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**From:** Fr Thomas Fraser [rector@stpaulsparish.org]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, April 20, 2011 3:42 PM  
**Subject:** FW: Sexuality and Christianity research paper

Cassie,

I am delighted to be “interviewed,” but I am afraid that my answers may be of somewhat limited value to you in writing your paper. The reasons are these: the Roman Catholic and Episcopal Churches share the same positions on most theological matters (that is, unlike the ecclesial bodies founded at the Protestant Reformation – Lutheran, Presbyterian, Reformed, Baptist, etc. – the Episcopal Church does not hold Protestant theology but rather the theology of the historic Catholic Church). This means that the Roman Catholic and Episcopal Churches also have many of the same problems. Right now both Churches – like a lot of the rest of the world – are caught in the midst of a vicious “culture war,” as the sociologists have termed it, between “liberals” and “conservatives” with wide and bitter gulfs between the extremes on many subjects ... the most volatile at this point doubtlessly being sexuality. Therefore, while there are official positions on many subjects in both the Roman Catholic and Anglican (Episcopal) Churches, if the question is what do individual Episcopalians/Roman Catholics believe (or local parishes and even dioceses tolerate), there is in fact a wide – and tragically often irreconcilable – spectrum both of opinions and of what is overtly or covertly done.

In addition, there are two historic differences between Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism which can further complicate understanding the Episcopal Church’s approach to controversial issues:

- Unlike the Roman Catholic Church – and like the Eastern Orthodox Churches – each national Anglican (Episcopal) Church world-wide is self-governing. Although there are coordinating bodies, there is no one supreme international governing authority like the Vatican with all official church pronouncements coming through that one governing body.
- Because of their historic roots in England, all of the Anglican Churches world-wide including the Episcopal Church in the United States have a religious “culture” which developed directly from Benedictine monasticism (which was extremely influential in England throughout the Middle Ages). One of the characteristics of Benedictinism – in both Roman Catholicism and in Anglicanism – is that each abbey is self-governing and its abbot/abbess has a unique degree of independence. Because of this Benedictine heritage, in secular (i.e. non-monastic) Anglicanism each Bishop and his diocese have a greater degree of freedom than do Roman Catholic Bishops and their dioceses.

Now, obviously, there are limits to this independence; both abbeys and their abbots/abbesses and Anglican dioceses and their Bishops must accept the Catholic theology of the whole Church and be fundamentally faithful to its core values and authority. However this historic legacy means that Benedictines and thus Anglicans (Episcopalians) have a tradition of free and open discussion, intellectual questioning and exploration which, like every good thing in this world, can be abused and from time-to-time has been carried to unacceptable extremes. (We clearly are experiencing some abuse of this freedom right now in the American Episcopal Church, and it is causing destructive tensions within Anglicanism world-wide.) There is also the long-time tradition in the Episcopal Church of holding even controversial discussions openly and “transparently” while the same subjects would be discussed among Roman Catholic Bishops and theologians “behind closed doors.”

Having said all that, I will do my best to give you a picture of where the Episcopal Church in the United States seems to be today on the subject of sexuality.

*Which roles are women and men allowed to perform in the church? (Why these and not others?)*

Among lay persons, men and women are permitted to exercise all roles equally. Controversy arises over the question of the Ordination of women as Bishops, Priests, and Deacons in the Apostolic Succession (this is a specifically and narrowly sacramental question ... not one of power or authority, a crucial distinction!). The majority of Anglicans world-wide – as well as the vast majority of Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox – believe that it is not valid because it is not what Jesus established when He instituted the Sacrament of Holy Orders (and it is a universally held tenet of Catholic theology that in order to be valid or real, a Sacrament must be exactly that which Christ created). The Episcopal Church in the United States since 1976 has permitted Bishops to “experiment” with the ordination of women in their own dioceses. Unlike ordained men, by Canon Law no individual Episcopalian is required to recognize women as validly ordained or accept their priestly functions; and this “experiment” has created and continues to create great divisiveness in Anglicanism.

*What roles do women and men have in their marriages? (Why these and not others?)*

The Church officially, as well as the overwhelming majority of Episcopalians, would say that indeed there are biologically-determined differences which have role ramifications (men cannot give birth; women in some ways do not have the muscular strength men have, etc). Non-biologically-determined roles however (e.g. who is the principal breadwinner, who makes various kinds of decisions, etc.) are to be determined by mutual agreement between the spouses themselves and are probably best based on practical considerations, not gender-related ideology.

*What are the attitudes toward sexual relations (premarital, marital, extra-marital, homosexual?)*

The official position of both the American Episcopal Church and Anglicanism world-wide is that genital sexual relations are acceptable and moral only between a man and a woman within monogamous marriage. The overwhelming majority of Anglicans world-wide emphatically concur. Although there are no scientific studies of our American church members to date, it is my own experience that individual U.S. Episcopalians however personally are at all points along the same spectrum of opinion as Americans in general. This can lead in parishes, dioceses, the national Episcopal Church, and world-wide Anglicanism to exactly the same kind of bitter divisiveness that our society as a whole is experiencing over these subjects.

*Do you see these roles and attitudes as stable or changing in the future of your church (and why?)*

If you mean St Paul's Parish, Riverside, it would appear that while the great majority of parishioners are open to discussion and listening respectfully to the opinions of others, their values – on many subjects, not just sexuality and Christianity – are for the most part established and stable.

*Did you learn about Feminist Biblical Scholarship in seminary? Has Feminist Biblical Scholarship impacted the community in any way?*

As a 66-year-old, I consider this question a real compliment. The truth is, Feminist Biblical Scholarship hadn't even been thought of when I was in seminary (1969-1972)! NOW had just been founded when I graduated from seminary, and the overriding social issue was the Viet Nam war. It has been my personal observation that today the impact of Feminist Biblical Scholarship in the Episcopal Church is directly related to where persons – or institutions, such as seminaries – are on the "liberal-conservative" spectrum. Anglicanism, and thus the American Episcopal Church, does not have a history of institutional Biblical fundamentalism; so there has generally been no church-wide reaction to generations of sexist-racist-antiscience use of the Bible as has been the case among many fundamentalist Protestants.

Hope this is of some help.

frTAF