

Spring 2006

Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

SEX AND THE CHURCH



It is precisely the church's traditional perception of our nakedness, our sexuality, and our embodiment as stumbling blocks on the path to spiritual integration that is at the root of so much of this current consternation surrounding issues of sexuality. It is our hope that the words and images contained in this issue of *Reflections* will help religious communities undo the tragedy of Adam and Eve, by facing their own sexuality, accepting it as a gift from God (and therefore very, very good), and re-integrating it into healthy and whole vision of themselves as body, mind, and spirit.

—Jamie L. Manson

Reflections is a magazine of religious inquiry and opinion generated by the community of Yale Divinity School. Opinions expressed are solely those of the authors and do not represent those of the sponsoring institution and its administration and faculty.

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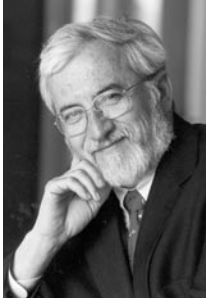
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COVER: "Adam and Eve," (1932) by Tamara de Lempicka (1898–1980)

SEX AND THE CHURCH



From the Dean's Desk



Harold W. Attridge

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Testament

Sex is much on the minds of many in the churches these days. The Anglican communion is being torn apart by disagreements over the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson. Methodists have been battling over whether to welcome gays into their churches. At the 2006 general assembly of the Presbyterian church, a task force on “peace, unity, and purity” will offer its recommendations regarding issues of sexual orientation. Ordination of women remains a controversial issue in several denominations. In the Roman Catholic Church, still reeling from the pedophilia scandal, Pope Benedict XVI’s first encyclical, on love, celebrates the value of heterosexual sex within matrimony. Other churches, such as the United Church of Christ, profess an “open and affirming” stance toward people of all sexual orientations, although several dozen local congregations rejected the denomination’s direction.

The Church’s preoccupation with sex and gender issues reflects the general American obsession with such matters. On the airwaves, on the silver screen, in print, and in person, we are bombarded with vibrant images and conflicting messages about the value or the problems of being the sexual creatures that we are. Sexual violence is a pervasive and enduring problem. The recent death of Betty Freidan reminded us all that the issues of women’s liberation, for which she was such a prominent spokesperson, remain current today. Our political parties have been caught up in “culture wars” that often focus on issues related to sexuality. Presidential elections, and the fate of the nation, can be decided by voters concerned with abortion rights or gay marriage.

All of the contemporary concern about issues revolving around sexuality is hardly new. Despite Paul’s proclamation that there is neither “male nor female” in Christ, the distinction and its implications have long been part of Christian reflection on the human condition, from Augustine’s *Confessions* to the latest works of moral theology and Christian ethics. The conversation continues in these pages. Contributors to the issue include Dale Martin, of Yale’s Department of Religious Studies, much of whose work has focused on issues of biblical hermeneutics in the postmodern world; James B. Nelson, longtime professor of Christian ethics at the United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities and specialist on matters of sexual ethics; Kelly Brown Douglas, Episcopal priest and professor of religion at Goucher College, who addresses the issue of attitudes toward sexual ethics in the Black Church; Debra Haffner, director of the Religious Institute on Morality, Justice, and Healing, and author of the Religious Declaration on Sexuality, Justice, and Healing; Michael Kelly, who assesses the ministry of Sister Jeannine Gramick in the Catholic Church.

This issue of *Reflections* steps back from the current fray over gender and sexuality and offers some thoughtful perspectives on the general issues, on the ethical principles that guide our thinking, and on the ways in which scriptural resources and “difficult texts” might be engaged. Our hope is that these reflections will help our readers to work through some of the divisive issues within communities of Christian conviction today and to help such communities address a comprehensible and liberating message to the world.



Harold W. Attridge

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Sex as a Spiritual Exercise

By Daniel A. Helminiak

Christianity has shaped Western civilization. In light of that history, the title of this article may seem strange indeed. Christianity affirms the Incarnation, that in Jesus Christ, God actually took on human flesh, and Christianity insists that salvation occurs in and through Christ's bodily life, suffering, and death. Christians find spiritual nourishment by sharing the Eucharist, Holy Communion, the body and blood of Christ.

And following Jesus, Christians look forward to resurrection of the body: Heaven is not just a spiritual state, but a bodily one, as well. Nonetheless, from Christianity's earliest beginnings, in most Christian thinking, the body and the spirit have been seen as enemies.

In Galatians 5:17, Paul wrote, "What the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other." To the Hebrew mind of the Bible, "flesh" stood for all that is weak, passing, creaturely, and perhaps sinful. "Spirit" stood for all that is life-giving, lasting, and of God. So, understood according to the usage of his day, the teaching of Saint Paul was merely that evil and goodness are at odds, that the worldly and the godly are in tension. Obviously! But ripped from its cultural context and misunderstood in terms of our current usage, Paul's literal words are taken to refer to sex and to pit it—the flesh, the body—against spirituality.

SEX-POSITIVITY IN CHRISTIANITY'S EARLY BEGINNINGS

In fact, the sex negativity that has characterized Christianity did not come from Christianity's Jewish heritage, nor from the teachings of Jesus, nor even from the letters of Paul. Jewish teaching to this day is sex-positive. Jewish couples are supposed to have sex on the Sabbath to hallow the day. The Genesis command was to be fruitful and multiply.

And without reference to marriage, children, or family, the collection of poems in the *Song of Songs* is a paean to sexual love and romance.

Jesus' remarks about sex mention only adultery, divorce, and sexual obsession (lusting in the heart). In addition, some argue that, in healing the centurion's servant, Jesus restored a threatened homosexual relationship.

Saint Paul does not deserve the bad rap he gets about sex. As I report in *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, L. William Countryman argued cogently that the intent of Romans 1 was not to condemn homosexuality. Rather, this text opposes the splintering of the Christian community over irrelevant differences about Jewish purity laws—including the "abomination," that is, the ritual taboo, of male-male penetrative sex. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul does discourage marriage but only because he believed the world would soon end; and flexible in his counsel, he is still open to the variety of sexual practices of his day. In Galatians 3:28 Paul dismisses even the difference between male and female because "all of you are one in Christ." Paul was no misogynist. The command in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 that women be silent and subordinate is not from Paul himself but was added by his more conservative disciples such as those who also wrote 1 Timothy 2:11–15 in Paul's name. The final chapter of the genuinely Pauline letter to the Romans, for example, mentions by name twenty-nine disciples; among these are ten women, three of whom—Phoebe, Prisca, and Junia—held



positions of honor and authority in the early Pauline churches. In its beginnings, Christianity was not sex-negative.

The negativity of the Christian tradition derived from Stoicism and Neo-Platonism, secular philosophies that were prevalent during Christianity's formation. These systems of thought were suspect of pleasure and were overly rationalistic. Shortsighted in their appreciation of human sexuality, they focused on biological function and argued that sex was for begetting children and any other use was mistaken. This "mistake" was quickly turned into

sin, and into the twenty-first century we all live with the result: uneasiness and guilt over sex.

The most brilliant minds of the Christian tradition rationalized that misunderstanding. Saint Augustine is the theological favorite of Protestantism, and Saint Thomas Aquinas is the great theologian of Catholicism. Both understood rationality to be the crowning glory of humanity, and both were wary of sex. At the point of orgasm, they reasoned, one momentarily loses rationality, and the risk of such loss can only be justified for a serious reason. The desire to conceive a child would be the only sufficient reason.

Wariness about sex through those early centuries is understandable. Before modern medicine, perhaps a quarter of all women eventually died in childbirth. No effective contraceptive was available. Children born out of wedlock were social pariahs. A non-virgin woman would be hard pressed to ever find a husband and needed economic support. Sexually transmitted diseases had no cure. Sexual urges were thought to reduce people to the level of an animal. On many fronts, sex was thought to be, and in fact was, dangerous.

But why has religion remained rabidly sex-negative even today? Repeated studies show that the more religious people are, the more opposed to sex they tend to be. A nearly hysterical religious opposition to sex—for example, the enlistment of hundreds of millions of American tax dollars to promote sexual abstinence nationally and globally—makes one wonder what is really going on.

There is no easy accounting for this religious curiosity. To explain social attitudes is difficult in the best of cases and, perhaps, impossible in a time of rapid change, like our own. Yale historian John Boswell argued that Christianity has basically followed secular mores regarding sexual matters. Far from setting the pace, Christianity tended merely to give it spiritual approval. Today, when a truly theological discussion of homosexuality has arisen, Christianity faces a novel challenge: to sort out sexual issues theologically in the face of mushrooming new evidence. In fact, such sorting out has already been done. Theological arguments to legitimate sexual diversity—biblical, historical, biological, medical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, ethical—are there for anyone who wants them. Yet the religions refuse to adjust their teaching. Why so? The causes are multiple, complex, and intertwined. A listing of likely ones will shed some light on this conundrum.

- Ignorance is a major factor. Sexuality has been a topic of study for barely a century. Sigmund Freud's notorious emphasis on sex was not a personal quirk but a reflection of the budding interest of his day. In the past century we have learned more about sex than during all of prior human history. Sexual orientation, transsexualism, transvestism, intersexuality—these topics never fit into traditional notions of sex, yet today they are known as relatively common, non-pathological, natural variations. Religionists are caught up short to have to face these issues, and,

despite their weighty moral obligation to provide competent spiritual leadership, many members of the clergy simply do not know, or are unwilling to admit, the recently learned facts.

- The powerful emotions that surround sexuality are another factor. Emotions cloud thinking. If truth be told, the heart usually rules the head. So some religious leaders—especially seniors, who tend to hold the influential positions but who grew up in former generations with deeply engrained restrictive sexual attitudes—may actually be humanly incapable of transcending their prejudices. Besides, most younger clergy also grew up in sexual repression. It will take generations before comfort with sex becomes typical of our society.

- Emotional restructuring of the human psyche is a slow process. Deep psychological healing often requires years of psychotherapy. Yet the emotionally laden social changes that assault our era have come quickly—divorce, chemical contraception, racial equality, women's rights, access for the handicapped, gay liberation, transsexual and intersex liberation, gay marriage, the Internet, the breakdown of national boundaries, the growth of a global community, and terrorism. The human psyche is not built to sustain such rapid-fire assault. By any historical standard, the achievements of sexual liberation, even if halted today, would remain remarkable. In fact, then, it is not to be expected that people in general or their religions will change their sexual attitudes quickly.

- Guilt is another factor. Sexual exploration is a normal aspect of adolescence. In that exploration many people do things that later weigh on their consciences—especially men and especially regarding homosexual play. My human sexuality class in rural, Bible-Belt Georgia, for example, almost always rates as true, without debate, that same-sex experimentation is a normal facet of their culture. But given the societal and religious guilt surrounding such sex acts, adult believers, converted and repentant, are likely to wage a battle against sexual “sins,” their own and everyone else's. The fact that even these true believers had once “fallen” provides personal proof of the need to vigilantly oppose pernicious homosexuality.

- Reaction formation—the Freudian defense mechanism whereby one opposes in others what one senses but cannot admit in oneself—also plays out in other ways. Carl Jung noted that homosexual people tend to be spiritually sensitive. So they are likely to be overrepresented in the ministry. Estimates of homosexual Catholic priests range from 30 to 60

percent and more. Because of the all-male structure of the Catholic priesthood, this incidence of homosexuality is probably higher than that among non-Catholic clergy. Still, despite the de facto requirement of marriage for Protestant ministers, the incidence of homosexuality among them is also likely to be high. Besides, a recent study suggested that “heterosexual” men who become more sexually aroused by homosexual pornography also tend to score higher than others on a scale of homophobia. Overall, then, some clergy surely oppose homosexuality because they cannot accept the tendency in themselves.

