If same-sex orientation is seen from this understanding of finite imperfection, same-sex erotic behavior is removed entirely from the realm of the moral. The question becomes what defines choices as immoral, and from a Hebrew Christian perspective the moral distinctive does not reside in the sexual or gender identity of the human

partner. Rather it is the will of God for *shalom* [as discussed earlier] in the human family that reflects the image of the Trinity (p. 38).

As also said earlier, this means that all the immoral and moral directives of (sexual) relationship apply regardless of gender orientation and hetero- or homosexual practice.

In Chapter 4, Kraus makes it clear that

sin must not be equated with the literal ritual and moral taboos of the Old Testament narrative (p. 43).

The problem is, Kraus acknowledges, that current cultural biases can impact theological interpretation. Again, *shalom* – the restoration of peace to all relationships – is central.

When discussing how humans are in the image of God, he states (emphasis in original):

In a word, God is the ontological embodiment of loving relationship, which on earth is to be embodied in the nonviolent human community of shalom – love, justice, and peace... The image ... is contained in the “mystery of persons in relationship.” (p. 48)

And

The new canon for judging sexual and family morality, as in the letters of Paul, is the priority of the kingdom of God (p. 53)

Kraus sums up the entire chapter with

In so far as physical sexual intimacy reflects and furthers human *shalom*, it participates in the image of God. In so far as it is abusive and destructive of human *shalom*, it is a desecration of the image of God. This is equally true of all sexual activity (pp. 54 & 55)

In Chapter 5, Kraus states:

To adapt the words of the African proverb, it takes a SGLBT village to nurture the image of God in a child (p. 61 & 62)

He adds:

Sexuality understood as the instinctual longing for human bonding and intimate physical relationships, which relations to other animals cannot provide, is an integral quality of all our relations (p. 62)

He quotes approvingly Laurie Jungling:

For the purpose of this essay, I will define *eros* as the divine call into life as embodied relationality that has been freely and faithfully given in and through God’s on-going creation. Erotic love is the force that gives life the relational essence that fills and empowers all creation (p. 63).

In this context he writes:

Original sin has adulterated *eros* with narcissistic desire and promiscuous freedom; and in like manner distorted *agape* into a kind of benevolence of power, and *philia* into political allegiance (p. 65).

In Chapter 6, “An Ecclesial Response”, Kraus writes (emphasis in the original):

If the image of God is a social image – that is humankind in community, rather than an individual male-female image – then the rationale for sexual

regulations and an authentic contextualization of the biblical materials requires a theological reconceptualization of the moral issues involved (p. 70).

He adds:

The challenge is to reflect the *authentic human image of God as a community under the authority of God*. Thus the social issue of how the church deals with the inclusion or exclusion of minority sexual variants becomes a test of its authenticity as the body of Christ, the image it claims to represent in the world. It is precisely the church's claim that the spiritual reality of the image of God is attained via covenant community that gives urgency to the question of exclusion and inclusion from "the body of Christ".

But

Orthodoxy... has often been more a reflection of conventional cultural and political values reinforced by a selective reading of the biblical text than a theological and ethical analysis and contextual application (pp. 70 & 71).

In doing so, Kraus avers, the spiritual genius of the church is denied. He sees this exclusion as tantamount to the exclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles in the first century. Kraus writes:

In our search for the recovery of "*the new self*" and renewal "*in knowledge according to the image of its Creator*" we dare not perpetuate the scandal of Jew and Gentile, black and white, male and female, gay and straight, slave and free, citizen or illegal alien. For followers of Christ this is not a viable theological option, although it may seem to be the only political option at a given time (pp. 71 & 72).

He cites Colossians 3:11 – 14 in the Contemporary English Version in this regard. Kraus looks at the core values of genuine commitment to Christ. He ventures to give a theological definition of sexual orientation:

I have argued that sexual orientation, now understood to exist on a continuum of gender identities, should be considered an integral component in the metaphor of humans in the image of God. And that variations in sexual identity are to be accounted for as deviations in a finite order of creation, not as the morally corrupted consequences of human sin. Thus same-sex attraction in itself should not be viewed as temptation, but as a normal variant of human sexual orientation that is *subject, as are all human conditions, to the temptations of what Paul calls "the flesh"*. And the definition of orientation should be understood to include the possibility of responsible sexual fulfillment under the same moral stipulations for all. If sexual identity is understood as a constituent aspect of the finite image, we have no reason to judge variant sexual orientations in themselves [as] morally deviant (pp. 72 & 73, emphasis in original).

I quoted Kraus in full here, because it is his central thesis.

Kraus then holds out for something he labels "Kingdom pragmatism" that practises a "different standard of moral and spiritual evaluation (p. 74)." He gives numerous examples on this same page. He references the fruit of the Spirit as central to this. He again underscores that same-sex orientation/practice is not of itself immoral. And if not immoral, he asks,

what grounds other than a literal reading of selected Scriptures, which has led to so many other inconsistencies of contextualization, does the church have for making it [same-sex abstinence] a religious requirement for membership? (p. 79)

On the contrary, the same rules apply to same-sex relationships as to heterosexual relationships: “*monogamous consensual covenanting relationship* (p. 79, emphasis in original).” Kraus concludes on this note:

May God grant us the wisdom and courage to be the community of messianic *shalom* embodying the Trinitarian unity of the image of God (p. 80).

The author in Part 2 invited four “Complementary Reflections” from “a retired Mennonite bishop, a pastor of an urban congregation near Washington, DC, a New Testament professor teaching at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, and a theologian and senior editor of the *Christian Century* (p. xvi).” – all personal friends. He even suggests that Part 2 might profitably be read before his essay. Kraus offers an Epilogue as well, in which he states he had not begun this writing project with the intention to publish. Given the length of this review, I shall not summarize the four engagements with Kraus’ treatise. I encourage the reading of the four essays.

Likewise, for the sake of length, I shall not summarize Bruce Hiebert’s fascinating paper that examines seven intrinsic structures of morality in the human brain. For those wishing to read Hiebert as he applies this to “Mennonite brains, morality & the Queer inclusion struggle” (title of his paper), you may contact him directly for a copy of this paper, and another that expands on the seven structures of morality¹.

C. Norman Kraus’ book, in this reviewer’s opinion, should be widely used as study guide in churches of every denomination. It should also be read widely by those in the gay community. Years ago I read the pseudonymously authored book, *The Returns of Love* by Alex Davidson, in connection with a friend who “came out”, and later died of AIDS. I could wish this slim volume under review could have been given to my friend, and to “Alex Davidson” back then, and to countless others. That is endorsement enough.

¹ With Bruce’s permission, you may contact him directly: brucehiebert@shaw.ca. You will not be disappointed!