

In Fear Of Androgyny

Theological Reflections on Masculinity and Sexism, Male Homosexuality and Homophobia, Romans 1:24-27 and Hermeneutics (A Response to Alexander Venter)

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I would like to make some observations on Alexander Venter's recent article in this journal (1993), albeit not in response to his invitation to a "theological debate regarding men's issues in the South African context" (87). Rather, I shall focus on one aspect of his paper: male homosexuality and 'the Bible'. A theoretical, exegetical, and hermeneutical critique of Venter's treatment of this issue implies also a fundamental critique of other problematic aspects of his article. Others, especially feminist theologians, will perhaps respond to those

I will first consider the context of Venter's 'crisis in masculinity,' and then briefly discuss some basic theoretical issues concerning human sexuality, followed by an exegetical discussion of Rom 1:24-27 as Venter's key biblical text, as well as hermeneutical reflections

Venter's 'Masculinity' and the 'Men's Movement': A Crisis and its Context

what you mean a mens movement?
aint they still runnin the world?
what they need a movement for?
(hattie gossett cited in Ellison 1993:95)

Venter defines the 'current crisis' in masculinity in terms of a male state of being torn between the images of the 'traditional macho-man' and the 'softie' of the late 1960's/1970's: an identity-conflict between 'masculine hardness' and 'feminine softness'. This male existential problem (cf 88) resulted in a 'men's movement' aiming to solve this problem. Venter admits that this crisis and the 'men's movement' is "at present centred in North America" (87), but then attempts an 'application to the South African context' (90), where, he claims, there "certainly is" (*ibid*) a crisis in masculinity. Firstly, he maintains that 'the white Afrikaner male

has a strong heritage of patriarchy and in some ways is only beginning to feel the effects of the feminist movement and his own floundering identity as a dominant male (*ibid*)

By his own definition, this means that there is no crisis in masculinity for 'the

Afrikaner male.' Secondly, Venter claims that both the 'English-speaking white male' (by virtue of close socio-cultural links with North America) and the 'black African male' are in such a crisis. The latter "is in a crisis indeed" on account of tribal-patriarchal values and apartheid as an exacerbating factor (*ibid.*). Again, his definition of a 'crisis' for 'the black African male' hardly resembles his earlier definition of the (North American) crisis: the former's involves lack of affirmation, dignity, self-worth, absent fathers (migrant labour system), etc. Significantly, his subsequent claims reflect on the North American crisis only.

At the risk of generalising, I submit that the vast majority of South African males (black or white) are nowhere near Venter's supposed crisis, generally still subscribing (consciously or unconsciously) to the ideologies of patriarchal systems operating in the different cultural traditions of this country: there is no South African debate about a 'crisis in masculinity' because most South African men do not experience this 'crisis.' Men in South Africa are not "just at the beginning" (101), because they largely do not even know that there should be a beginning. Venter's argument is clearly written with a 'crisis-ridden,' male American audience in mind: this is his 'implicit audience.' Venter is *de facto* talking to a largely unchallenged, male South African audience steeped in patriarchy, in which 'societal demands' to become a 'softie' scarcely exist – except for a small minority. He criticizes sexism (95), voicing a laudable warning (100) that if male

analysis and repentance does not cut deep enough, the men's movement will become another ego trip for self-indulgent and short-sighted males.

However, this is precisely how his article functions in the South African context: in effect, he is 'jumping' from a 'patriarchal phase' straight to the 'men's movement phase,' ignoring the intermediate 'feminist phase' (presupposed in North America). Neither Venter's theoretical presuppositions nor his theological arguments, I suggest "cut deep enough." Thus, Venter himself contributes to the buttressing of local patriarchal systems, implicitly providing an apology for the patriarchal *status quo*. My focus on male homosexuality will demonstrate his inadequate treatment of the entire 'masculinity' issue, and also show that his condemnation of gays is central to this support for patriarchy.

(Homo-) Sexuality: Some Important Theoretical Issues

Homosexuality is not Venter's main concern. It is discussed in the context of his reflections on 'Biblical and theological perspectives on the crisis in masculinity.' Having introduced the 'crisis,' he 'reflects theologically' on the issues thus raised, beginning with 'male sexuality.' He claims that

The Bible's view of sex and sexuality is open and honest; sex is not overly spiritualised as happened in cultures surrounding Israel, neither is sex denigrated as evil . . . Responsible male sexual activity in the scriptures was always in the context of commitment, family responsibility, community accountability. (91)¹

Here Venter moves to the issue of homosexuality, particularly examining Rom 1:26-27. His reasons for discussing homosexuality are of interest (for in terms of the structure of his argument, this is unnecessary) – they reveal a concern underlying his entire article: the fear of androgyny (or gender confusion / conflation).

1. It should become clear in the following that I regard such generalising statements as unacceptably ahistorical

Before I explore this issue further, I will briefly discuss some basic theoretical issues concerning human sexuality, this must precede any account of theological issues. Venter ignores much recent research on human sexuality, especially feminist and gay/lesbian writings,² I will show problematic consequences and suggest alternative views

Sex and Gender

Largely on account of feminist research over the past two decades, social scientists have recognized the importance of separating analytically the concepts of (physiological) 'sex' and (socio-cultural) 'gender' (cf Rubin 1984 308). Simply put, we should regard the word 'sex' as denoting either genital intercourse and other erotic activities, or physiological femaleness/maleness – where the distinguishing features are sexual organs, chromosomes, etc (cf Oakley 1985 18-48). 'Gender,' however, refers to the cultural construct of femininity/masculinity roles acquired or learned, which may differ vastly from culture to culture (*ibid* 173-88, cf Katchadourian 1979).