- Changing sexual mores shake the very foundations of Western civilization, so fear also catalyzes religious leaders in their opposition to change. Such change is inherent in the “sexual revolution,” and such change is colossal, so opposition to it is not wholly irrational. On the chopping block of historical change lie the rule of patriarchy, the relationship of man and woman, the notions of femininity and masculinity, the mythically powerful and financially encumbering heterosexual wedding, the popular understanding of marriage, and the Norman-Rockwellian myth of family. The threat also includes the fictionalized energy of “free sex” unleashed, the power of romance to dilute the work ethic, and the loss of easy governmental control over people because they love. The movement toward a global community—built on the axiom of “human rights” and respectful of all peoples and cultures yet manipulated for economic goals by multinational corporations—is another entangled dimension of this intricate scenario. Under discombobulating circumstances like these, it is understandable that religious leaders would tend toward conservatism and, impotent as anyone to restrain the historical trends, would focus on individuals, their private sex lives, and their fear-ridden relationship with God. Evidently and unfortunately, religious faith is not strong enough to allow that all people could be themselves and still live together in peace, joy, and mutual respect. We are still incapable of conceiving a truly new world order.

- Philosophically, as well, the bottom has fallen out of Western civilization. Radical postmodernism discredits the very notions of truth and goodness, and moderate postmodernism has, in the least, demonstrated the difficulty of approaching these traditional ideals. No consensus whatsoever on epistemology or ethics exists in our day. Even the possibility of correct knowing has been—self-contradictorily—argued unflinchingly. No one—except,

I believe, Bernard Lonergan—envisages a credible exit from this quandary. Thus, religion’s easy claim to know the truth from God and to announce the good appears as a fiction from a bygone era. Nonetheless, better to have a dubious ethical teaching than none at all. So religion holds to its traditional position. This tendency is blatant in Roman Catholicism, which continues to insist that in every case sex must be open to conception. Other religions are not as explicit in their teaching, but logical analysis of their opposition to sexual variations because of a supposed “complementarity of the sexes” leads to the same first premise. Thus, for want of a coherent alternative, religion insists on the faltering status quo.

- Appeal to the Bible should not sustain opposition to lesbian and gay relationships, yet it does. As cogently as historical research is ever likely to do, biblical scholarship shows that, understood in their original linguistic, historical, and cultural settings, the biblical texts were not addressing the questions of our day and did not even condemn same-sex acts per se in their day. Although not all allow so lucid a conclusion, in the very least an honest person must admit that there is serious question about the meaning of those texts. This doubt should favor sexual diversity. Standard and long-standing religious principles apply in such cases. For example, Catholic teaching holds that it is not right to impose a moral burden on a person if the need for that burden is questionable: *Lex dubia not obligat*: A doubtful law has no binding power. Similarly, Baptists advocate “soul freedom,” the right of every believer to personally hold their own interpretation of the Bible and its requirements. Yet neither of these religions cuts slack for lesbian and gay people. Evidently, just as possession is nine-tenths of the law, so established moral teaching outweighs recent insight. Thus, for all the reasons already noted and in opposition to their own traditional ethical principles, religions continue to comfortably oppose homosexuality.

- Blatant human perversity, downright wickedness, is also a factor that should not be overlooked. It shows itself in scapegoating: the easy blame of lesbians and gays for all the ills of society; in an unscrupulous but politically expedient play on people’s fears for winning elections and sustaining repressive political agendas; and in the lucrative appeal to homophobia in religious fundraising efforts. A similar dynamic, less deliberately culpable, is operative within pastors’ and hierarchs’ fears of splitting congregations and whole religious bodies over a controversial change in emotionally charged sexual policy.

- Finally, fairness requires that we allow the good will of those who oppose homosexuality. Undoubtedly and disconcertingly, many religious leaders sincerely believe that sexual variations are harmful, wrong, godless, and sinful. Their reasons might be an un-self-conscious conglomerate of those listed above or others that pertain to generalized religious allegiance—such as belief in a particular religion, the voice of the pope, or the word of the Bible, the Koran, or the Book of Mormon. Although others—myself included—might see their stance as a fiction of blind conviction, the nobility of their spiritual commitment must be credited.

Obviously, for the most part, religious discussion of homosexuality is not a rational affair. I know no other topic whose mere mention can make some people lose all perspective, succumb to amygdaloid rage, and go bonkers. The inevitable change of religious beliefs, judgments, and attitudes will be difficult. While the slow process of change goes on, other spiritual leaders—open-minded, questioning, honest, and good-willed—need to forge a new vision of the relationship between sexuality and spirituality. Such a vision will provide conservative religionists a coherent and ethical alternative. This they can embrace in good conscience when they finally begin to let go of their sex negativity. To such a vision, this article turns once again.

THE HUMAN AS BODY, PSYCHE, AND SPIRIT

In their concern to limit sexual experience, Augustine and Aquinas were correct: Sexual experience does entail a momentary loss of rationality. But with more profound psychological awareness, the wisdom of our age asserts that such a temporary loss might be to the good. The psychoanalytic term that could apply is “regression in the service of the ego.” Sometimes it is useful to experience a break from our too-heady rationalism. Such “regression” allows our mental structures to regroup in a healthier configuration: one step backward for the sake of two steps forward. Just as a needed vacation lets us return to everyday life with a new outlook, so, too, a respite from our over-rationalized and over-intellectualized pursuits can bring a new sense of wonder to daily living.

To be human is to be ever becoming. Throughout our lives we create ourselves. In the end each of us will be the one and only edition of ourselves. Our becoming depends on a shifting balance in the various facets of our make-up. As a pause that gives new life, sex can provide an occasion to shift our inner balance. But what does this shift have to do with spiritual growth?

Religion has traditionally conceived the human being as a combination of body and soul. Similarly, psychology speaks of body and mind. The difference between mind and soul is not worth addressing at this point. Both concepts are sufficiently fuzzy that comparing them would be a wasted effort. Still, this much remains clear: A two-part model of the human being is too simple. There is more going on in inner human experience—soul or mind—than just one thing.

In his major work, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Bernard Lonergan speaks of two facets of the mind. The one constantly urges us into new frontiers and toward further growth; the other seeks, rather, the comfort and security of a stable status quo. Lonergan calls the first *intentional consciousness* or the human *spirit*, and the other, *psyche*. Thus, he projects a tripartite model of the human being: body, psyche, and spirit.

Spirit is the self-transcending dimension of the human mind. We experience it most fundamentally as wonder, marvel, awe. It prompts us to be aware, to be self-aware, and even to be aware of our awareness. Its very nature is “question”—outward-looking dynamism, raw curiosity, that would understand ever more and more and encompass ever more and more. Open-ended in its purview, its ideal goal is everything that there is to know and love. It is, in fact, that by which we do come to know and love. It guides our wonder, our questioning, our judging, and our choosing. Geared to embrace the universe—even as, in the ideal, we would want to understand everything about everything and in the process become one with it all—it is a built-in homing device for our life’s quest. It “knows” what is required for wholeness, oneness, coherence, unity—just as, when we ask a question, we anticipate what kind of answer will satisfy our question. Likewise, it “senses” when we verge off track—just as without actually knowing the correct answer, we recognize when we’re given a “snow job” and a proposed answer does not really address our question. Following the lead of this inner guide to the extent that we are able, we would continue to change, move, and grow until we reached the fullness of the positive growth that is possible in our particular life situation.

This inner mental drive has us living in a world of understandings and love, of meanings and values, of ideas and ideals, of visions and virtues. Various named, these matters are clearly spiritual; they are not of time and space. Because of this dimension of our minds, remaining right where we are, we can transcend space and time. We can grasp abstracts—

such as $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ and $t' = t\sqrt{1-v^2/c^2}$ —which apply everywhere and always. We can have experiences—mysticism—in which we seem to attain to the unity of all things. This dimension of our minds is rightly called *spirit*. It is that because of which Genesis says that we are made in the “image and likeness” of God and the Psalmist says that we are made a “little less than the angels.” It is that because of which Saint Augustine said in prayer, “Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you.” It is that which makes us persons, in part spiritual beings, rather than brute animals or inanimate things.

Without ever explicitly talking of God or of a relationship with God, I have been describing a facet of our minds that is spiritual. If I am correct in so doing, this very aspect of our minds is the basis of human spirituality. Because of it we know wonder and awe, we question our existence, we contemplate the stars, we reach out in love—and anticipating the answer to our every question and projecting the fulfillment to our deepest longings, we conceive of God. The human spirit is the real foundation of all spirituality. Theological considerations are secondary; they are derivative.

To the extent that we allow the human spirit to guide our living, to the extent that we integrate its urgings ever more into the very structure of our being, we grow spiritually; we become more spiritual. However, this self-transcending dimension is not all there is to our minds. There is also psyche. It supports the out going spirit; it “houses” the spirit. But by the same token, the psyche also limits the spirit.

The greatest obstacle to our spiritual growth is ourselves. Although our spirits would soar, facets of our minds prevent such self-transcendence. For reasons also built into our being, we cannot be fully open-minded, we limit our wonder and awe, we fear to strike out on new adventures, we selfishly attend only to ourselves. Our self-limiting self-defense restricts our potential for unlimited growth.

Psychologists and counselors work to free up the limiting aspects of the self. These professionals help us heal our past hurts, give up festering resentments, enhance interpersonal relationships, put aside counter productive defenses. The focus of such healing is emotions, memories, images, and habits of personality. All these make up what Lonergan calls *psyche*.

Hence, there is a tug and pull inside of us. The urge to grow and the urge to stagnate are at war within us—perhaps like the “spirit” and “flesh”

about which Saint Paul wrote. The goal of growth is to integrate these inner forces and to let spirit take the lead until, through repeated self-adjustment, our whole being—body, psyche, and spirit—moves harmoniously in one direction. Such is the path of spiritual growth. Understood from a psychological point of view—that is, a humanistic or naturalistic, not yet a theological, point of view—spiritual growth results via the process of integration of the human spirit.

THE MECHANISM OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Now it comes clear what a pause in routine has to do with spiritual growth. It is sometimes useful to break out of our routinized world in order to allow our spirits to take the lead. This is not a matter of going on retreat so as to allow God into our lives—as if God were not already always operating through natural causes in and around us and, as Christianity would add, through the supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit, who has been poured into our hearts. On my understanding, spirituality is, rather, first and foremost a commitment to releasing the self-transcending human spirit that is ever already part of our own wondrous being. Accordingly, like meditative practice, sex can also be a path toward personal—and, therefore, spiritual—integration. By moving us out of our workaday world and into a more creative mental space, like meditation, sexual experiences can foster the transformation of the psyche. Such psychological healing is the God-given mechanism of spiritual growth.

Whereas a former age emphasized opposition between body and spirit, contemporary psychological awareness emphasizes integration—because it enhances humanity, and iron-willed suppression does not. This psychological lesson is sure. Pressure-cooker-like, bottled-up feelings and inclinations inevitably break out; but with respectful attention, inner forces can be unearthed, understood, and responsibly channeled into pathways of personal growth. Thus, instead of attempting to sequester sex, to restrict, control, and restrain it, our age would recognize sexual diversity and in each case help body, psyche, and spirit enter into a unique, life-enhancing partnership. Instead of conceiving the spiritual ideal to be escape from the physical body and world, our age would find spiritual growth through personal fulfillment in the body—in a life of wonder, awe, honesty, gratitude, love, service, and good will. The other-worldly spirituality of a former age is today giving way to “incarnational spirituality,” a this-worldly

path of wholeness and integration. Granted that one facet of human wholeness is the human spirit, personal integration entails ipso facto increasing actualization of our spiritual potential. Rather than oppose sex, contemporary emphasis would use sex to elicit and integrate this potential. This effect can occur on two levels: bodily and psychic.

BODILY ACCESSES TO THE SPIRIT

Tibetan Buddhism has long used physical sexual arousal to achieve transcendent experiences. We know this tradition as Tantric sex. In our own society interest in “erotic massage” is popularizing this same approach. It uses full-body massage, including sexual stimulation but without orgasm, to induce intense and prolonged states of physiological arousal. Especially when accompanied by deep-breathing exercises, this arousal can induce profound altered states of consciousness, which, like psychedelic drugs used religiously or psychotherapeutically, facilitate the restructuring of the psyche. Similar reports are made about karezza, prolonged non-orgasmic copulation, which was pioneered in the Oneida Colony and later popularized by Dr. Alice Stockman. Even solo sex, often surprisingly, elicits images, memories, and longings that offer new options for life. In humans, for whom the brain is the largest sex organ, orgasm is inseparably linked to the workings of the mind.

