

## NEWS & OPINIONS

# Research in Progress

Michael A. Rynkiewich

I would like to thank Paris for playing the philosopher's role of surveying our particular descriptions of a rope, a tree, and a wall and discerning that there is an elephant in the room. The elephant is not sexuality or gender, but rather the nature of our knowledge of these types of things. The bottom line, for me, is that cultural paradigms (categories and explanations) concerning sexual identities and desires produce a wide range of beliefs and practices worldwide, and these are constantly changing. Yet, in one of those culture areas, the United States, people on multiple sides of the arguments continue to delude themselves that their local knowledge applies to a universal arena.

Our work is indeed a call for a time-out for all sides to exercise a bit of epistemological humility regarding Scripture and tradition, biology and culture, and the nature of community and communion.<sup>1</sup>

Time and again, while both physically present and later through the Spirit, Jesus had to slow down his disciples who tended to misconstrue his meaning and succumb to the temptation of contentious name-calling debates. Jesus successfully resisted those temptations himself early on; for example, the temptation to conflate power with the control of others (Luke 4:1-13). However, after preaching love for one's enemies (Luke 6:27-38), Jesus had to rebuke the disciples who asked for permission to call down fire to consume a Samaritan village (Luke 9:51-56). When Jesus tried to explain his own role as the suffering servant, the disciples ignored him and began an argument about which of them was the greatest (Luke 9:44-48; Luke 22:14-24). When Jesus tried to use a metaphor to warn the disciples to be prepared, the disciples missed the

part about the preparation of prayer and instead produced two swords (Luke 22:35-38). Probably with a sigh, Jesus replied "*It is enough*," and then led them to the mountain where he asked them to "*pray that you may not come into the time of trial*" (Luke 22:39-40), which is what he meant in the first place. Peter impetuously boasted that he did not have to prepare with prayer, he was ready now to fight and die for Jesus. We know how that ended.

As Paris notes, we all show a respect for science and, in particular, the findings of anthropology and biology. Perhaps here is where the present mood of the country leads her to speculate that, after we publish, we will have no friends remaining, either on the right or the left (only two sides, how binary is our thinking). Few are the number of people today who still appreciate what the phrase 'research in progress' means, who understand that science is a process of constantly refining observations and analysis,<sup>2</sup> and who are able to live in the liminality of nuance and uncertainty. Friends come and go, but I have never been abandoned by validity, reliability, and generalizability.<sup>3</sup>

Such work can be uncomfortable, for the practitioner and for those who feel vulnerable when science reports its findings. Anti-vaxxers feel threatened with studies that show that vaccines work. Those constructing a sexual identity, or claiming no sexual identity, feel threatened with studies that show the influence of hormones in utero, before language. It is not the case that scientists are unaware of occasions for bias in their choices and in their work. We remind ourselves, and are reminded, constantly of that

<sup>1</sup> A whistle on the playing field for a time out that unfortunately may be just whistling in the dark.

<sup>2</sup> This refers to the bedrock of science: self-criticism, self-correction, and constantly building up the means of apprehending the world.

<sup>3</sup> "... *validity* . . . the correspondence between what one thinks one is measuring and what one is really measuring. *Reliability* . . . the likelihood that a measure will repeatedly yield the same results. . . . *Generalizability* . . . the possibility that a study's outcomes based on a sample also will apply to the broader group from which the sample is drawn" (Trostle 2005, 76).

possibility, and we adjust accordingly, testing our models and practices through self-critique and repeated revised research projects. O'Reilly calls this process in anthropology: "iterative inductive" (2012, 30).

What is more worrisome to me is the decline in science training and understanding in America, that is, all the sciences in all segments of the population. For example, practitioners, like nurses and doctors, typically do not take a class in epidemiology in their training, and yet some, even some doctors who have made it to Congress, think that technical medical training makes them experts in epidemiology. There are experts out there,<sup>4</sup> but they are often ignored or shouted down.

Paris asks about the polygamy discussion that has a long history in anthropology and missiology. Those are in the records and in the textbooks,<sup>5</sup> but she is correct that they have not been fully mined for missiological insights. In my article, I presented a couple of ethnographic examples of sexual behavior linked to other issues beyond desire and self-realization. The relationship of sexual behavior to identity and culture also emerges in studies of polygamy, and therein lies the link to today's concerns. By 'guise', I only meant that one should look beyond the presenting symptoms to the underlying issues. In Scripture, it is not only Israel's neighbors but also the stories in Genesis that provide us with cases of first and second wives, maids who are also concubines, daughters-in-laws who become sexual partners,<sup>6</sup> circumcision and its relationship to rape,<sup>7</sup> menstrual practices used and abused,<sup>8</sup> and even fidelity and adultery among the 'patriarchs and matriarchs' of Israel itself. That would open up a conversation about 'heterosexuality' beyond the limits of this publication, and others should certainly consider doing that.

Paris frames our 'conceptual critique' as part of the ancient process of 'naming'. I appreciate that; God's invitation to Adam to join God in creating was, to my mind, the beginning of culture. We name, says Paris

channeling Ellul, and then "we live with the consequences of our naming." This is similar to the claim by Berger and Luckmann that we create culture anew, then forget that we did so, thus conflating culture with reality in the end (1966).

That is what I mean by saying that the issue of heterosexuality-homosexuality is 'poorly contextualized'; so much so that American Christians, even conservative Christians, accept the terms (categories, names) of the debate, and in doing so, they have surrendered before they have even begun.

Paris is aware that this is not the place for a 'to do' list since such a list would lead only to "false promises." If our contributions are a 'gift', then we offer what we have. Our gift is 'conceptual critique' and a passion for the sciences we represent. Our gift is to present what the data reveal, so far, and not to attach strings to the package by selectively searching for support for someone's ideological or theological position. First, we do no harm.

Our 'to do' is to step back and reflect. We should revisit our scientific epistemology and findings until we have a better handle on biological processes and cultural concepts surrounding sexuality and identity. Likewise, we should revisit our biblical hermeneutics until we have a better handle on concepts and social relationships that emerge from the whole narrative. In the process, we should hold the two operations apart as long as possible so that science, culture, and theology may have the best chance to inform the other once we have the confidence that we know what we are talking about.

## Major Referenced Articles

Gil, Vincent E. 2022. Wither Biological Sex?: The Gender Takeover, A Position Paper. *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 6 (1): 42-61.

Priest, Robert J. 2022. Faith Integration and the Outrageous Ethic of Sex Only in Male-Female Marriage: Towards an

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Michael Osterholm (University of Minnesota), Marc Lipsitch (Harvard), Larry Brilliant (WHO), Sunetra Gupta (Oxford), Jay Bhattacharya (Stanford), and Martin Kulldorf (Harvard).

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Brian M. Howell and Janell Williams Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (2011).

<sup>6</sup> The story of Tamar and Judah is strange, yet they both appear in the genealogy of Jesus (Genesis 38, Matthew 1:3).

<sup>7</sup> The children of Israel 'weaponized' circumcision to disable the clan of the man who raped Dinah, and then executed them all (Genesis 34).

<sup>8</sup> Remember that Rachel used menstruation customs to deflect her father Laban from searching where she was sitting (Genesis 31:34-35).

Anthropology of Sex and Marriage for the Christian Community. *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 6 (1): 1-41.

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## Other References

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