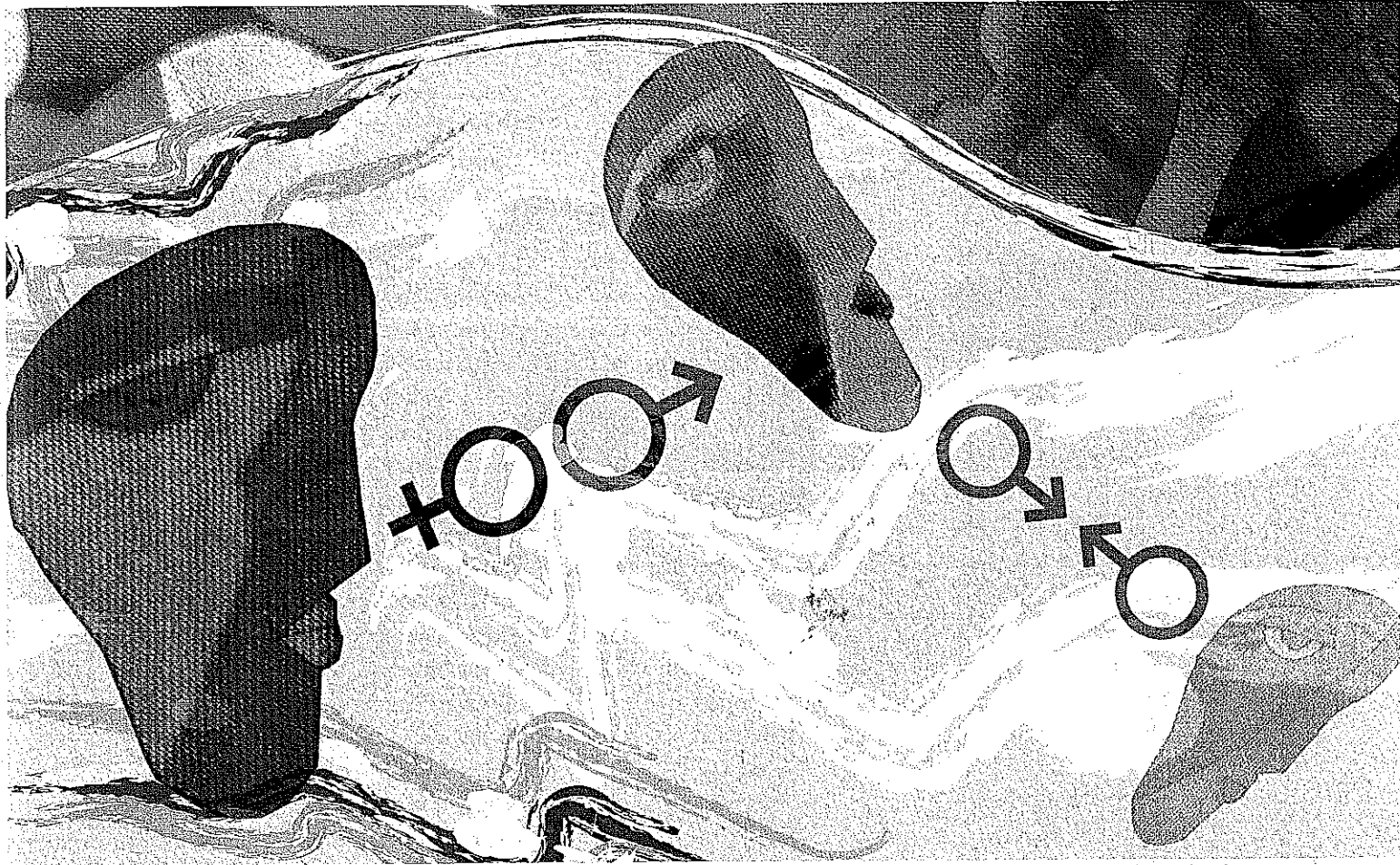


# Dealing with issues in sexual ethics

Student responses to questions on sexual ethics often suffer from a failure to address the issues raised in the question and an over dependence on case studies or simplistic examples. **Sarah K. Tyler** explores ways in which you can maximise your responses to questions on this topic.

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Matters of sexual ethics include those areas in human sexual relationships that are open to debate and difference of opinion. They are issues concerned with the value of individuals and the responsibility of humans one to another in the area of sexual morality. These are

important for many reasons, not least because they are of concern to society and to individuals. Furthermore, they are important because religious teaching includes guidance and rules on matters of sexual relationships. An issue or dilemma in sexual ethics is one that raises

Different churches within Christianity adopt different attitudes towards homosexuality

questions not easy to resolve — for example, whether sexual relationships should only take place within marriage, or whether the age of consent should be raised or lowered. Some issues in sexual ethics (such as celibacy) will be of primary concern to religious believers, while others (such as incest) will concern everyone.