Because the body is the foundation of the psyche, any sexual arousal loosens up the psyche. The relaxation that sexual arousal requires frees up the mind. Fantasy routinely accompanies sexual arousal: images, memories, and emotions rise up out of the psyche. This shake-up of the psyche opens the way to personal transformation. Thus, sexual arousal can serve as an access to the spirit through the body—just as other, more standard, body-centered spiritual practices do, such as fasting, sleep deprivation, yoga, ritual postures, movement, and sacramental intoxicants.

PSYCHIC ACCESSES TO THE SPIRIT

A passing sexual encounter can sometimes be a beneficial experience—the legendary weekend tryst that leaves both parties grateful for each another and restored to faith in life. Still, on the level of psyche, sexual arousal has its most powerful effect when coupled with romance and ongoing relationship.

The emotional power of relationships is legendary. Lovers interminably challenge each other as they jog to and fro in a dance of on going compromises and adjustments, some steps welcomed and others resisted. Sometimes the power of interpersonal relationships can be explosive; but, to some extent in every case, they pry open the psyche. Falling in love and being in love are exciting and disrupting experiences. When people are in love, from their psyches come pouring out memories, joys, and fears—as well as hopes and schemes: the dreams and promises of lovers, the meanings and values, the ideas and ideals that are the hallmarks of the human spirit. This psychic upheaval turns over rich mental soil and makes way for new growth. With the breakdown of habitual patterns of behavior and response comes the possibility of reconfiguring the self in a healthier form. In this sense people in loving relationships are “good for each other.”

Sex can be used to facilitate self-transcendent experience. Having sex seduces lovers into dreaming dreams and making promises: Human sex engages the psyche, which, in turn, releases the human spirit.

Bringing a purified mind to sex also transforms sex itself. Therefore, compared to the unaware, people who meditate regularly can be more personally engaged in a sexual encounter. They can approach a partner with clarity of focus, knowing why they are there; with intensity of action, being fully present to every movement, touch, and gesture; with emotional attunement, flowing in synch with the partner; with responsiveness of presence, attending spontaneously to the other; and with profound identification, finding themselves in the other and the other in themselves.

At the same time that the regular meditator brings a richer self to the sexual encounter, the bodily and psychic effects of the encounter also further intensify the meditator’s personal presence. This reciprocity creates a snowballing effect. Multiple systems conspire to increase personal—and now interpersonal—integration. Bodies, psyches, and spirits flow in the transcending, ever-renewing course that is determined by the open-ended dynamism of the human spirit itself. A unitive experience—a sense of oneness with oneself, the other, and the universe—may sometimes result. This is to say, in sexual sharing or in reflection on it, one can know a moment of mystical ecstasy. As does every “religious experience,” this moment helps to further transform the psyche, opening onto the possibility

of still further experiences of self-transformation. In this fashion, loving sex can become a path to spiritual fulfillment.

THE IDEAL AND THE REAL IN PERSPECTIVE

However, my down-to-earth sense of life requires that I add a qualification. It must be recalled that most often sex is a rather prosaic event. People usually end up enjoying sex not because it can open the door to mysticism but for this or that more mundane reason. As with spirituality itself, we must be careful not to idealize sex. It is often less than it is cracked up to be. Sex is, after all, a human affair, and, more often than not, human affairs fall into the gray range, not into black or white.

Be that as it may, sex and spirituality can be integrated. They can mutually enhance each other. However, as the close relationship between sexuality and spirituality becomes a topic of popular discussion, misleading oversimplifications emerge. I explained the inherent relationship of sexuality to spirituality on the basis of a facet of our human makeup—namely, the open-ended, self-transcending, dynamic, and normatively structured human spirit. Granted this understanding, not every sexual encounter is spiritually useful. In itself, of course, as sheer titillation, sex has a magic of its own. But this merely physical and emotional excitement is not the self-transcending wonder of the human spirit. Not just any sexual arousal leads to spiritual fulfillment.

Drugs can induce spiritually useful altered states of consciousness, and many indigenous religious rituals—not to mention Christianity's use of communion wine on an empty stomach—utilize psychedelics for this purpose; but people also use drugs on the street and end up in enslaving addictions. Similarly, sex can be used for spiritual growth, but it can also be used for escapism. In its own way sex can also become an addiction. It would be a compounded illusion to believe that an insatiable pursuit of sex has spiritual growth as its motive or its likely result.

The spiritual path follows a fine line. It is the narrow gate of which Jesus spoke, the razor edge that the bodhisattva must walk. If a former age fell off the edge into an other-worldly extreme, advocat-

ing a spiritual fulfillment that required the denial of sex, our own age tends to fall off the edge into a this-worldly extreme, ignoring the spiritual and touting the value of physical pleasure. Finding and expressing a balance is not easy to do. But worse than missing the balance is to not even attempt to find it. Integration of sexuality and spirituality may call for some experimentation, and along the way one may make some mistakes. One only hopes that we all have the good sense not to make irreparable mistakes—such as unwanted pregnancies, incurable sexually transmitted diseases, broken hearts, or scandalous betrayals of solemn commitments. I treat the integration of sexuality and spirituality in detail in *Sex and the Sacred*.

THE INTEGRATION OF SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is a quest. Composed of body, psyche, and spirit, we live pulled in many directions. The challenge each day is to pursue a new balance as life inevitably changes and moves on. The key to the balance is attunement to our own spirit, for the spirit holds a vision of unity, an orientation toward transcendence, and a fountain of wisdom that are beyond our deliberate control.

For that very reason—because our own spirit seems to operate from beyond ourselves, because we are more than our small, conceptualized selves—people tend to attribute spiritual experiences to things outside of themselves, most commonly, to “God.” I have attributed spirituality to an aspect of our own beings. Properly understood, this approach leads to no solipsism, selfishness, selfism, godless humanism, atheistic naturalism, or myopic pettiness—as critics allege—for our spirits are essentially outgoing, geared to the universe, oriented to all that is true and good. Fidelity to the human spirit could not but lead godward.

One advantage of this approach is that it easily explains the close relationship between spirituality and sexuality—and many other facets of human living, as well. Another advantage is that it counters the centuries-long embarrassment of Christianity—the religion that believes God became flesh but has treated the flesh as unworthy.

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Black Church Homophobia: What to Do About It?

By Kelly Brown Douglas

The issue of sexuality, especially non-hetero expressions of sexuality, is a complex matter within the Black Church community. Even with all of their diversity, Black Church people are regarded as strikingly similar in their attitudes toward non-heterosexual sexualities. They are viewed as not simply homophobic but more homophobic than other populations of society.

There is probably no issue that better highlights Black Church views toward non-hetero sexuality than that of same-sex marriages. A recent Pew study indicated that the Black Church community was more opposed to these marriages than other communities. The study cited 64 percent of African Americans opposing same-sex marriages, a percentage that had held steady for several years, while the overall population had become less opposed to these marriages (from 41 percent in 1996 to 30 percent in 2003).¹

The Black Church community's obstinate stance in regard to issues surrounding gay and lesbian rights is most striking when one considers both the historical black struggle for social equality and the Black Church's prominent role within that struggle. It appears inconsistent, if not hypocritical, for the Black Church to be in the forefront of racial justice concerns, yet resistant, if not repressive, when it comes to the rights of non-heterosexual persons. How are we to account for this closed-mindedness when it comes to non-hetero expressions of sexuality? Is it possible to move the Black Church community toward a more equitable view?

What must first be appreciated is the Black Church's heterogeneous character. The Black Church community is not a monolithic reality. This Church is a disparate collective of churches that reflect the diversity of the black community itself. These churches are diversified by origin, denomination, doctrine, worshiping culture, spiritual ethos, class, size, and other less obvious factors. They may be within white denominational structures or

independent of them. They can reflect congregational, connectional, or episcopal polities. They can be urban, suburban, or rural. They range in size and structure from storefronts to mega-churches. Yet, as disparate as black churches are, they share a common history and play a unique role in black life, both of which attest to their collective identity as the Black Church. In short, black churches emerged as a fundamental part of black peoples' active resistance to dehumanizing white racist oppression, even as they have played a central role in black people's struggle for life and freedom.

Moreover, while this essay focuses on the prevalent and pervasive homophobic sentiment of the Black Church, it recognizes that there are various black churches with more liberating and progressive views toward sexual expression and even same-sex marriages. One such prominent black church is Covenant Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., with co-pastors Christine Wiley and Dennis Wiley. This church not only welcomes gay and lesbian persons, but its pastors also perform same-sex blessings.²

I must also clarify the vantage point from which I speak. I am a black female Episcopal priest who also claims my voice as a womanist theologian. Thus, I represent that aspect of the Black Church community that is a part of a white denominational system. As a black Episcopalian, however, my story of faith is inextricably linked to the story of Absalom Jones, a former slave, co-founder of the Free African Society, co-initiator of the independent Black Church movement (along with Richard Allen), and the first black Episcopal priest. Jones signifies the persis-



tent black presence within the Episcopal church that constantly advocates for racial justice within the denomination and whose primary identification is with the wider black community in the struggle against white racism.

Furthermore, even though the denominational system of which I am a part might be considered more progressive in its views toward non-heterosexuals—as it allows for the blessing of same-sex unions, ordains self-identified non-heterosexual persons, and recently consecrated a gay bishop (though this latter act has in fact divided the worldwide Anglican communion). The black Episcopal community with which I identify tends to mirror the prevailing attitudes of the wider Black Church community.³ While there are black Episcopal voices that are supportive of gay and lesbian rights within the church, there are also significant black voices that are not. Interestingly, the most strident opposition to the recent consecration of a gay bishop has been from the African continent, suggesting perhaps a consistency of passion throughout the African diaspora when it comes to non-heterosexual sexualities.⁴ For instance, during a recent address to a national gathering of black Episcopal clergy, those who responded most harshly to my lecture on sexuality were several clergymen from the African continent. They were quite clear that homoeroticism was something that the “African” continent could simply not tolerate. Even more telling, perhaps, were the responses from the African American clergy—they were conspicuously silent, as if refusing to engage such a topic. Nonetheless, it is from out of and to the wider black faith community, of which black Episcopalians are a part, that I speak.

Denominational affiliation notwithstanding, my womanist identity further compels me to speak about matters of sexual injustice. As a womanist theologian I am “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.”⁵ I am, therefore, obliged to speak to any form of injustice whether it is present within the black community or in the wider society. More specifically, womanist scholars are compelled by our very womanist identity to interrogate homophobic attitudes and heterosexist systems and structures as they exist within the Black Church community in an effort to “debunk” and dismantle them.⁶ These very attitudes and systems have certainly infringed upon the lives of many black women and men. They have most notably contributed to the Black Church community’s slow response to the HIV/AIDS crisis that now ravages the black community.⁷ Thus, if for no other reason, the womanist commitment to “survival

and wholeness” compels a discerning theological response to issues of sexuality.

Womanist theologians, therefore, cannot ignore that aspect of the womanist definition that states that a “womanist loves other women sexually and/or non-sexually.”⁸ It is the inherent task of those of us who claim our voice as womanist theologians to work toward creating a church and community where non-heterosexual persons are able to love themselves and those whom they choose to love without social, political, or ecclesiastical penalty so that they, along with all other black men and women, may enjoy life and “wholeness.” It is from out of my commitment as a womanist theologian that I address the homophobia/heterosexism of the Black Church community. Let us now examine the complex nature of homophobia/heterosexism within the Black Church community as it has been most recently manifest in the debate surrounding same-sex marriages.