Although Venter occasionally acknowledges this analytical distinction (90 92), he generally seems unaware of its importance, probably because of his 'nature-orientated approach,' or biological determinism he assumes a firm base for 'gender' (culture) in 'sex' (biology/natural), grounding socio-cultural gender constructions in presumed biological 'givens' (98). Hence 'masculinity'/'masculine sexuality' seem transhistorical and transcultural.

It is vital to distinguish clearly between 'sex' and 'gender' precisely because conflating them preempts meaningful discussion about numerous key issues. In an argument based on gender as a 'reflection' of 'nature,' such an omission is critical, since it avoids questioning the very basis of this position. Thus Venter's failure to separate the concepts cements cultural stereotypes of gender and sexuality which are associated with certain forms of heterosexist patriarchy. Of course, this is important for his claims on 'masculinity'.

Venter's Essentialist Perspective on Sexuality

Essentialism, the 'standard mode' of understanding sexuality especially within Western discourse (public and academic) can be described as (Vance 1984 14)

a belief that human behaviour is 'natural, predetermined by genetic, biological, or physiological mechanisms and thus not subject to change, or the notion that human behaviors which show some similarity in form are the same, an expression of an underlying human drive or tendency. Behaviors that share an outward similarity can be assumed to share an underlying essence and meaning.

This does not necessarily presuppose that sexuality can be reduced to a 'biological essence' (genes, hormones, chromosomes, etc), although it usually does. 'Psychological essentialism' would assume inherent sexual 'drives' in the body or psyche, which need to be controlled or channeled (as in classical Freudian psychoanalysis). Essentialists commonly assume

² Venter claims that he is not writing "a direct response or challenge to feminism" (88) but it would be more to the point to say that he ignores feminist theory and theology (a typical problem of the men's movement Thistlethwaite 1991 cf Connell 1992).

some kind of 'essence' within homosexuals that makes them homosexual – some kind of gay 'core' of their being, or their psyche, or their genetic makeup. (Epstein 1987:11).

Since essentialists generally assume that "homosexuality has always been with us; it has been a constant in history" (Bullough, cited in Halperin 1990:159), they risk interpreting historical evidence in a fundamentally ahistorical manner.³

Venter's argument underlies a "naive essentialist" (Donaldson & Dynes 1990:1333) position. He assumes that 'sexuality' is culturally and historically invariable: 'sexuality' is what all human beings (in all cultures and ages) 'have' and 'have had' in the same way (91). Sexuality is a central feature of human beings, vital to their well-being (*ibid.*) – an idea characteristic of dominant essentialist Western conceptions of sexuality (though not restricted to the West). Male sexuality is a (dangerous) 'drive' which the mind has to control, a drive possibly not purely sexual, but definitely 'something fierce and wild' and needing restriction (100). This essentialist perspective permits him to treat 'homosexuality' as culturally invariant. While acknowledging (with Hays 1986) that

To introduce the concept of 'sexual orientation' into the text [of Romans 1:24-27; H.S.] is anachronistic. It was not part of the world of antiquity

he still treats homosexuality as if it were the 'same thing' then and now (92).

An alternative approach sees sexuality (like gender) as a socio-cultural construct (see Altmann 1989; Stein 1990; cf. Lambert & Szesnat 1994:46-50). 'Constructionists' tend to argue that

sexuality should be investigated on the level of subjective meaning. Sexual acts have no inherent meaning, and in fact, no act is inherently sexual. Rather, in the course of interactions and over the course of time, individuals and societies spin webs of significance around the realm designated as 'sexual.' People learn to be sexual ... in the same way as they learn everything else. (Epstein 1987:14)

'Constructionists' maintain that 'sexuality' is not an independent category, objectively definable in every cultural and historical context (Padgug 1989): cultures determine what is 'sexual' and what is not – indeed, many cultures may not conceptualise anything like the notion of 'sexuality' in the first place. With regard to the issues of 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality,' constructionists' tend to argue that the experiences named by those terms are artifacts of specific, unique, and non-repeatable cultural and social processes ... 'constructionists' assume that sexual desires are learned and that sexual identities come to be fashioned through an individual's interaction with others. (Halperin 1990:41-2)

A constructionist perspective maintains that biological, medical, and psychological theories that try to 'explain homosexuality' by means of some 'drive,' gene, chromosome, pre-natal brain development, etc., are inconclusive and, ultimately, misleading.⁴ It can be argued that while most known societies have examples of 'sexual behaviour' between members of the same sex, the conception of 'the homosexual' as a distinct type of person is a recent Western Phenomenon (Weeks 1981:81):

3. Essentialist assumptions are common among homophobic proponents as well as lesbians and gays (but see D'Emilio 1986)
4. Halperin (1990:49-51) cf Birke (1981); Futuyama & Risch (1984); Ricketts (1985); Gooren (1988); Paul (1993). For critical reviews of the classic work of Freud and Bieber (on which Venter indirectly relies) see Bayer (1987:15-66); De Kuyper (1993); Friedman (1986); Murphy (1984); Ruse (1988:21-83)

The physical acts might be similar, but the social construction of meanings around them are profoundly different.

A constructionist perspective has a number of implications, *inter alia*:

- * it should be used as a heuristic tool for the cross-cultural and historical study of sexuality;
- * 'sexual matters' need to be understood in their socio-cultural totality: discussing 'homosexuality' is pointless unless we include the whole field of human sexuality and its interconnections with other areas of social relations in a particular culture;
- * terminology laden with cultural stereotypes must be avoided – such as 'homosexuality';⁵ hence terms must be precise and minimally value-laden (e.g. 'sexual acts between members of the same sex');
- * female same-sex relations must not be treated as if they were basically the same as male same-sex relations; the criteria for what is regarded as 'licit' sexual behaviour for a person often primarily depend on gender conceptions.