Some matters of sexual ethics are subject to legislation (the law), such as homosexuality, which was made legal in 1967, while in 2005 the Civil Partnerships Act recognised the legal status of same sex partnerships. This may imply that homosexuality is accepted as morally right by everyone. However, even if the majority of society accepts this choice as morally right, religious believers, or non-believers, may have personal reasons or beliefs for arguing that even though it is legal it is not 'right' — for some reason they do not believe that it conforms to what society should be defending or promoting.

#### Issues of right and wrong

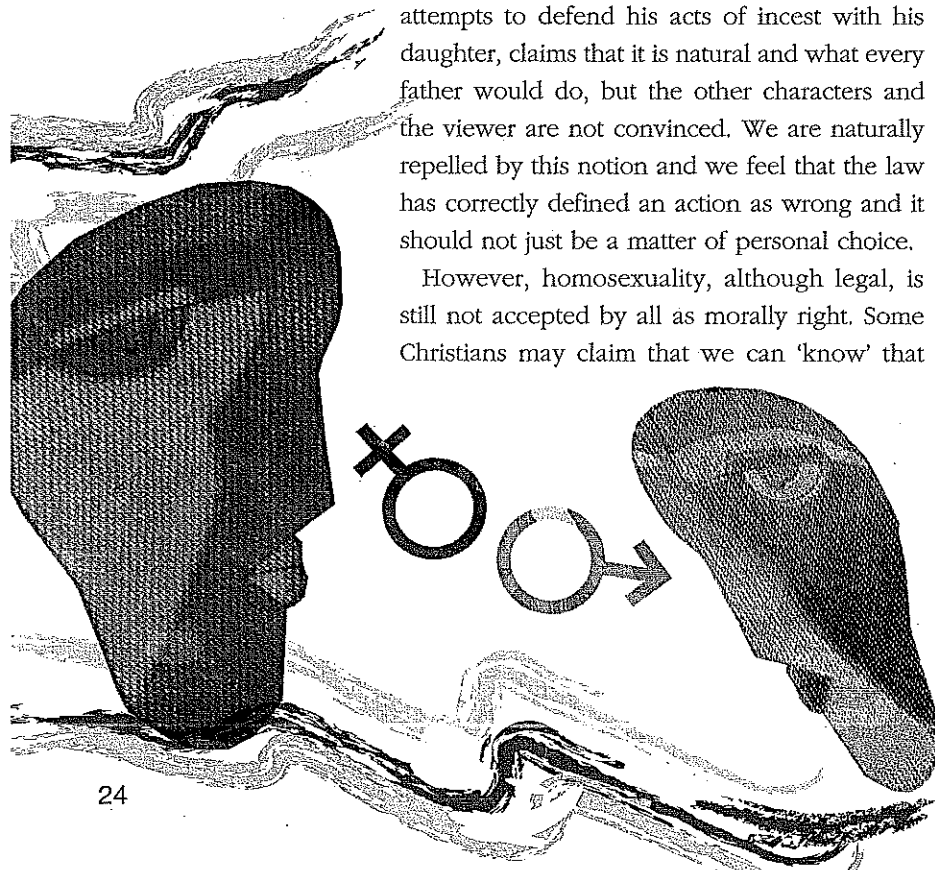
Nevertheless, it may be possible to use the law as a means of establishing what is right and wrong in matters of sexual ethics. In the case of incest, the law defines it clearly as wrong, with criminal charges for those who are guilty. Furthermore, we have an intuition that incest is wrong. In the film *Priest* (Walt Disney 1994), the father, who attempts to defend his acts of incest with his daughter, claims that it is natural and what every father would do, but the other characters and the viewer are not convinced. We are naturally repelled by this notion and we feel that the law has correctly defined an action as wrong and it should not just be a matter of personal choice.

However, homosexuality, although legal, is still not accepted by all as morally right. Some Christians may claim that we can 'know' that

homosexuality is wrong because the Bible teaches so. Leviticus 18:22 instructs 'Do not lie with a man as with a woman, for that is abominable', and in Romans 1:26–7 Paul writes that homosexuality is a perversion that is a consequence of the fall, and in 1 Corinthians 6:9 he says that homosexual offenders will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. If the Bible is the word of God, as Christians believe, then it may be possible to say that by using the Bible we can know what is right or wrong in matters of sexual ethics. An extreme example of this is the ultra conservative Westboro Baptist Church which promotes the view that the Bible teaches that homosexuality is a profoundly serious issue in religious and sexual ethics, making use of almost any biblical passage they can to justify this belief (see [www.godhatesfags.com](http://www.godhatesfags.com)).