As central as the Bible is to the black faith tradition, there is another key element of black faith that also informs black people’s responses to homoeroticism: that which I refer to as a *platonized theology* and what black novelist James Baldwin has aptly described as “Protestant Puritanism.” Platonized theology shapes an influential strand of the Christian tradition. This theology notably places the body in an antagonistic relationship with the soul. The soul is divinized while the body is demonized. The soul is revered as the key to salvation. The body is condemned as a source of sin. The locus of bodily sin is human passion—that is, sexual pleasure. This “sacred” disdain for the sexual body pervades the Christian theological tradition, particularly as it has given way to a definite sexual ethic. Specifically, platonized Christianity advocates a dualistic sexual ethic. That is, it suggests only two ways in which to engage sexual activity, one tolerable, not inherently sinful, and the other intolerable, and, therefore, sinful. Procreative use is tolerably good; non-procreative use is intolerably evil. Characteristic of platonized Christianity, a third possibility is not permitted. A platonized sexual ethic does not allow for sexual activity to be an expression of an intimate, loving relationship. Platonized Christianity severs intimate sexuality from loving relationality.

Platonized Christianity became an influential part of the black faith tradition during the eighteenth-century religious revivals. During these revivals a significant population of black men and women were converted to Evangelical Protestant thought, the principle conduit of platonized Christianity in America. Black church people most affected by this

evangelical tradition tend to affirm the assertions of Paul that one should “make no provision for flesh,” but if one must engage in sexual behavior, “it is better to marry than to burn.” At the same time, reflecting this platonized tradition, black church people tend to view homoerotic sexuality as lustful, sinful behavior. Since it is not viewed as procreative, it is not considered a “proper” form of sexual expression and thus is not seen as deserving the shelter of marriage. In this respect, black church people’s concept of a hyper-proper sexuality is driven not simply by white patriarchal heterosexist norms, but most significantly by a platonized Christian theology—though the two narratives coincide when it comes to homosexuality and same sex marriages.

It is also interesting to note that these narratives also coincide when it comes to women. Both define women’s sexuality in terms of their capacity to procreate, thus in relation to men. Such a view ostensibly denies black women the possibility of non-procreative and hence non-male centered sexual expression. Such recognition once again compels a womanist response. Just as white patriarchal heterosexist social narratives and platonized theology disavow the propriety of non-heterosexual expressions of sexuality, so also do they work together to uphold the center of patriarchal power: a heterosexual male-centered family where women’s primary role is to procreate or at least to support the male-centered family. There was no greater example of this insidious interplay between patriarchal and heterosexist narratives than a sermon given by a prominent black pastor in Washington D.C. From his Sunday pulpit, he vulgarly attacked homosexual persons, particularly lesbians. He argued that black lesbianism is a result of strong black women who believe that they can survive without a man (specifically black women who earn more than their husbands). The implications were clear: inasmuch as black women defined themselves independently of black men they were in danger of becoming lesbians and they were certainly a threat to the black family—hence independent black women needed to be subdued.

More to the point, however, black church people’s vehement responses to same-sex marriage as well as homosexuality reflects a *theo-historical dynamic* that is grounded in a platonized theology and propelled by a history of racial sexualized oppression. James Baldwin puts it best when he says:

It is very important to remember what it means to be born in a Protestant Puritan country, with all the taboos placed on the flesh, and have at the same time in this country such a vivid example of a decent pagan imagination and the sexual liberty with which

white people invest Negroes—and then penalize them for . . . It’s a guilt about the flesh. In this country the Negro pays for that guilt which white people have about flesh.”

And indeed black people do pay for that guilt, at least in their views toward sexuality. With this understanding we can now answer what it is that has compelled the Black Church community to respond with such passion regarding same-sex marriages.

The issue of same-sex marriages is considered a direct affront to black people’s sense of struggle, experience of oppression, and faith tradition. As such this issue exposes the social, historical, and most importantly theological factors that coalesce to provide a “perfect storm” for bringing to the surface prevailing black attitudes toward non-heterosexuality. While homophobia and heterosexism may be the result of this storm of issues, it is a homophobia and heterosexism born from the struggle of being black in a society hostile to black humanity. Nevertheless, both are still a problem because they limit the life options of non-heterosexual women and men, and, perhaps even more sinfully, suborns violence against them. So, while we may appreciate the complexity of black homophobia and heterosexism, it still must be addressed and hence eradicated. Left to answer is how to move the Black Church in the direction of becoming a more equitable and just community in regard to matters of women and non-heterosexuality.

Before I continue further, I must offer a caveat. What I will now briefly put forward reflects only my preliminary thoughts as I move toward a fuller understanding of the issue of same-sex marriage and what it might mean in regard to the Black Church community. Thus, what follows are at this point for me theological signposts that compel further theological reflection.

The first signposts are found in black people’s own historical experience with contested marriages. To reiterate, the black enslaved were routinely denied the privilege to marry. Marriage was considered a right granted to human beings capable of loving relationships. Because black people were considered less than human, that is, beastly chattel, they were thought incapable of such loving relationality. Consequently, they typically were not granted the right to marry. Yet, despite the hardships and brutality associated with doing so, enslaved men and women routinely risked both life and freedom in order to marry the one they loved. The question is why? What was it that was so significant about the marriage union that compelled enslaved men and women to pursue it despite the oppressive condi-

tions that mitigated against it? The answer is perhaps found in the words of black novelist William Wells Brown. In his nineteenth-century novel *Clotel*, Brown says this of the enslaved determination to be married:

Although marriage . . . is a matter which the slaveholders do not think is of any importance . . . it would be doing that degraded class an injustice, not to acknowledge that many of them regard marriage as a sacred obligation and show a willingness to obey the commands of God on this subject. Marriage is, indeed, the first and most important institution of human existence . . . It is the most intimate covenant of heart formed among mankind [*sic*]; and for many persons the only relation in which they feel the true sentiments of humanity.⁹

Two things immediately stand out in Brown's observations regarding the enslaved views of marriage. First, black people's tenacity to be "married" despite the obstacles imposed by the rule of slavery, witnessed not primarily to their need to conform to white cultural/social conventions, but rather to their desire to affirm before God and community the sanctity of their intimate relationships. At stake was not so much the propriety of their marriages as the sacredness of their loving relationships. Such an emphasis on the sacredness of relationships was perhaps informed by an African theological heritage that stressed the theological significance of maintaining loving harmonious relationship with one another as a reflection if not a response to the harmonious relationship that God maintains with all of creation. To be sure, the enslaved determination to be married suggests the theological foundation for discerning the Church's response to same-sex marriages is the sanctity of *loving relationality*.

Any appreciation for what it means for human beings to be created in the image of God and thereby to reflect that image must begin with the imperative to engage in loving relationship with one another. The Genesis creation narrative puts it thus: "So God created humankind in [God's'] image, in the image of God [God] created them male and female [God] created them" (Genesis 1:27). What is made clear in this creation account is that human beings are not meant to live in solitary existence, but to live relationally. In this regard, the emphasis is not on the biological creation of male and female but on the existential creation of human relationship. What is made clear in the creation of male and female is that the fullness of one's humanity is to be found in loving relationship. Perhaps that which the Church

must fundamentally affirm, is that which many enslaved men and women apparently understood: the sacredness of loving relationality. The theological imperative of human creation is not for men and women to categorically conform to social/historical contrivances of marriage but for them to adhere to what it means to be *imago Dei*. Given this, the Church has an absolute obligation to nurture and to provide a space for loving relationality, regardless of its sexual identity.

The second issue that stands out in Brown's observation concerning enslaved responses to marriage is his emphasis on their humanity. Clearly, marriage for the enslaved was a marker of their very humanity. As Brown put it, "it is . . . the only relation in which they feel the true sentiments of their humanity." The implication for the Black Church community is clear. If Black Church people are to take seriously the meaning of their own history of struggle for their humanity, particularly as that struggle was informed by their faith, then they must realize the justness of non-heterosexual women's and men's struggle for full affirmation of their humanity. Most importantly, as Black Church people witness to a God who enters into *compassionate solidarity* with the black oppressed in the struggle for their humanity. Just as God has revealed God's self on the side of black people as they strive toward freedom and justice, so is God on the side of non-heterosexuals as they do the same. Rev. Kelvin Calloway, pastor of the Second A.M.E. Church in Los Angeles, perhaps best described the mandate for the Black Church when he said, "Oppression is oppression is oppression . . . Just because we're not the ones who are being oppressed now, do we not stand with those oppressed now? This is the biblical mandate. That's what Jesus is all about."

In this regard, black people's demand that those in the gay and lesbian struggle for justice respect their history of struggle—that is, the significance of the civil rights movement—does not mitigate the need for the Black Church community to recognize the parallels between white cultural contempt for them and heterosexist contempt for non-heterosexual persons. Just as white racist culture has historically refused to admit the humanity of black women and men, and thus has variously denied that black people are created in the image of God, so, too, does heterosexist culture repudiate the humanity of non-heterosexual men and women and thereby implicitly disavow that they, as non-heterosexuals, are created in the image of God. Once again, Black Church people must recognize the similarity between white racism and heterosexism, even as heterosexism is

perpetuated within the black community itself. It is in this way that, even though black people may be unable to acknowledge the gay and lesbian struggle as a civil rights issue, they must admit it as a “human rights” issue. As such, the Black Church community is obliged by its own faith affirmations to affirm the divine worth and sacred rights accorded to all human beings: life, dignity, and the freedom to live out their full potential as divinely created beings. Most significantly, again in accordance with black people’s own history of struggle, these sacred rights include the privilege to marry.

Black people must reclaim their own faith heritage that maintains the sanctity of the body and thereby recognizes that true salvation is not simply about what happens to the soul, but also what happens to the body. In other words, there is a significant black faith tradition that has historically recognized that soul salvation means nothing less than bodily freedom. This is what pulsates through the sung testimony of the enslaved found in the spirituals. As we know, the spirituals maintained in their hidden and coded language the connection between heavenly salvation and earthly freedom. That is, enslaved men and women testified in song to the urgency to save their souls while simultaneously singing about the urgent need to free their bodies. The spirituals point to a faith tradition that did not readily admit soul/body splits but maintained the inextricable connection between the two. Such a tradition suggests a response to a platonized Protestant Puritan tradition that is characterized by body/soul splits. To be sure, it is only in reclaiming its own non-platonized religious heritage that I believe that the Black Church will become more consistent and equitable in responses to matters of sexuality.

The problem of homophobia/heterosexism, particularly same-sex marriages, within the Black Church community is a complicated one. Yet, regardless of the complexity of the matter, it is one that the Black Church must address. It is, to be sure, time for the Black Church to truly live into its justice affirming social, political, historical, and theological tradition, and, therefore, to eradicate any manifestation of the sin of homophobia/heterosexism from its very midst.

Notes

- 1 This study is cited by Religious Tolerance.org: Longitudinal U.S. Public Opinion Polls Same-Sex

- Marriage and Civil Unions (religious tolerance.org/hom_poll5.htm) 4. It should be noted that various polls are constantly being conducted with some suggesting that the gap in opinion between that of the overall population and that of African Americans is closing. For instance, a study later in November 2003 revealed that opposition to same-sex marriage within the general population had grown to 59 percent, even as the African American population remained steady at about 60 percent. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Religious Beliefs Underpin Opposition to Homosexuality,” November 2003 (<http://people-press.org/reports/display7.php3?PageID=765>; accessed June 28, 2005).
- 2 This church was featured on the July 16, 2004 episode of *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, (episode 746) titled “Black Churches and Gay Marriage.” Covenant was highlighted as a church that not only welcomes gay and lesbian persons but also performs same-sex marriage blessings.
- 3 In November 2003 Gene Robinson, an openly gay priest, was consecrated as ninth Episcopal Diocesan Bishop of New Hampshire.
- 4 It should be noted that at the Third International Conference on Afro-Anglicanism held in Toronto, Canada, from July 20 to 27, 2005, an accord was agreed upon that addressed, among several issues, the topic of human sexuality. In regard to sexuality the accord states: “We have wrestled with deep sincerity with the complex issues of human sexuality. . . . The vast differences of approach have been evident in our dialogue. Nevertheless, we have not departed from the sacred truths of our common humanity. We have all been created in God’s image. God’s compassion and love are extended to all whom God has created. . . . We yearn together for the day when the human body will become the symbol, and source, and sacrament of unity among us and no longer a cause of division or an instrument of strife.”
- 5 See Alice Walker’s four-part definition in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi–xii.
- 6 Womanist theologian Katie G. Cannon coined this term, “debunk,” as she has spoken on various occasions of the womanist task to “debunk” the methods and notions of white patriarchal ethical and theological systems.
- 7 See my discussion of this in *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll and New York: Orbis Books, 1999).
- 8 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, xi.
- 9 William Wells Brown, *Clotel or the President’s Daughter: A Narrative of a Slave’s Life in the United States* (1853), (St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 83.