Venter's Biological Determinism

Venter's approach to sexuality and gender can be called 'biological determinism': an attempt to ground (cultural) gender in (physiological) sex. This assumption is generally implicit rather than explicit; only once (98) does he openly state his claim that

recent research shows that gender specific traits (emotions, psychology, and behaviour) are more biologically based than previously believed.

Significantly, the only references Venter cites for his claim are an article in *Time* magazine (Gorman 1992) and an essay (Johnson 1991) in a conservative evangelical book whose explicit aim is to attack feminism. It is impossible to do more here than refer to literature critical of the biological determinism advocated in these sources.⁶

Venter's essentialist 'fierce drive' assumptions also point to his biological determinism: men must accept that they are 'driven' by powerful forces and need to 'control themselves' (100). Another good example of Venter's biological determinism appears when, referring to Hulley and Nelson, he maintains:

we must learn from the way God created us. Men have a penis (to penetrate) and women have a vagina (to receive). Therefore homosexual practice is not natural, not part of God's created order. (92)

Taken to its extreme, Venter's argument implies that all non-penetrative heterosexual conduct is against God's will: mutual masturbation, non-vaginal intercourse, cunnilingus, fellatio, and indeed all foreplay not leading to the penetration of a vagina by a penis, must be wicked in Venter's eyes.

It is ironic, then, that elsewhere Venter laments that "today" (91) people have become 'sex-focussed,' or 'genitally obsessed' (92). His crass biological determinism shows that he is just as 'genitally obsessed': he sees a person's sexual organs

5. This noun (and the adjective 'homosexual') has deep-seated, nineteenth century roots in essentialist conceptualisations (cf. Halperin 1990 15-18), and is therefore difficult to disentangle from its modern connotations (e.g. 'sexual orientation' as part of one's 'sexual identity' – both typically modern Western notions)

6. See Bleier (1984, 1986), Birke (1986), Doell & Longine (1988), Haraway (1989), Hubbad (1982), Martin (1991), Spanier (1991); Sperling (1991)

as determining the divinely destined sexual role to be played – women are to be penetrated, men are to penetrate them (92). I would suggest, however, that the fact that the only non-artificial method of human reproduction is copulation (generally taking the form of ‘penis-ejaculating-in-vagina’) does not mean that all sexual/erotic activity must be restricted to this particular act, let alone that this is the divinely intended ‘exclusive sexual destiny’ of humankind. Rather, the erotic/sexual aspects of our bodies are created to open the potential of pleasure unrestricted by the limitations of a male penetration complex.

Venter’s attempt to couch this biological determinism in the implicit assertion that we must observe ‘divinely ordained body language’ (*ibid.*) is merely ‘theological code’: for him, to adapt Freud’s dictum, ‘anatomy is theological and biological destiny.’ Of course, Venter’s ‘appeal to nature’ is a powerful old strategy to achieve behavioural conformity. As Weeks observes (1989:200; cf. Macdonald 1993),

appeals to nature, to the claims of the natural, are amongst the most potent we can make. They place us in a world of apparent fixity and truth. They appear to tell us what and who we are, and where we are going. They seem to tell us the truth.

The ‘power of the natural’ is even more significant within the church: an appeal to ‘nature’ is tantamount to an appeal to the divinely ordained ‘order of creation’ – a powerful ancient theological argument. Hence, of course, a narrow, literal interpretation of the Biblical creation stories becomes vital for Venter (91).

In Fear of Androgyny

Why does Venter discuss homosexuality? He gives the following explicit reason (92; under his heading “Male Sexuality”):

Emphasis on ‘unisexual,’ ‘bi-sexual,’ ‘homosexual’ etc. has distorted and confused male sexual understanding and identity ... The point is that the sexual distinction between male and female is becoming totally blurred.

Earlier, discussing the creation narratives, Venter states: “Equality does not mean a sexless or androgynous identity” (95). Later, lamenting father failure together with the lack of adherence to cultural gender stereotypes in the education of children (97-8; which he links to the ‘causes’ of homosexuality, 89.93), he asks rhetorically whether emphasizing androgyny “really [gives] an answer to masculinity-femininity and beyond” (98). He thus associates ‘androgyny’ with the blurring of gender characteristics. This is threatening because it implicitly attacks the very building blocks of male domination/patriarchy. Venter apparently fears the latter, notwithstanding his occasional disclaimers. He pronounces that (on the level of the individual) “Both male dominance and abdication must end.” (89) It would seem that ‘abdication’ means ‘abolishing patriarchy,’ for (on the societal level) he states (97) that

Patriarchy, like headship, must be redefined to recover the good in it for the benefit of all, and to free it from its sexist image.

While this bizarre statement occurs within a discussion of ‘the Biblical witness,’ it appears that Venter sees the same ‘need for redefinition’ for our very own systems of patriarchy (not least because of his literal interpretation of the Bible). This statement strikes me as analogous to the infamous political claim that apartheid just needed reforming – presumably also to ‘recover the good in it for all.’ Venter, while

condemning sexism, seems blind to the inherent contradiction in his suggesting a 'redefinition of patriarchy' Patriarchy (like apartheid) cannot be redefined, reformed, or sanitized, it can only be abolished Ultimately, Venter's argument serves to buttress patriarchy His 'practical recommendations' may vary slightly from hardline evangelical theology (Piper & Grudem 1991), but both fundamental direction and structure of the argument are closely related

This desire to 'save patriarchy' often accompanies homophobic sentiments (Harrison 1985, cf Herek 1987), Venter is no exception Ultimately, I suspect that this connection lies behind Venter's diatribe against homosexuality Piper and Grudem's book (a source for Venter) makes this connection explicit, arguing that their discussion of homosexuality is necessitated by their claim that once evangelicals make 'concessions' to feminism, 'moral and sexual anarchy' will result (1991 82-3) Of course, the fearful supposition that once certain sexual/gender restrictions are abolished 'anarchy' will follow, is a well-known phenomenon – the "domino theory of sexual peril" (Rubin 1984 282)