However, different churches within Christianity adopt different attitudes towards homosexuality. The official position of the Roman Catholic Church is that homosexuality is sinful, and Roman Catholic priests, heterosexual or homosexual, are required to take a vow of celibacy. The Anglican Church technically accepts that homosexuality may be a natural condition, but still requires celibacy. Strict Evangelical churches are most likely to teach that homosexuality is absolutely wrong and there will be real consequences for those who violate this. A recent example is that of Ted Haggard, the former senior pastor of the New Life Church in Colorado and President of the National Association of Evangelicals in the USA ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted\\_Haggard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted_Haggard)). Despite speaking out against the sin of homosexuality, Haggard was revealed as having a relationship with a male prostitute and as a result was dismissed from the Church. The Church had to do this to confirm their continuing belief that there can be clear judgements about what is right and wrong in sexual ethics.

However, even if we believe we can make clear judgements about what is right or wrong in sexual ethics, these judgements can still vary between individuals. In the case of the celibacy of the clergy, in the film *Priest* both Father Greg and Father Matthew had clear ideas about whether it was reasonable to require priests to be celibate. Greg, despite struggling to remain



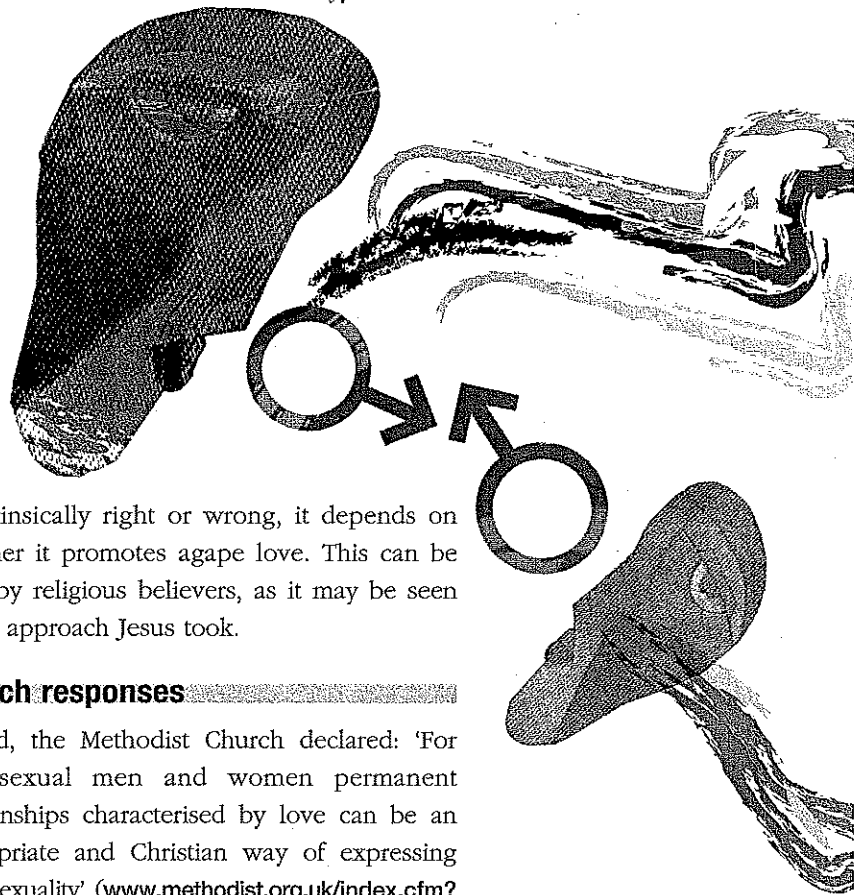
celibate, believed that it was, on the grounds that Jesus was celibate, and that it is the only thing the Church requires of priests. Matthew believed that celibacy is a man-made law and should not be considered absolutely right.

### Finding a resolution

Christians may adopt different ways of attempting to solve dilemmas in sexual ethics but invariably will turn to the Bible for some guidance. For some religious believers, the guidance offered by the Bible and taught by the Church will always be the primary means of solving dilemmas in sexual ethics, believing that the Bible is of eternal value and that it offers the most reliable way of being guided in life. Whatever changes happen in society, they claim that the Bible is the best possible guidance and comes from God. A strict evangelical Christian is likely therefore to adopt a strict approach to sexual ethics on this basis, encouraging not only celibacy before marriage, but exercising strict control over relationships between the sexes.