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Embracing the Erotic: The Church's Unfinished Sexual Revolution

By James B. Nelson '57 M.Div, '62 Ph.D.

A fellow from my hometown, Lake Wobegone, Minnesota, tells wonderful stories. One of Garrison's tales concerns the lone cowboy riding across the range, that beautiful open country out where (as the old song says) the deer and the antelope play. The cowboy approaches a herd of buffalo, dismounts, walks up to one of the animals, looks it over, and says: "Yuk! Just look at you. Look at that matted hair, those bloodshot eyes, that foul breath. Yuk!" Then the cowboy mounts his horse and rides off into the sunset.

The following text is an excerpt from a series of lectures offered by Dr. Nelson for the Foundation for Contemporary Theology in Houston, Texas.

The buffalo thinks for a moment, then turns to another buffalo and says, "You know, we seldom hear that kind of thing around here. But I think I've just heard a discouraging word."

Though we have been consciously working on these sexuality issues in our churches for at least three decades now, we still hear discouraging words. As in the political scene, so also in the religious; when sexual issues arise, too often the anxieties and strident voices rise as well. Still fearful of the divisiveness of such matters in a time of membership attrition, any religious bodies have been virtually paralyzed about sexuality.

Thankfully, there is a brighter side to the picture. Prodded by feminist prophets, spurred by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender prophets, churches have at least begun to challenge the sexism, the heterosexism, and the homophobia by which some have tried to control the lives and bodies of all those who seem different from them. We have cracked open the doors on the hidden scandals of sexual abuse. We have begun to question the notions of gender complementarity, of dominant/submissive patterns of sexuality, of penis-in-vagina intercourse as the only good and true sexual act, of the belief

that we can measure the morality of sexual acts by their external form instead of by their relational quality, of the belief that we can reduce all sexual ethics to an ethics of marriage, and, yes, we have begun to question the exclusion of eros from the spiritual life.

These have been our beginnings. But with each passing year the sexuality issues seem to become more complex. The global HIV-AIDS pandemic rolls on; gays and lesbians still suffer from vicious hate crimes; clergy are brought to ecclesiastical trials for performing same-sex unions; protection of children from ubiquitous pornography and protection of free speech remain an unresolved tension; sexual abuse on an unimagined scale rocks portions of the Church; abortion is increasingly restricted and abortion providers become targets of violence; transsexual and intersexual medical developments raise new questions about gender; same-sex unions, adoptions, and benefits for domestic partners are divisive political issues. The list goes on and on. Is there any doubt that our sexual agenda is confusing, unsettled, unfinished?

Even when we in the churches have not handled sexuality well, perhaps we have learned this: if it



can generate such emotional intensity and symbolic weight, our sexuality must be important, indeed. But how important?

It is a good question, but too narrow. Sex is not the same as sexuality. “Genitality” (to use the academic word) or “having sex” (in common parlance) is only part of sexuality — an important part for many of us, but a relatively small part.

Sexuality may or may not involve genital expression. Celibate people are still sexual. Sexuality has to do with our capacity for procreation and parenting, to be sure. But it is much more. Our sexuality embraces our embodied ways of being in the world as female and male, our differing gender meanings, our varied orientations, our deep desires for sensuous touch with the world, our hungers for physical and emotional intimacy. Genitally active or celibate, single or paired, young or old, living with disability or temporarily able-bodied, by the goodness of God we are all sexual beings from birth to death.

The word *sexuality* has a Latin root, the verb *secare*, meaning to cut off, to sever, to disconnect from the whole. Likewise, our experience as sexual creatures has at its core a powerful energy and an aching longing to connect.

Looking with eyes of faith, I believe human sexuality is God’s way of calling us out of separation and loneliness into communication and communion. Indeed, this sexuality that has such power in our lives—the source of such anxiety, such joy, such yearning, such shame, such curiosity—must be very close to the center of things.

And what is *eros*? Though culture often seems to say so, the erotic is not pornographic, X-rated, exploitive sex. Nor is *eros* simply lust, for lust is egoistic obsession with what we want to possess for our own gratification. Further, though deeply connected to our sexuality, *eros* is not simply genital urges and feelings.

It is, Paul Tillich rightly saw, the moving power of life, the hunger for connection, the passion for reunion. *Eros* is that dimension of our love born of desire. It is our yearning for fulfillment. Sensual, bodily, juicy in its energy, *eros* is open to feeling and passion. It seeks the integration of body and spirit, of human and divine. It is love that is constantly searching for reunion.

So, as St. Augustine taught us (in one of his good moments, and he *did* have a lot of those), the problem is not to uproot or transcend desire — for desire is an essential mark of our humanity and of our belonging to God. Rather, the problem is to order all objects of our desire in accord with their

true relation to God, in whom alone our restless hearts will find satisfaction and fulfillment.

But as with sexuality itself, so also with the erotic love that is at its center, *eros*, theologians typically have had a tough time. In the 1930s, Swedish theologian and bishop Anders Nygren wrote an enormously influential book, *Agape and Eros*, which —unfortunately—powerfully influenced much theology ever since. Nygren set the two loves in radical opposition to each other, and *eros* got the worst of it. Characterized (or rather caricatured) as egocentric, narcissistic, and self-seeking, *eros* was depicted as that love which was to be defeated by self-giving, sacrificial *agape*.

But enormous theological and practical problems come with the denigration of *eros*. The integration of sexuality and spirituality becomes forever problematic, for, in spite of an incarnationalist faith, the body remains theologically suspect and hence so does passion.

Furthermore, self-love continues to be confused with egoistic narcissism, and self-effacing behavior is baptized (especially for the sexually marginalized). Those persons who appear to symbolize the body most fully—women, gay men and lesbians, transgendered persons, persons of color—are especially stigmatized by the rejection of the erotic.

Still further, the denial of the erotic is closely linked to the confused state of sexual pleasure in the Christian life. Sexual pleasure is believed to be either inherently dangerous (as St. Augustine taught) or justified only as a means to a higher end — procreation (as St. Thomas believed). In either case, sexual pleasure is darkly suspect.

But in the end, any spirituality that lacks erotic energy becomes lifeless and cold. The pervasive fear of sex and passion, so common in our churches, is certainly linked with the difficulty many Christians have in sustaining a passion for justice.¹

For glimpses of a better erotic future for the Church, let us turn to a familiar story that many in the Christian community tell about God—the mystery of Christmas, Lent, and Easter—the Christic drama in three acts: incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

INCARNATION

That stunning prologue to the Fourth Gospel begins, “In the beginning was the Word...” The Word—God’s own creative meaning and energy. And when the Word came to dwell with us, it became —what? A book? A creed? A theological system? A

code of morality? No. To the everlasting embarrassment of all dualistic piety, it became flesh — full of grace and truth. Warm-blooded sexual flesh. And it still does. When we meet God in and through our sensuous, urinating, defecating, menstruating, lubricating, orgasmic, ejaculating, youthful, aging, frail, vigorous, hungry, and vulnerable human flesh, there is incarnation.

The opening words of John's gospel doubtless shocked its first readers, steeped in the belief that flesh was the root cause of the world's impurity. And now the gospel writer is telling them that God was alive in a radically revealing way in this fleshly, fully human life of an ex-carpenter-turned-itinerant rabbi. It was a startling claim. And it still is. For our sexual dis-ease breeds a bodily distrust that brings out the docetist in us and makes the incarnation into doctrine but not flesh. You may recall how Søren Kierkegaard, after courting Regina for years and finally winning her promise to marry him, suddenly jilted her. His explanation? He had come to realize that his love for her would distract him from a "higher" love for God. It took a later and more incarnationalist theologian (Jewish in faith), Martin Buber, to say of the Dane's decision, "That is sublimely to misunderstand God. Creation is not a hurdle on the road to God, it is the road itself." We are destined to come to God through our earthly loves, not in spite of them.²

Dealing with incarnation, most Christian theologians (like Kierkegaard) have tastefully or fearfully ignored Jesus' sexuality — and hence ours. So let another good Jewish thinker startle us. This one is not a professional theologian but an art historian, Leo Steinberg. His lavishly illustrated book has an unusual title: *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*.³

Steinberg's point? For a thousand years of Christian art, Jesus' sexuality was disregarded. Paintings and sculpture attempted to portray only his divinity. Then came the Renaissance. Now devout Christian artists from Flanders to Florence removed the drapery from Jesus' figure and purposely exposed his genitals, even drawing attention to them. What happened in this Renaissance art has been tactfully overlooked for the past five hundred years — that is the "modern oblivion."

These were devout Renaissance artists, neither trying to shock nor to blaspheme. They were trying to make theological statements. For one, they were saying that Jesus' chastity was real and valid. Sexual abstinence without vigorous sexual capacity is an empty lesson. Beyond that, the shamelessness of

exposing Jesus' genitals points back to our original innocence (as in Eden, naked and without shame) and points forward to our redemption from sin and sexual shame. Most fundamentally, the focus on the bodily sexuality of Jesus demonstrates the thoroughness and completeness of the incarnation: God's revelation of sacred presence in and through our bodily life. And that is good gospel news. The issue here is not Jesus' maleness. It is the fullness of his humanity, including his fully sexual humanity.

Incarnation. The goodness of God-revealing flesh. And how critical it is to name it so Baby Suggs knew that. You may remember Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, and Baby Suggs, the grandmother and holy woman of that nineteenth-century black family who had escaped from slavery. As she drew her people around her in the clearing in the woods each Saturday afternoon, she "told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. 'Here,' she said, 'in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it . . . You got to love it. You. . . This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved.'"

And there is Alice Walker's character in *The Color Purple* saying, "God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff that God did." Put into the more traditional words of the prayer book: "It was God's good pleasure to take on our human flesh." Incarnation happened. It still does.

CRUCIFIXION

But we still live with erotic alienation and brokenness. So, God's story moves to redemption. In the Christic drama it is *the cross*, dealing with human sin.

Now, I spent much of my life in Minnesota where folks still know about sin. After all, in Minnesota there are more Lutherans than people, so not surprisingly we call it "the guilt state." Some time ago I heard a Minneapolis standup comic, a woman in her mid-seventies, describe her experience. "Oh, I'm so Lutheran," she said, "I just can't get away from it. Recently, I went to renew my driver's license. As I stood in line waiting for my turn with the clerk, I got more and more nervous. Finally, I got to the counter, and when the clerk asked me, 'Where were you born?' I blurted out, 'I was born in sin, and in iniquity did my parents conceive me.' I'm just so Lutheran."

Yes, we are all sinners. But our sexuality as such is not sinful. In that dimension of life, it is our alienation from the erotic wholeness for which we were created and destined that is sinful.

But we've had a long religious history that has named sexual sin differently. The early Church began to name specific sexual transgressions as the premier forms of human wrongdoing, and sexuality per se became the root of human evil. I think of the early Church Fathers who saw sexual intercourse as inherently flawed because it transmitted original sin, and who called women "the gate of hell" because they saw women as essentially bodily and sexual. I think of the Church Fathers who counseled the faithful to wait until they were at least sixty before reading the Song of Solomon so that it would not inflame the passions.

Nevertheless, decent theology has always known that sin is not basically an act (something we do), it is fundamentally a condition (a condition of alienation, estrangement). It is out of that prior state of alienation that destructive acts arise. That is true of our sexuality. Sexual sin lies fundamentally in our estrangement from our bodies, our alienation from our intended erotic wholeness. And the terrible historic irony is that so many religious teachings about sexuality actually have increased our bodily alienation and hence deepened our sexual sin.

Can the cross help us? Ah, but there's the rub. Some atonement interpretations have contributed mightily to our sexual sickness. The notion that pain is inherently redemptive, the idea that salvation must come through the self-sacrifice of the innocent — such images of the cross have been the primary force for some women in shaping their acceptance of abuse. Those interpretations have eroticized domination and, regardless of their intent, have silenced too many women and children and gay men in midst of violence against them.