The line appears to stand between sexual order and chaos It expresses the fear that if any thing is permitted to cross this erotic DMZ, the barrier against scary sex will crumble and something unspeakable will skitter across

Although Venter is less explicit in this than Piper and Grudem, this ultimately appears to be his reason for discussing homosexuality Venter's fear of androgyny is a 'code' for his fear that the power of patriarchal systems is weakening The homophobic attack on gays and lesbians is part and parcel of this defence of patriarchy

Some Exegetical Comments on Romans 1:24-27

Since the exegetical debate on 'homosexuality and the Bible' is too complex to be discussed here,⁷ I will restrict myself to a limited discussion of Venter's key text, Romans 1 24-27 A literal interpretation of Rom 1 24-27 is important to Venter as 'support' for his biological determinism with reference to Rom 1 26-27 in particular, 'homosexuality' is labelled 'unnatural' and thus under divine condemnation

Venter mentions correctly (92) that in Rom 1 24-27, sexual acts designated as 'contrary to nature' (para physin) arise from the gentiles' refusal to worship God Unfortunately, Venter neglects to pursue this issue, and hence the key question *Why* does Paul think this way? What is the origin and socio-cultural context of this (apparently negative) opinion on sexual relations between members of the same sex? It is not enough to simply say it is written (Wengst 1987 73)

Preliminary Observations

I begin with a fresh translation of Rom 1 24-27

[24] Therefore God handed them over in the desires of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves [25] those (people) exchanged the truth of God for the lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed in eternity amen [26] For this (reason) God handed them over to dishonourable passions

7 See Brooten (1985 1992) Cohen (1991) Countryman (1988) Edwards (1984 1989) Furnish (1985) Hays (1986) Scroggs (1983) Siker (1994) Smith (1991) Stegemann (1993) von der Osten Sacken (1986) Wengst (1987) My former colleague Peter Reiss has independently developed a theoretical and exegetical approach quite similar to mine (1994)

for also their females exchanged natural sexual intercourse⁸ with (sexual intercourse) against nature, [27] and likewise also the males, leaving the natural (sexual) intercourse with the females, were inflamed in their lust towards each other: men effecting shamelessness in men;⁹ receiving the retribution among themselves which is due on account of their delusion.

Firstly, I concur with Richard Hays (1986:187)

that the purpose of the passage as a whole [1:18-32] is to proclaim that 'the wrath of God' is now being revealed against all who do not acknowledge and honor God. Romans 1 is neither a general discussion of sexual ethics nor an explicitly prescriptive admonition about the sexual behavior appropriate for Christians.

This does not imply that Paul 'did not really mean it,' but that we need to take both the literary and the cultural-historical context seriously (*ibid.* 191). Rhetorically, 1:24-27 is merely an example of the result (*dio*, "therefore", 1:24) of the gentile's refusal to honour God (1:21), structurally parallel to the list of vices (1:29-31) which has the same exemplary function.

Nevertheless, Paul did single out male and female same-sex relations as an example of 'wicket gentile vices;' he focusses on sexual activities as a vice of gentiles – to him as a Jew, the most obvious form of the 'debauched lust' of the gentiles, and thus characteristic of gentile sin (transgression of the *torah*). Paul is certainly not unique within his contemporary Jewish context, where sexual relations between members of the same sex (male and female) were regarded as an exclusively 'gentile sin' (whether this was true with regard to the actual *behaviour* of contemporary Jews – especially in the diaspora – is a different matter; of Wengst 1987:80n6).

It is widely recognised that Paul's general argument in Rom 1:18-32 is closely related to both certain Hellenistic (especially Stoic) concepts and to a contemporary Jewish tradition of talking about gentiles.¹⁰ It resonates with, for instance, the reasoning in Wisdom of Solomon (a first century Jewish writing), in the notion of idolatry – gentiles can discern God, but choose not to do this; gentiles exchange creator and created being (SapSol 13; cf. Rom 1:25). We also find the link between idolatry and sexual misconduct exhibited by Paul in Rom 1 (SapSol 11:15-16, 12:23, 14:12, 25-7; Hays 1986:190). although this connection is of course much older than the first century (Wengst 1987:75); sexual relations between members of the same sex are seen as a result of idolatry.

Paul's apparently negative attitude towards sexual/erotic same-sex relationships between men and women is equally part of an inner-Jewish discussion, although it also reflects concerns of the Graeco-Roman world at large – especially concerning sex between women (see below). In order to understand 1:24-27, it is therefore imperative to understand the cultural-historical context.¹¹ Space limits

8. The phrase *tén physik chrésin* (1 26 27) means literally 'the natural use / function', it is often a euphemism for sexual intercourse (see Foucault 1985 53-62, cf Liddell & Scott 1940)

9. Or "men working genitals (*aschémosyné*) in men", *aschémosyné* ('shamelessness', 'shameless act') is used as a euphemism for the genitals in the Septuagint (e.g. Lev 18), this connotation may well have been in Paul's mind

10. Eg. Dunn (1988 ad loc.), Hays (1986 192-3), Pohlenz (1949, 1953), Strack & Billerbeck (1926 30-76), Wilckens (1978 96-100) Of course, Stoic thought already interacted with Jewish-Hellenistic wisdom-theology. In the syncretistic environment of the first century Mediterranean, the attempt to distinguish clearly the 'origins' of some of Paul's theological thoughts or concepts is not always meaningful

11. For good overviews on 'matter sexual' in classical Greece and Rome, see Dover (1984, 1989), Henderson (1988), and Hallett (1988)

us to a discussion of the key concept of 'nature' in this regard.