The New Life Church also adopted this principle when they dismissed Ted Haggard on the basis that his behaviour was opposed to their beliefs that homosexuality is wrong according to God's word. They could not change their position just because their pastor was found to be homosexual. Some Christians who struggle with same sex attraction, like Ted Haggard, attend residential camps that they hope will help them overcome their feelings, believing that they can never be compatible with God's teaching (see [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article4893735.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article4893735.ece)).

Even if we don't adopt religious beliefs as the means of guidance, we may still be able to draw the conclusion that certain things are absolutely right or wrong. We are guided by how people are affected by our actions, whether they are good for society, or whether our experience tells us that they are right. However, society's views do change, and some matters that were considered wrong once, are now acceptable. Divorce, for example, is no longer seen as wrong, although adultery is probably still seen by most people as wrong. Perhaps the best approach to use is that of Situation Ethics, which argues that nothing



is intrinsically right or wrong, it depends on whether it promotes agape love. This can be used by religious believers, as it may be seen as the approach Jesus took.

### Church responses

Indeed, the Methodist Church declared: 'For homosexual men and women permanent relationships characterised by love can be an appropriate and Christian way of expressing their sexuality' ([www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=opentogod.newsDetail&newsid=33](http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=opentogod.newsDetail&newsid=33)).

In a similar vein, while the Church of England does not recommend physical expression of homosexual orientation, it acknowledges that the church must respect those who '...are conscientiously convinced that they have more hope of growing in love for God and neighbour with the help of a loving and faithful homophile partnership, in intention lifelong...' ([thinkinganglicans.org.uk/uploads/brianlewis.html](http://thinkinganglicans.org.uk/uploads/brianlewis.html)).

However, this is not a universally acceptable position for many Anglican Christians. In July 2003, Canon Jeffrey John, an openly homosexual though celibate priest, reluctantly withdrew his acceptance of the post of Bishop of Reading. He did this to avoid creating a worldwide split in the Anglican Church over homosexual priests. This caused great division in the church. The Dean of Southwark, the Very Reverend Colin Slee, observed:

Canon John has become the victim of appalling prejudice and abuse which has its main proponents within the Church of England ... the news will hurt thousands of Christian people who are not gay but believe strongly in God's love and redemption for all his children equally ([www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1435042/Dean-blames-spiritual-apartheid.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1435042/Dean-blames-spiritual-apartheid.html)).

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Soon afterwards, the Anglican Church worldwide was torn apart when the Nigerian church, which has 17 million members, openly opposed the ordination of a gay bishop, Gene Robinson, in the USA. President Obasanjo of Nigeria said of homosexuality: 'Such a tendency is clearly un-Biblical, unnatural and definitely un-African' ([christiantoday.com/article/nigeria.to.outlaw.samesex.marriage/5052.ht](http://christiantoday.com/article/nigeria.to.outlaw.samesex.marriage/5052.ht)). As a result, in July 2008 the Archbishop of Canterbury reluctantly called for a ban on homosexual priests becoming bishops in the Anglican Communion worldwide. Evidently, in the Christian Church, while homosexuals are treated with a greater degree of equality than they had been in previous years, the controversy remains and true equality is still a long way off.

Many Christians believe that the Old Testament teachings on homosexuality are no longer applicable. They were written in an age when there was little understanding of homosexuality, and Jesus himself never condemned it. Some believe that it is more loving to accept homosexuals on the same basis as heterosexuals, and that religious teaching needs to accommodate the change in social and biological understanding of homosexuality. Situation ethics again may help. For a situation ethicist, it is unloving and ungodly to reject homosexuals, even on supposedly religious grounds, and along with divorcees or other people who have fallen short of religious ideals of sexual behaviour, they should be fully accepted as loved by God and his people.

**Sarah K. Tyler** is a principal examiner for religious studies and an experienced writer and speaker. She is head of religious studies at Mander Portman Woodward Sixth Form College in London, and is an editor of RELIGIOUS STUDIES REVIEW.

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- Evangelical Christianity
- Homosexuality



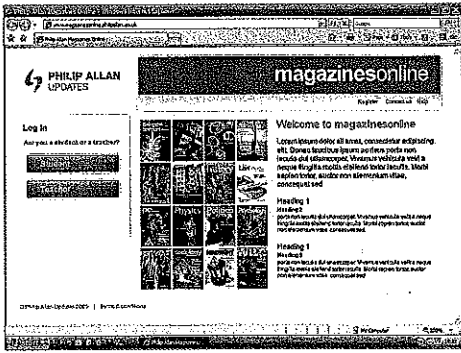
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