No! Instead, let us say that being formed into the Crucified One means standing *with* those who are being unjustly killed in body and spirit, standing with them for life. Let us always be clear: Jesus was killed not because he chose death but precisely because he chose life and in so doing he threatened those who were obsessed with the ways of pain and death, domination and submission.

Yet, the cross does speak, and genuinely so, of redemptive suffering. It is the powerful vulnerability of the sacred presence still entering the depths of our human pain—a divine presence we can know in our own authentic vulnerability.

The cross is about something like that. It is all about God's agapaic entering into our human pain. It is all about God's erotic yearning for reunion with us. It is all about God's redefinition of power, giving us back our bodies and our senses, yes, giving us back our lives.

RESURRECTION

So, the Christic story has moved to *resurrection*. The ancient affirmations are familiar: Christ is alive! I believe in the resurrection of the body.

Instead of seeing salvation as anti-sexual and disembodied, we are beginning to understand that whatever salvation is, it importantly involves our erotic healing — a resurrection of the body.

We hunger and thirst for that reunion. We long to put aside the remnants of a disembodied notion of salvation. We hunger to experience grace as deep and profound acceptance of our whole bodyselves. Can it happen?

The resurrection of the body takes many forms, and, as Baby Suggs said, its all about flesh, flesh that needs to be loved. Furthermore, as she said, the only grace we can have is the grace we can imagine — and name and claim. So how can we name the grace of body salvation?

We can name the goodness of bodily self-love. Though some of our religious heritage would have it otherwise, authentic self-love is not egocentrism, grasping selfishness, or narcissism — all conditions which arise from the *lack* of authentic self-love. Both Hebrew and Christian scriptures bid us to love our neighbors as ourselves, not *instead* of ourselves.

One sexual example: what about sexual self-love expressed in masturbation? Even though the nineteenth-century medical fears of consumption, blindness, and insanity are no longer with us, within our own memory a surgeon general could be dismissed for simply mentioning the subject favorably in public. But, when self-pleasuring is neither obsessive nor escapist, when it is the celebration of the gift and goodness of our own flesh, we might know yet another experience of grace. And that can be sexual healing.

It is the gift of bodily revelation that can put us in touch with an underdeveloped part of our spirituality — a path historically called the *Via Negativa*. It is not the *Via Positiva* way of climbing to the transcendent heights, but rather sinking vulnerably into the sacred depths. Not the way of fullness, but of emptiness. Not the way of striving and doing, but of letting go and just being, and knowing that I am

accepted. It leads to a different kind of power, a strength found in vulnerability. Again, body healing, body resurrection.

Indeed, the resurrection of our bodies can connect us with creation in ways that might help this fragile planet to survive. A philosopher once said, “Be careful how you *name* the world. It is that way.” Well, what is our fundamental description of the world?

The minister of my boyhood Presbyterian church had one predictable sentence he repeated in every sermon. I used to wait for it, and he never failed me. He was so fond of it that he rose up on his toes each time he pronounced it. “This is,” he would say, “a godless, sin-sick weary world, a vale of tears.” Though he could point to plenty of evidence, and so can we, is this a resurrection description? Death names the world godless. Resurrection names the world as God’s body.

Resurrection of the body. A rich symbol of many meanings, and surely it means more than individual survival. The apostle writes: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves...groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:22–23). Could there be, just could there be a connection between the redemption of our bodies and that of creation?

What if our bodies are revelations — not of disconnection but fundamentally of our deep connectedness to everything else? After all, each of us is composed of trillions of individual cells, all trying to live in harmony with one another. Our bodies are communities with the whole earth. Our bodily fluids carry the chemicals of the primeval seas, our bones have the same carbon as the ancient mountains,

our blood contains the sugar that once flowed in the sap of now fossilized trees, the nitrogen binding our bones is the same that binds nitrates to the soil. Even in — often precisely in the midst of — our diseases and bodily dysfunctions, our flesh reveals our destiny for wholeness and connection with all of creation.⁴

When we know that, we have also known in some way the resurrection of the body. And that’s pretty erotic stuff — bodies are, you know. As e.e. cummings has written:

i thank you God for most this amazing day...(i who have died am alive again today, and this is the sun’s birthday, this is the birth of life and of love and wings...)...how should tasting touching hearing seeing breathing any...human merely being doubt unimaginable You? (now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened).....

That is the rebirth of eros: the resurrection of the body.

Notes

- 1 See Marvin Ellison, “Common Decency: A New Christian Sexual Ethics,” *Christianity and Crisis*, Nov. 12, 1990, 356.
- 2 Cf. Robert McAfee Brown, *Spirituality and Liberation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 77f.
- 3 Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).
- 4 See Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *Green Paradise Lost* (Wellesley, Mass.: Roundtable Press, 1979, 1981), 58ff.

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It's About Sex...Not Homosexuality

By Dale B. Martin '88 Ph.D.

The Acts of Paul and Thecla, a second-century Christian document, relates the story of how St. Thecla became a Christian and even an apostle. As a young woman from the elite class, she is engaged to be married to a wealthy upper-class gentleman. But then Paul comes to town and preaches his gospel of sexual renunciation.

According to Paul in this early Christian document, people can be saved only by the complete renunciation of sexual activity. The resurrection is promised only to those who avoid sex entirely.

Thecla is captivated by Paul's message of salvation by asceticism—along with many other women, both old and young, and even many young men. In fact, she seems totally enamored at least with his preaching if not with himself. She announces to her mother, who is distraught with the news, that she will not get married but will instead give her life to Paul's gospel, which demands complete virginity. Thecla baptizes herself, cuts her hair short, dresses like a man, and goes off to become an androgynous, ascetic apostle of the gospel of renunciation and salvation.

I always face a challenge teaching this text to my students. They cannot understand why all the young people in the story are so captivated with the idea of *avoiding* sex. Why, given the choice, would *anyone* repudiate sex completely and freely choose instead a life of no sexual contact? How could that “gospel” convert so many? They are puzzled when they come to realize that not only was the call to asceticism compelling for the characters in the story, but that sexual renunciation was a powerful *attraction* of Christianity for many people—even, or maybe especially, *young* people—in the ancient world. What kind of “good news” is that?

Though many people nowadays—even Christians—don't know this, most early Christianity was strongly ascetic: the majority of Christians for the first many centuries of Christianity, apparently, assumed that God required the severe control, preferably the complete renunciation, of sexual relations. Along with advocating other forms of asceticism, such as fasting and prayer, early Christian leaders taught that sexual relations should be avoided if possible and indulged in only for the purposes of procreation if indulged at all. The existence of asceticism may not come as a total surprise to students. After all, they usually have heard about ancient and medieval monasticism. What they find puzzling is the fact that sexual asceticism seems to have been quite popular, at least the idea of it, among ancient Christians.

In order to explain the ancient allure of asceticism, I often start by talking about two modern phenomena: the “pill” and the women's liberation movement. Of course, complex historical changes can never be boiled down to simple causes, but one could make an argument that two things that have contributed significantly to changes in how we think about sex in the past forty years or so have been the development and increased availability of reliable birth control and the feminist movement, both of which began impacting broader society with great force in the 1970s. My undergraduates were all born in the mid- to late 1980s. They take such things for granted.



What is so important about the pill and the feminist movement? With reliable birth control, heterosexual sex has become radically decoupled, at least in the minds of most people of our culture, from procreation. And the feminist movement of the 1970s forced people to begin thinking of women as equal to men. The prior assumptions that linked sex to birth and made the sex act proper only when it embodied the hierarchy of male over female came apart beginning in the 1970s.

It comes as something of a shock to my students that things weren't always this way. I explain that in the ancient world sexual intercourse, ideologically, was always a central factor in the cycle of death. Why did human beings have sex? In order to make new human beings. And why were new human beings needed? Because the existing ones kept dying. The ancients, and still many people in other cultures, think of sex as just one cog in a wheel: sex, birth, death, decay, followed by more sex, birth, death, and decay.

This firm linkage of sex with death was even more evident in the ancient world than in the modern world, even before the pill. Because of the high mortality rate in the Greco-Roman world, especially of infants and women in childbirth, on *average* every woman who lived to childbearing age (normally considered around thirteen or fourteen in the ancient world) had to give birth *five times* simply in order for the population of the Roman empire to remain the same. Since of course many women did not have that many childbirths, many others had to have had more. Ascetic Christianity—and just about all Christianity in the ancient to medieval worlds was “ascetic”—offered people an escape from the dreaded cycle of birth and death. The key to immortality was to break the cycle of death, and the best way to do that was to stop having sex. The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and many other early Christian texts thus called Christians to deprive death of its victory by depriving themselves of sex.

Now this logic may not make a lot of sense to us modern people. But that is because sex doesn't “mean” the same thing to us as it did to ancient people. The meaning of sex has changed dramatically at different times in history. Most Christians now believe that sex is basically good, that people are “normally” happiest when they marry, have regular sexual relations with their spouse, produce children, and grow old surrounded by their family. Christians may think it is *acceptable* for some people to remain single, but it is certainly not preferable. Celibacy or singleness is seen, at least by most Protestants

but also in the dominant culture more generally, as second best if not downright tragic. But this is a view that has been held in Christianity only since the seventeenth century.

In the fourth century, Pope Siricius along with saints Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine condemned a Christian named Jovinian for heresy merely for teaching that married Christians were just as virtuous as celibate Christians. The Fathers of the Church declared that it was *heresy* to deny that celibacy was far superior to marriage. This had been the opinion certainly of the apostle Paul and maybe also of Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 7:1–7; Matthew 19:12; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 14:26). Throughout Christian history, official Christian doctrine (not just opinion) taught that sex within marriage was of inferior virtue to celibacy. This is the opposite of what most modern American Christians assume, even though those same Christians usually assume, and sometimes falsely claim, that their views of sex and marriage represent “the traditional” Christian view. No, it was only with the rise of the Puritans and others influenced by prior Catholic humanism and the Protestant Reformation that Christian teachers started saying that marriage was of equal and sometimes superior value compared to celibacy. That change in the meaning of sex and marriage was a radical reversal of sixteen centuries of Christian doctrine.

Thus a huge change in the meaning of sex and marriage came about in the seventeenth century, a change of which we are obvious heirs. But the changes of the twentieth century were huge also. Before, although Christians had reversed previous assumptions that virginity was preferable to sexual activity and that marriage was only the “lesser option” for Christians, they still assumed that the meaning of sex was defined, largely, by its role in procreation. And they assumed that the sex act enacted the proper hierarchy of God-ordained nature. The man, as the penetrator, was superior, and the woman, as the penetrated, was inferior. Homosexual sex was “unnatural” in this view because, people assumed, either a man would have to be penetrated—which was “unnatural” whether he was penetrated by a man *or a woman*—or a woman would have to be the one penetrating—again, with either a man or another woman.

With the rise of the feminist movement, even Christians began thinking of men and women as equals, the idea that femaleness itself was inferior was rejected, and the hierarchy of the sex act was replaced with the notion of egalitarian complementarity: male and female are equal and complement one

another. Thus, these days both liberal and conservative Christians tend to think of sexual intercourse as something that should take place between one man and one woman, treated equally, and that it is entirely appropriate to have sex just for the enjoyment of it. In fact, “self-help” books written by and for conservative Christians advise people on how to have a happy, joyful, “fulfilling” sex life, even when procreation is not the goal.

The problem is that Christian theology and ethical teaching have not caught up with the radical change in the “meaning of sex” that we have experienced in the past forty years. If sex isn’t just for procreation anymore, then why can’t two men or two women have sex? If the meaning of sex is basically to express love or have fun, why can’t two men or two women express their love by means of sex? If sex is best when it is between two people who treat one another equally and fairly and want to give themselves to one another, why limit that to only a male-female couple?

The debate that currently rages over homosexuality is not really about homosexuality. It is about sex itself. Homosexuality is just the tip of the iceberg. It is just the most obvious site where the older “meaning” of sex no longer holds and yet many people still assume some of the older “rules” about sex. Contemporary churches are not only at a loss about what to do with their gay and lesbian members. They are also at a loss about what to say to teenagers about sex. Masturbation used to be considered sinful. Many Christians today, even conservative or evangelical Christians, no longer consider masturbation a sin. What’s a teenager supposed to think?