The Concept of *Physis* (Nature) and Human Sexual Relations

In Rom 1:24-27, certain sexual activities are classified as *para physin* (against nature): Paul uses *physis* to disqualify sexual relations between members of the same sex – which is important in Venter's argument concerning homosexuality, for he understands Paul's term *physis* as denoting 'biological given,' and thus 'divinely created order.' However, the meaning of *physis* in Rom 1 differs significantly from the modern Western understanding of 'nature' that Venter employs. This issue requires detailed exposition.

Since the fifth century BCE Greek sophists, the Greek word *physis* has usually been contrasted with *nomos*, which denotes not only 'law' but also 'human custom, convention' (Koester 1974:260; Winkler 1990:17). In classical Greek, it denotes 'intrinsic properties,' or (especially in Aristotle) the 'essence' of something (Koester 1974:258); it is usually not an abstract reference to 'nature as such.' In general, the term *physis* falls into two components of meaning: 'origin' and 'constitution' (*ibid.*). However, in both 'medical-technical' and common, 'vulgar' language, *physis* (as well as the corresponding Latin *natura*) quite often refers to the genitals (Winkler 1990:217-20). We can assume that Paul and his audience in Rome understood this connotation as well.

Paul's use of *physis* is problematic since it does not fit his own theological thinking; he rarely uses it.¹² Apart from passages like Gal 2:14, where *physis* clearly means 'origin,' he has little use for the concept of *physis* in the sense of 'nature/constitution.' In general, Paul seems to use a traditional/popular understanding of *physis* (Koester 1974), which ties in with our earlier observation that Rom 1:24-27 stands in the context of traditional material. Hence, it is crucial to understand the background of the phrase *para physin* (1:26) and the adjective *physikos* (1:26.27) in contemporary usage.

Already in 1977, McNeill observed that in Paul's letters, *physis* labels matters which in modern Western culture would not denote 'nature' (1977:53-6). The best example is 1 Cor 11:14-15, where Paul asks rhetorically: "does not *physis* herself teach you that while it is dishonour (*atimia*; cf. Rom 1:26) for a man when he has long hair, to have long hair is woman's glory?" Here, *physis* would not be understood by many today as denoting 'nature': it is not 'unnatural' for men to have long hair – hair 'naturally' grows long until it is cut, as Furnish (1985:79-80) and Wengst (1987:75) remind us – although it may be considered untraditional (and hence undesirable). Paul's use of *physis* in Rom 1:26 and in 1 Cor 11:14 are closely intertwined, as we shall see below.

To understand this concept, it is useful to review Winkler's work on the use of *physis* in the 'dream interpretations' of Artemidoros, a second century CE writer (Winkler 1990:17-44; cf. Foucault 1986:3-36; Price 1990). Winkler argues that *physis* – especially concerning sexual acts classified as either *kata physin* (according to nature) or *para physin* (against nature) – denotes acts that accord with the social hierarchy of society. Therefore,

12. In the seven 'undisputed letters' of Paul, the adjective appears twice, and the noun ten times. Both do not occur in the synoptics, and indeed hardly ever in the New Testament. As a typically Greek concept, it has no equivalent in the Hebrew Bible.

what 'natural' means in many such contexts is precisely 'conventional and proper.' The word 'unnatural' in contexts of human behavior quite regularly means 'seriously unconventional' and is used like a Thin Ice sign to mark off territory where it is dangerous to venture. (Winkler 1990:17)

Of course, usage of *physis* similar to Artemidoros' can also be found in other contemporary texts; for example, Seneca "declares the following items to be *contra naturam* [against nature]: hot baths, potted plants, and banquets after sunset." (*ibid* 21)

Artemidoros deals with dreams that often have 'sexual content.' His texts are unusual in that they offer a unique insight into a more popular understanding of sexual acts in relation to the understanding of *physis* (Winkler 1990:24.36), providing us with

an excellent description of the public meanings attached to sexual relationships ... As such, it provides a ground plan for most men's (and presumably many women's) behavior whenever that behavior was regarded as possibly coming under public scrutiny. (*ibid* 41)

Unlike Freud's twentieth-century 'dream interpretations,' Artemidoros sees social meaning in erotic dreams, not vice versa (cf. Foucault 1986:26-8). Interpreting those dreams which predict the future, Artemidoros uses several criteria for classification, the most important being *physis* and *nomos* (Winkler 1990:36)

natural and conventional ... are all [sexual acts] in which a man penetrates a social inferior (wife, mistress, prostitutes in brothels, streetwalkers, vending women in the marketplace, female or male slaves, other men's wives), is penetrated by another man, or masturbates.

Regardless of whether an act is natural or conventional, unnatural or unconventional, what is important for men, says Artemidoros (quoted in Winkler *ibid*), is that to be penetrated by a richer, older man is good, for the custom is to receive things from such men. To be penetrated by a younger, poorer man is bad, for it is the custom to give to such. The same meaning applies if the penetrator is older but poorer.

Clearly, within this 'sexual value system,' the gender of one's sexual partner as such is not of primary importance, but rather her/his social status (*ibid*). It is vital to understand that in Artemidoros' (and Paul's) world, sexual pleasure is generally not presumed to be mutual:

the significance of such [pleasure] relations is always interpreted asymmetrically in terms of a calculus of profit – in terms of who is giving pleasure/money and who is taking it from others ... These relations of domination are regarded as 'natural and conventional,' meaning that the actors represented in them, when taken in pairs, can be ranked in both the social and the sexual realms. (*ibid* 36.40; cf. Richlin 1983)

Finally, acts labelled 'against nature' (*para physin*)

are an apparently heterogeneous assortment: necrophilia, sex with a god, sex with an animal, self-penetration and self-fellatio, and 'a woman penetrating a woman.' (Winkler 1990:38)

This assortment of 'unnatural acts' appears bewildering, until we realise that the guiding principle for whether an act is 'natural' or 'unnatural' lies in the degree to which it conforms to the social status hierarchy of the participants (cf. Foucault 1986:23-32). 'Unnatural' sexual acts are those in which the participants contradict or step outside the social order. For instance:

Bestiality is not 'unnatural' in the sense of being what modern psychology calls a perversion;

rather it is outside the conventional field of social signification. If a man gains advantage over a sheep, so what? (Winkler 1990:39)

Winkler's conclusions (*ibid* 43) are of vital significance for understanding Paul:

Sexual contact is understood in public contexts as male-initiated, phallos-centred, and structured around the act of penetration; all acts that conform to those protocols are relatively non-problematic (*kata nomon*). ... Artemidoros uses the word 'nature' not as a value judgment but as a category term to mark an important boundary in this field of social signification. By 'unnatural' he simply means that certain acts are either impossible or irrelevant, that is, they are insignificant within the terms of the social meaning of sex. Thus, Artemidoros in his own way illustrates once more the theme that 'nature' means culture.

We need to understand that Paul, as well as his Roman audience, understood *physis* as the 'proper, characteristic constitution' of a man or a woman – as perceived within their socio-cultural context. Brooten's work (1985, 1992) ties in with this, for she argues that Paul regards erotic same-sex relations between women (Rom 1:26-27) as against 'the nature of women'; furthermore, with Brooten's work we also take Paul's contemporary Jewish context into account. Her studies on Rom 1:24-27 (arguably the best available work on this text) focus on Paul's rejection of what she calls 'female homoeroticism,' placed in the context of Paul's general understanding of 'the nature of women.' Brooten argues that Paul is part of the ensuing Roman period inner-Jewish male discussion concerning sexual relations between women. The Hebrew Bible itself is silent about such relations, while apparently prohibiting sexual acts between men (eg Lev 18:22).¹³ Only during the Roman period did inner-Jewish discussions about sexual relations between women begin to appear (1985:63-5). Brooten suggests that sexual relations between women became more open during this period, resulting in the (male) attempt to curb this trend by condemnation across the religious-cultural spectrum of (male) moral opinion in the Mediterranean (cf Hallett 1989; 1988:1266-7). Non-Jewish writers of the Roman period often appeared to interpret sexual advances by a woman to other women as 'becoming, or trying to become like a man.' Such women, often called *tribades* in Latin (a Greek loanword), were derided as ridiculous, monstrous, and dangerous. Brooten argues that Roman-period writers were unable to fit sexual relations between women into the scheme of 'lawful/conventional' and/or 'natural' sexual relations. In the context of this scheme characterised by the active/passive and the corresponding penetrator/receiver dichotomy (men of the social 'elite' must penetrate but never be penetrated),

The real issue may be that of women overstepping the bounds of the female, passive role assigned to them in Greco-Roman culture. The underlying issue would then be female sexual autonomy. (Brooten 1985:70)

Brooten interprets Paul's rejection of sexual love between women in this context. As we have seen, the issue in Rom 1:18-32 is the exchange of the creator-god for the created being; for Paul, 'idolatry' is the root of the 'three tragic

13. Non-Jewish writers of the early imperial period seldom express serious reservations about male same-sex relations as such "male homosexual activity *per se* was not frowned upon as 'feminine' or 'perverted' among freeborn adult males as long as the man in question assumed the active, physically penetrating role with and adolescent partner, as long as that partner was not himself a freeborn Roman male, as long as the use of force or public funds did not facilitate the relationship, and as long as the liaison was conducted quietly and discreetly" (Hallett 1988 1266)

exchanges' that follow (*ibid* 71): impurity and dishonouring of the bodies (1:24-5), dishonourable passions (1:26-7), the rejected mind-set and therefore unacceptable conduct (1:28-31). Brooten argues that the notion of the *tribades* as a confused category fits the structure and logic of Paul's argument in Rom 1:26 – especially if correlated with Paul's more explicit earlier exhortation in 1 Cor 11:2-16:

Paul was deeply concerned that what he saw to be the order of creation be maintained with respect to sex roles and gender polarity. Like other ancient authors who discuss *tribades*, Paul saw female homoeroticism as an improper crossing of boundaries, a blurring of the categories of male and female. (*ibid*)

Brooten asserts that despite the different contexts of 1 Cor 11 and Rom 1, both texts demonstrate Paul's view of 'woman's nature': essentially, Paul

sees a blurring of distinction between the sexes as contrary to nature and against the hierarchy: God, Christ, man, woman. (*ibid* 75)

When Paul insists that the Corinthian women must appear veiled, he assumes that his audience will agree that men 'naturally' wear their hair short and women long: he refers to *physis* as a reason for the distinction between men and women, reflecting a general, 'popular understanding of *physis* (1 Cor 11:14). Thus, in both Corinthian and Roman cases, Paul insists that gender differentiation be kept up in appearance, in spite of his own reference elsewhere to an early Christian baptismal formula in which the distinctions between men and women, Jews and Greek, slaves and free persons are declared void for the sake of unity "in Christ" (Gal 3:28).

Brooten insists that male and female 'homosexuality' are not the same issue, that they need analytical separation, and that Paul's rejection of 'female homoeroticism' differs fundamentally from his rejection of "male homosexual acts." She argues that while these two issues are structurally related in Rom 1 "the issue is not parallel and cannot be subsumed under sexual love relations between women." (1985:63) Nevertheless, despite her correct assertion that writers of the Roman period had a very different perspective on male and female same-sex relations (1993), her basic argument concerning Paul's rejection of female homoeroticism also helps to explain Paul's rejection of male homoeroticism. Underpinning Paul's rejection of female homoeroticism in Rom 1, Brooten argues, is a strict understanding of gender boundaries. However, conceptualisations of gender are always relational, not absolute – gender differentiation by implication concerns both genders.

Obviously, on one level, the Hebrew Bible's condemnation of sexual relations between men underlies Rom 1:24-27. But for Paul (as for other contemporary Jews), on another level, the blurring of gender boundaries perceived in female same-sex relations also ruled out sexual relations between men. For instance, Paul's contemporary, Philo of Alexandria, fears that 'gender-bending' will have the 'shameful' result of 'men appearing as women' (Spec. Leg. 3.37-42; cf. Szesnat 1994): this is what Paul seems to mean in Rom 1:27 (men effecting shamelessness in men). Philo, too, presupposes the typical ancient 'active/passive pattern' of sexual relations: a man is by definition the active, penetrating actor in sexual intercourse; a woman by definition the passive, receptive 'partner'.¹⁴ Thus, a man who

14. One is tempted to draw an analogy between this ancient penetrator / penetrated and active / passive dichotomy and Venter's insistence on 'eternally fixed' male and female roles in sexual intercourse (92)

'submits' to penetration by another man 'becomes a woman,' and (also by definition) assumes appropriate gender characteristics This conception also seems to be at the root of Paul's rejection of same-sex acts between men in Rom 1

The difference between Paul's understanding of *physis* and a modern Western understanding of 'nature' does not mean that 'the moderns' simply corrected what 'the ancients' did not fully understand the notion of 'nature' is not simply an 'advanced development' of the ancient concept of *physis/natura* (Theissen reflects such a view when he refers to Paul's use of *physis* in 1 Co 11 14 as an "intellectual mistake", 1987 174) The concepts must be recognised as inherently different the cultural assumptions behind them, the 'world-view' and 'symbolic universe' underlying them, are different

Hermeneutics, 'Biblical Sexual Ethics,' and Romans 1:24-27

This section concerns problems in Venter's implied hermeneutical approach to Rom 1 24-27 Fundamental to this is his lack of reflection on the hermeneutical problems we face when reading Biblical texts 'on sexuality' He writes that his "assumptions regarding cultural norms and Biblical hermeneutics will become clear in the course of [his] essay" (87) In fact, he does not discuss these issues at all – not surprisingly, because Venter reads not only Rom 1 24-27, but all other Biblical texts in a literalistic fashion, ignoring the historical context Where he does mention context, he uses it to gloss over the historical complexities rather than to explain them He makes no serious attempt to address the 'hermeneutical gap' between the text and the contemporary reader, for he does not properly recognise this gap in the first place Having 'interpreted' Rom 1 24-27 with ahistorical, essentialist assumptions, he believes that he is now justified in using the passage to condemn 'homosexuality today'

My exegetical comments demonstrated that the cultural contingency of Paul's brief remarks on sexual same-sex relations between men and women respectively is vital for our understanding of him The fundamental hermeneutical problem here is do we take everything that 'the Bible says as literally prescriptive for what we can say in contemporary Christian ethics (cf Hays 1986 186)? Curiously, Venter relies on Hays to rebut Boswell's outdated suggestions on Rom 1 24-27, but ignores the second part of Hays' article (204-11), which, insisting that exegesis is not enough, develops guidelines for using Biblical texts in contemporary ethical decision-making My paper cannot discuss all hermeneutical problems involved in the issue of 'the Bible and sexuality'¹⁵ However, a few basic points can be made A comparison with the issue of 'slavery' is helpful (cf Kasemann 1969) Few would support slavery today, although the New Testament never questions slavery directly it is accepted as part of the world view of Graeco-Roman antiquity Consequently, even fundamentalist interpreters are satisfied to exclude this Biblical issue from a literal interpretation for contemporary ethics Yet, concerning other issues, literalism runs rampant – on account of a literalistic reading of a handful of brief Biblical passages, gays and lesbians are ostracised and condemned

It is a curious but unmistakable phenomenon that a great many Christians treat so literally the references to homosexual practice in the Bible while at the same time they interpret bib

15 But see Cahill (1985) Hartin (1991) Hays (1986 204 11) cf Barton (1994)

lical texts on almost every other topic with considerable flexibility and non-literality. (Nelson 1978:181)

The Pauline reference to hair-length (1 Cor 11:14-15) referred to earlier is another important example: few would take Paul's 'nature-argument' here literally – most would dismiss Paul's opinion on hair length as unimportant, as 'just a cultural issue' (so Geisler 1989:263-4 – a source for Venter). 'Sexuality,' however, is seen (from an essentialist theological perspective) as being of supposedly superior importance: apparently, Paul's sexual mores have eternal validity, but not his hair codes. However, this argument misunderstands Paul's thought: for Paul, sexual behaviour and hair length were closely intertwined. Brooten's analysis shows that for Paul (and his contemporaries), female homoerotic behaviour is basically an issue of *gender*. Rom 1:26 concerns the appropriate (culturally defined) 'nature of women.' I have argued that the same principle applies to male homoerotic relations. Fundamentally, in Paul's world, both hair length and sexual behaviour are issues of gender (cf. Brooten 1985:76-7). Hence, if we reject the cross-cultural normativity of one issue (hair-length), we cannot unquestioningly adhere to the other (same-sex relations).

A way forward in our contemporary interpretive problem could be the reading of another Pauline passage, Gal 3:28 (cf. Brooten 1985:77-8; 1992):

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free (person), there is not man and woman; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Generally recognized as part of an early Christian baptismal formula, this is a programmatic statement about the significance of social status relations within the Christian communities (see Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:205-41; McDonald 1987). The three conceptual pairs used constitute fundamental building blocks of first-century Jewish (and Christian) perceptions of social hierarchy. For the unity of the community of saints, says Paul, such distinctions are irrelevant. Paul cites this text in Gal. where the conflict addressed reflects the 'Greek vs. Jew' pair. Elsewhere, with regard to the slave/free and male/female pairs, Paul tends to bypass the implications of this dictum. Nevertheless, that he initially cited the baptismal formula indicates its great significance for him. Gal 3:28 is therefore also important for our contemporary debate on (homo-)sexuality because, manifestly, for Paul and his contemporaries, sexual relations are fundamentally about gender relations, and therefore social power relations in family and society. To take Gal 3:28 seriously means to rethink Rom 1:24-27.