Churches don’t have a consistent, coherent, and persuasive message to give to their young adults, who are understandably putting off marriage and family until they are out of college, or medical school, or graduate school, or until they have been able to establish themselves as successful adults. Young adults can hardly be expected to remain virgins until they are thirty, yet even their parents in many cases are urging them to delay marriage. What’s a young adult Christian supposed to think?

Churches don’t have a decent message for older Christians, say the seventy-year-old widowed aunt who has a “gentleman friend” and yet does not want to marry again because of all the financial and familial complications it would bring. Thousands of churches simply ignore the situations of such people. The traditional teaching that sex is good only when coupled to procreation and that it is allowable only in marriage may still be the official or

assumed line, but it is nowadays honored more by being ignored.

The theology and ethics of sex have not kept up with the changes in sexual behavior and assumptions of contemporary Christians—not to mention other people. In general, Christians behave sexually just about the same as other Americans of their same class and cultural location. For example, Christians, both liberal and conservative, tend to divorce and remarry at the same rate as non-Christians—in spite of the fact that Christianity has traditionally taught that divorce is forbidden and remarriage not allowed—except *sometimes* in very limited cases. Churches just ignore the traditional Christian prohibitions or severe restraints on divorce and remarriage. Most churches have not come up with new theologies of marriage, divorce, and remarriage that fit the changed practices of most Christians. Churches no longer know what to teach about many aspects of human sexuality because they no longer have an adequate idea of “what sex means.”

Homosexual Christians are simply the current lightning rod, the most noticeable instance of the failure of “fit” between contemporary sexual assumptions and practices, on the one hand, and traditional Christian doctrine, on the other. The traditional arguments against homosexuality no longer convince many Christians. Traditionally, Christians assumed that homosexuality wasn’t “natural” because it couldn’t lead to procreation. Or they thought that it was “unnatural” because homosexual sex acts seemed to disrupt the proper hierarchy of male over female. But with the decoupling of sex from birth and the reinterpretation of sex as between consenting equals the old arguments against homosexuality don’t make sense. Therefore, many contemporary Christians still believe homosexuality is wrong, but they have difficulty articulating convincing reasons why. Other Christians have recognized the changed cultural situation and have come to accept gay and lesbian Christians. But neither side has successfully articulated a new theology of sex that actually makes sense of the lives and experiences of most Christians today. Homosexuality is simply the most visible focal point of the larger problem.

Rather than just restating traditional “rules” against homosexuality, or trying to fit homosexual Christians into the traditional notions of sex and family, contemporary churches should use gay, lesbian, and bisexual Christian experience to help come up with new Christian ways of thinking about the “meaning of sex.” After all, Christians have radically changed how we think of sex and marriage at differ-

ent times in the past. The resilience of Christianity has lain to a great extent in its ability to adapt its theology to the changes of history, from the radical asceticism of the ancient church to the family-oriented positive attitude toward sexuality of the modern church. From the inferiority of women assumed throughout history to the equality of women accepted only in the past forty years or so. We can and must do the same to take account of the changes in *the meaning of sex* since the rise of reliable birth control and the feminist movement. We ourselves, as sexual human beings, have changed. Our sexual ethics must change also.

Homosexuality, rather than being a lightning rod for condemnation and confusion, could be a source of inspiration. Homosexuality is currently something “good to think with” as churches struggle, whether they realize it or not, to decide what they now think sex “means,” given that it *cannot* mean for us what it has for previous centuries of Christians.

In this debate, scripture should certainly play a role. But we must reject the notion, often expressed by more liberal or progressive as well as more conservative or evangelical Christians, that the Bible or Christian tradition can serve as a reliable “foundation” for our ethics. The simple fact, proven by any critical survey of different readings of scripture, is that different people come up with radically different interpretations of the texts. This is true not only of the interpretations of lay people; it applies equally to interpretations by scholars trained in and using the same “methods.” The Bible does not “speak” its message. It must be interpreted. And even the “historical” meaning of the texts cannot be established with the degree of consensus necessary for communal ethics or policy. Add to that the need to decide how we will “apply” the results of exegesis for ethical decision making, and it becomes obvious that just appealing to the Bible or tradition will never work, in and of itself, to create Christian consensus about the meaning of sex. It never has. Christian history and current disagreements should be taken as *demonstrating* that a simple appeal to “what the Bible says” or “what the Church has always taught” *cannot* in and of itself create consensus about Christian ethics.

We need new ways of thinking about *what scripture is* and new ways of imagining *how we should interpret it*. I suggest, for instance, that we think of scripture not as a “rule book,” a “constitution,” or an “owner’s manual,” but as something like a sanctuary, a cathedral, a space we enter. Think of how a cathedral “communicates.” Of course, a building

doesn’t actually “speak” or directly communicate its “meaning” to us in any literal sense. But we do experience spaces as having meaning, as something we can “read” and “interpret.” The very architecture, its height, loft, spires, point to God. Stained-glass windows are medieval technology for telling the stories of the Bible and the saints. Statues, the carved stations of the cross around the walls, the plethora of images, paintings, crosses, all are there to help us think about the meaning of our faith. In many churches, designed as they sometimes are in direct imitation of ancient and medieval styles, we are in a sense transported back in time, traveling through Christian history before us, surrounded by the “communion of saints” who lived and also worshiped before us.

Our movements through the cathedral also embody the stories of our faith. In many churches, the congregants move forward, from the nave through a rood screen and into the choir or chancel in order to receive the eucharist, symbolizing the movement from the world into heaven and into the very presence of God, and then back into the nave again after receiving the body and blood of Christ, re-armed now for our everyday lives in the world. Being in a cathedral alone, meditating or praying, is like reading scripture at home or by a lake. Being in a cathedral with the congregation is like reading scripture in the church service. Both readings are valid, even if they differ somewhat from one another. The space, the art, the colors, the movements of a cathedral are there, ready to inspire us, challenge us as we “interpret” the very space itself. We read the story (-ies) of the gospel in the space itself.

We need not go to the architects’ “intentions” to learn from a cathedral. We need not think there is *one* “meaning” or *one* manner of interpreting. Of course, we can learn something from what the architects and builders “intended” to communicate or from the broader history of the cathedral, but we *need* not do so in order to experience the cathedral in quite valid ways. And we would be crazy to limit our understanding of the meaning of the cathedral to one single meaning or any meaning constrained by history or authorial intention.

When we read scripture, we should enter it with an imagination informed by history and tradition as well as art, music, and literature. We must read the text with imagination and in community with other Christians, including Christians who have lived before us and left behind their readings in the history of interpretation. We must read the scriptures in faith and pray for the leading of the Holy

Spirit. We must read the scriptures in order to live within them. Direct “answers” to ethical questions about sex won’t be found by the simplistic appeal to the Bible as if to a rule book, just as churches have been unsuccessful in “finding” such answers to questions about divorce and remarriage, the

family, or economics. But scripture can still play a central role in developing the Christian imagination as it has throughout the centuries. Reading in faith, we should enter the sanctuary space of scripture and allow the expansion of our Christian imaginations—about our selves and our sex.

Dale B. Martin currently serves as Woolsey Professor of Religious Studies at Yale University. He specializes in New Testament and Christian Origins, including attention to social and cultural history of the Greco-Roman world. He was an associate editor for the revision and expansion of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, published in 2005. He has published several articles on topics related to the ancient family, gender and sexuality in the ancient world, and ideology of modern biblical scholarship. He is now working on issues related to gender, sexuality, and biblical interpretation, including an analysis of contemporary interpretation theory and its relationship to current uses of the Bible. His books include: *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* and *The Corinthian Body*. Much of the material in this essay occurs in his forthcoming book, *Sex and the Single Savior: and Other Essays on Sexuality and Biblical Interpretation* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

THE POMEGRANATE

On the tray is a pomegranate and
a pot of decaf. Room service.

Blue Oxford tails
wriggle beneath a rough sweater.

See, this is not desire.
This is the snake taunting.

I won't be able to—I don't know you.
Clever boy, he gets his own pun.

Night air sags over the cricket's
pauses as if stunned

by the sudden inconsequence.
Look on from the banks:

a clump of turtles on a half-submerged
log, sunning themselves. They

do not want the dark water.
They leave the clammy bank to us.

Everywhere are oaks, impervious
to Spanish moss, resurrection fern,

crested woodpeckers. Hundreds
of cypress engendering hundreds

of knees fall over into the river.
A long time ago someone said

knowledge and someone else,
wisdom, but that voice

was so lilting and quiet,
the way two women talk

in a garden and the white lilies
lift their trumpets to listen.

—Martha Serpas '94 M.Div

The Black Church and Sexuality

By Bishop John L. Selders, Jr.

It is rare indeed that people give. Most people guard and keep; they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be.

—James Baldwin

For more than two decades, I've found myself in the midst of a continual stream of discourse both private and public regarding sex, sexuality, sexual orientation, and the practice of varied forms of Christianities in the context of African American culture and life. From the outbreak of the HIV/AIDS pandemic that surfaced during the early to mid-1980s to this most present conversation of marriage equality and the political ante that has come along with the discussion, I've been part to some degree in the dialogue. It's been the venue where many of my passions of a civil and social nature intersect with my religious, religious practice, and theological passions. So it is from this place that I engage in some reflective commentary about what's on my heart and mind during this season of African American celebration (Black History Month, February, 2006).

James Baldwin's quote sets the frame for my reflection brilliantly by naming for me a very important element that must be considered. This conversation in the context of the "Black Church" for me begins with an acknowledgment of the assumptions that are made in the name of "God and the Black Church." Let me name just a few of these assumptions: (1) the Bible is the "Word of God," inerrant and infallible, (2) God is not ever to be questioned in light of "His Word," (3) God's voice and mouthpiece of interpretation is "My Pastor or My Bishop," who is in direct communication with God and is never wrong, etc.

The whole idea that the Bible is the first and last authority on any subject that we as human beings encounter or the notion that everything that is experienced in life has a biblical correlation explicitly, the "God said it, I believe, and that settles it" mentality is problematic. What's troubling for me as a faith leader (pastor/bishop) is the seeming complacency of the masses of African American religious folk in the face of this unwillingness to take a critical look at some of these assumptions, the inclination toward dismissal of any other ideas, opinions, or theologies that don't quite line up with the prevailing espoused theological articulations.

There seem to be very few places that we've created to have reasoned discussion and debate over some of these assumptions in our faith communities. Places where members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church can really talk to others of the same denominational persuasion. Let alone where there can be open dialogue and process around key political and social issues of our day, like the proclamation of the General Assembly of the Church of God in Christ published against same-sex marriage. As a son to the Church of God in Christ, I've never known the denomination to make any proclamation of any kind ever in the history of the church, no anti-poverty proclamation, no anti-war proclamation, no civil rights proclamation, no lack-of-health-care-for-the-neediest-in-our-communities proclamation. However, it has now an anti-same-sex marriage statement on record. And many are still not questioning why, and why now.

There is a train of thought that holds a major critique of the Black Church and of its homophobic treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons, especially those children of African descent. There is also the critique, as well, of the long-standing pattern of leadership in the African American community exemplified in the charismatic black male preacher and the power analysis that must be understood and reimagined in fresh new ways.

I would go on to suggest that the dynamics that exist have both leaders and collective members caught up in a continual unhealthy relationship. The responsibility for those dynamics can be easily projected on to the other without a willingness to own one's own part conscientiously. We all play a part in the way power is structured and practiced in the Black Church, and it will be up to us to do the hard work to undo the wrong of our past and present to ensure the safety of all of God's children in our future.