Rom 1:24-27 should not be used today as a legal-theological argument against gays and lesbians. If we seek 'contemporary meaning' in Rom 1:24-27, we should focus on the whole argument (1:18-32) rather than Paul's examples (1:24-27) in it: Paul uses the issue of sexual relations between men and women as a particularly vivid example (for him and his audience!) of idolatry – the 'folly' of exchanging the worship of the created being for the creator God.

Concluding Remarks

This article has pointed out some basic problems in Venter's article:

- * the simplistic importation of the North American discussion about its 'men's movement';
- * the neglect of vital theoretical issues;

- * the failure to take the historical context of key Biblical texts seriously; and
- * disregard for basic hermeneutical questions

In this, I have tried to highlight the link between Venter's condemnation of homosexuality and his defence of patriarchy.

On the face of it, Venter wishes to counteract the negative, violent image of manhood (89). However, at many key points, Venter eschews the basic cause of both this 'image' and 'behaviour': patriarchy remains fundamentally unchallenged in Venter's paper, which implicitly functions as a moderate evangelical ideology of 'patriarchy with a human face.' Venter wishes to remove patriarchy's 'nasty edge,' but he is not prepared to shake its foundations. His homophobic outbursts are part and parcel of this approach.

Thus we need to reject what Venter claims at the end of his section on homosexuality (93):

homosexuality is a perversion of manhood, as much as the 'Don Juan' womaniser is – both are self-centred, avoid real intimacy and have a false sexual identity.

Not only is this 'summary' of Venter's position a *non sequitur* (it hardly follows from his preceding assertions: he gives no reasons in his section on homosexuality why gays *per se* are supposed to be "self-centred" or avoid "real intimacy"); a generalising comparison of gays with 'the Don Juan womaniser' (ie the traditional image of the 'macho-man') is simply an homophobic insult.

The saddest aspect of Venter's remarks is not that they lack serious theoretical, exegetical and hermeneutical reflections, but his lack of sympathy for the countless lives that have been ruined and are still being ruined by the homophobic attitudes and heterosexist structures of both 'the world' and the churches. Venter seems oblivious to the pain and suffering inflicted daily upon people, solely because they live 'different' lives.¹⁶ The problem lies not with people who feel 'different,' but with those who, conditioned by societies and churches, make their existence a living hell. It is time to lay to rest the ancient 'nature'/'creation' argument (cf. Peck 1989), to put aside the homophobic nonsense of 'gays as a constant threat of pederastic abuse,' etc.¹⁷ What is so terrible about the loving relationship between two women, or two men (a love that may or may not be expressed sexually)? Why do we in the church – supposedly a home of compassion for the suffering – systematically close ourselves off to a whole group of people who suffer daily under homophobic, cultural stereotypes? The church calls its people to overcome fears of the unknown/different, to overcome social and racial discrimination: the witness of the earliest Jesus movement compelled Christians to do so; it compelled Christians to fight against the evil system of apartheid and for a truly democratic society. However, there remains this issue of 'sexual difference,' set apart as if utterly unrelated to this commission. It is time to recognise that homosexuality is an issue of justice, not merely one of pastoral care.

Research into matters of sexuality receives little academic attention in South Africa, even though our rich cultural history, as well as the current changes in cultural traditions in the country, make such work both important and fascinating (e.g.

16. Cf Holtz (1991), Pretorius (1990, 1992), Dlamini (1992), Charles (1993), Penn (1993), Gevisser & Cameron (1994)

17. There is no scientific evidence that gays and lesbians are more of a 'threat to children' than straight people

Moodie 1989; Harries 1990; Isaacs & McKendrick 1992). Theological research into issues of sexuality is also still rare.¹⁸ Many perceive the issue as being unimportant, when compared to the pressing problems of political transformation, poverty, educational crisis, etc. Nevertheless, human sexuality must not be seen as a trivial matter for the church in post-apartheid South Africa,¹⁹ if only for the close link between patriarchy, gender, and sexuality. To put it simply: take women's rights and feminism/womanism seriously ultimately leads to revisiting sexuality (including homosexuality). Hopefully, my brief theoretical elaborations have made this link clear. Most pressingly, the AIDS pandemic must also force the church to re-evaluate its teaching and actions in terms of sexual behaviour in general. 'Sexuality' is not just a matter of ivory-tower theory or white suburban theology, to be brushed aside as a luxury – it is a matter of survival as well as justice. It will not do to keep repeating a 'Christian sexual ethic' akin to nineteenth-century bourgeois Victorian mores. While this challenge requires an ethical approach that inevitably carries risks (cf. Welsh 1990), the church must develop afresh a theoretically informed, theological-ethical approach that addresses the reality of sexual behaviour in South Africa. In this regard, it will not do to take vague and ahistorical claims about what 'the Bible' can offer here: we must make exegetical and hermeneutical problems seriously. For all these reasons Venter's paper unfortunately presents us with a dangerous example of avoiding such serious reflection.²⁰

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18. But see Paterson (1984), Borello (1990), Hartin (1991), Dlamini (1992), Pretorius (1990, 1992), Cochrane & Reiss (1992)
19. Tragically, the widely disseminated black South African myth that homosexuality is a 'white man's thing' contributes to the avoidance of the issue as a whole – For black lesbian and gay writings, see for instance Gevisser and Cameron (1994), of Dlamini (1992) and Potgieter-Theys (1992)
20. Content and style of this article were greatly improved by the comments of Prof J Draper, Dr G West, and Prof A Roscoe

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