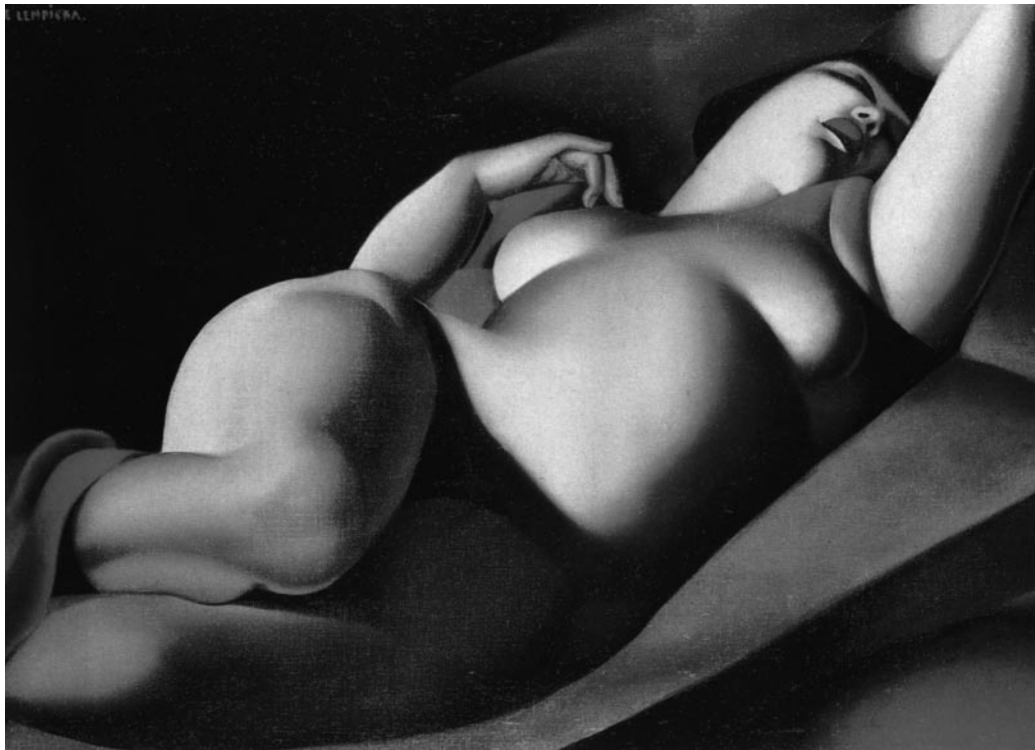
As I mentioned, I have been actively engaged in the work of addressing, from a faith perspective, many of these issues within the African American experience. I have been involved with several groups of individuals who have some of the same passions

for this work. Many of us have been on the front lines for a long time and have longed for settings to emerge where truth and reconciliation can be modeled and nurtured.

Issues of sex and sexuality have been used in the African American community to divide us. I see same-gender love as a religious issue as well as a civil, social, and human right. Same-gender loving relationships are one part of the social justice agenda that I support. As far as the community of faith that I serve, this is a part of our congregation's overall mission of radical inclusivity. I believe God created everybody, and every single person in our community of faith has a right, as far as I am concerned, to include their sexual selves in their expression of their full humanity.

Where are the spaces and places that we as daughters and sons of the African diaspora can come, gather, and reason awhile about our faith and faith responses? Are we willing to go deep inside ourselves to discover sexual ethics, sexual theologies, and practices that are inclusive to all of our multiple realities? Can we create and shape these spaces in the spirit of respect and wholeness? Can we imagine ourselves as sufficient, not deficient?

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Sexuality and Scripture: What *Else* Does the Bible Have to Say?

By Rev. Debra W. Haffner '79 MPH

He says:

How fair and pleasant you are
O loved one, delectable maiden.
You are stately as a palm tree,
And your breasts are like its clusters.
I say I will climb the palm tree, and
Lay hold of its branches.
Oh, may your breasts be like
Clusters of the vine.

And the scent of your breath like apples,
And your kisses like the best wine that
Goes down smoothly
Gliding over lips and teeth...

She answers:

That pleases my lover, rousing him
Even from sleep.
I am my lover's,
He longs for me,
Only for me.

He answers:

Come my beloved,
Let us go out into the fields,
And lie all night among the flowering henna.
Let us go early to the vineyards...
There I will give you my love.

Song of Songs 7:6–14

The Song of Songs is a delightfully erotic, sensual dance between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman, who, given what we know about marriage at the time the Bible was written, are probably in their early teen years. Their desire for each other is mutual; their passion is mutual; their fulfillment is mutual. The emphasis is on passion and intimacy; there is no discussion of marriage or fertility. And, it is only one of the places in Scripture where physical beauty is affirmed; where pleasure is good, where there are many forms of blessed relationships, and where sexuality is a source of pleasure and pain in our lives.

I love the Bible, but I am relatively new to its teachings. In Sunday school growing up Jewish but not having a bat mitzvah, I never got past Genesis and Exodus. I was taught at an early age by my grandmother, who was a Holocaust survivor, that the New Testament was a book that had been used to kill my relatives, and so I never read the New Testament until 1996 during my first semester at divinity school. When a professor there said, "Read this passage like you are reading it for the first time," I was!

I think it's also important to note that I first read Scripture as a sexologist. My first semester in seminary was as a research fellow at the Yale Divinity School during a sabbatical from my position as the president of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. I was surprised during this first semester to realize as I studied the Hebrew Bible that it was replete with sexual references: I chronicled more than thirty-five sexually themed stories in the book of Genesis alone. When I read the New Testament for the first time, I was most surprised by First Letter to Corinthians. In it, Paul addressed seventeen of the thirty-seven topics that should be addressed in a comprehensive sexuality curriculum.

Many people think they know what the Bible teaches about sexuality. They believe that the Bible

teaches that sex is only for procreation and that masturbation, abortion, and contraception are wrong, when actually the Bible is silent on each of these issues. On the other hand, some assume that it is hopelessly patriarchal and should be disregarded completely, when there are actually texts that emphasize mutuality and equality.

It is surprising how infrequently ministers, rabbis, and priests talk about the messages of sexuality in Scripture, when they seem ever present in its books. I echo the experience of National Public Radio's Marty Goldensohn. "When I was a kid," he said, "I could never figure out why there had to be two of every animal on the ark. No one would ever tell me. I wondered, was it so God could have spares, like a spare giraffe, in case one giraffe got hurt or sick?"

There are many stories, even core stories such as the story of creation and the birth of Jesus, where sexuality is central but often ignored. In fact, the Bible actually begins with an affirmation of humans as sexual beings. In the first account of creation, God created "humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female, he created them." The very first thing God says to people is go have sex: "be fruitful and multiply." In the second account of creation, God is displeased for the first time because God recognizes that "it is not good for man to be alone" and sets out to find Adam a companion. God brings each of the animals forward to Adam and suggests each of them as a companion. Adam rejects them all. It is only then that God puts Adam to sleep to create woman. The centrality of sexuality is emphasized in the last line of the chapter: "Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh." The goal of union is sexual pleasure; procreation is not mentioned in the second account of creation.

Side by side, the two first texts of the Bible emphasize the equality of men and women, recognize that we need companions and helpers in life, affirm sexuality as both procreative and recreative, and underscore that God is pleased to offer humans this gift.

The Bible teaches that bodies are good. Paul taught that the "body is a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19), and this message appears many times in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The Bible often comments on the attractiveness of the main character: Rebekah "was very fair to look upon"; Rachel was "graceful and handsome"; Joseph was "well built and good looking." Indeed, Jacob and Rachel are the first recorded instance of

love at first sight, partially because of their physical beauty. Jacob, it is written, waits for her for seven years, which "seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her" (Gen 29:20). Likewise, the lovers in the Song of Songs are fiercely beautiful and each part of their body is exalted: "how fair and pleasant you are, o loved one, delectable maiden. You are stately as a palm tree and your breasts are like its clusters" (Song 5:4–5).

The Bible speaks openly and honestly about the genitals and bodily functions. It is remarkably upfront about menstruation and seminal emissions. Menstruation is actually used as a plot device in the story of Rachel's deception of Laban – who saves the items she and Jacob have stolen by placing them under her and saying she has her period so he can't ask her to get up nor can he touch her bedclothes. There is also the story of the woman who touches Jesus and is healed, despite her being unclean from dysfunctional menstrual bleeding for more than twelve years (Matthew 9:20).

The Bible also has a strong message that *pleasure is good*. Sexual desire occurs many times in Genesis and other stories. Divine beings are said to desire beautiful human women (6:2); Sarah describes the pleasure of sexual intimacy in old age; Isaac is noticed "fondling his wife Rebekah"; Leah and Rachel negotiate for who gets to sleep with Jacob on which night; Potiphar's wife strongly desires Joseph; Delilah is able to subdue Samson only after three instances of bondage that he requests. Concerning sex in long-term relationships, Proverbs pronounces: "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. May her breasts satisfy you at all times, may you be intoxicated always by her love" (Proverbs 5:18–19).

Celibacy is not desirable according to the Hebrew Bible, and, at best, it is an option for the few in the New Testament. Celibacy only appears during times of disorganization: Jeremiah remains single because of the impending disease and destruction (Jer 16:2), while Jephthah's daughter begs her father for two months' reprieve from her death sentence so that she can "bemoan my virginity." (In fact, the daughters of Israel are said to go out each year to mourn her because "she had never slept with a man" [Jud 11:39].)

There are many types of blessed relationships in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, not only heterosexual monogamous marriage. Isaac is the only patriarch in the Bible who is monogamous. Solomon is said to have had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3); David,

his father, has a paltry twenty-one wives; in fact, the texts tell us that when David is depressed in his old age, a young woman is presented to him as the cure, although he is too depressed to take advantage of her (1 Kings 1:1–4)!

Jesus' message is one of love and radical inclusiveness, for both men and women and of people with differing sexual lifestyles. For example, in the Gospel of John, Jesus shocks his disciples by revealing himself to the Samaritan woman—who has had five husbands and is currently cohabitating with another man. He chooses her to spread the message that he is the Savior, but he doesn't tell her to marry the man with whom she is cohabitating (John 4:4–42). And, in one of the most quoted passages of the New Testament, Jesus refuses to condemn the woman accused of adultery: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Of course, they all depart (John 8:1–11).

The Bible is full of rich and rewarding relationships between people who do not live a heterosexual monogamous lifestyle, such as: Abraham and Sarah and Rachel and Jacob, who are married but the men have other partners with whom they have children; Martha and Mary, who share their homes together as sisters; Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz, who parent the same child; the bands of disciples who leave their families to travel and work together.

The question that I am asked most frequently about sexuality and Scripture concerns whether the Bible condemns homosexuality. We heard many times during recent denomination debates about sexual orientation that the Bible condemns homosexuality, and this statement is often presented without comment or challenge. I believe that it is at best inaccurate to use Scripture to condemn committed, consensual, same sex-adult sexual relationships. These type of relationships did not exist when Scripture was written.

There are only four passages in the Bible that explicitly address same-sex activities: two in Leviticus and two in Romans. That there are only four passages show that this subject was of relatively little importance. In contrast, there are ten prohibitions in Leviticus alone on having sex with a menstruating woman and seventeen on how to make a grain offering. The Hebrew Bible also condemns eating fat, touching the bed of a menstruating woman, and cursing one's parents.

There are passages in Scripture that describe love between people of the same sex. Jonathan and David seem to fall in love at first sight: "When David had finished speaking, the soul of Jonathan was

bound to the soul of David and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:1); "Jonathan took great delight in David" (1 Samuel 19:1); and David wrote of Jonathan, "Greatly beloved were you to me, your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." (2 Samuel 1:26) Other writers have suggested that the relationship of Ruth and Naomi was one of lovers and that Boaz may have been used only to impregnate Ruth. It is truly ironic that the passage often recited at heterosexual weddings, "Where you go, I will go, where you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people" (Ruth 1:16) was first said by one woman to another.

What about Sodom and Gomorrah? Wasn't that about homosexuality? Later books in the Bible clarify that this is a story about inhospitality. According to Wisdom 19:13, the sin of Sodom was a "bitter hatred of strangers" and "making slaves of guests who were really benefactors." Ezekiel 16:48–49 attests that "this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy."

Scripture recognizes the existence of sexual variation and sexual minorities in its passages about eunuchs. During the time that the Bible was written, eunuchs were men who either were born with missing or incomplete genitals (such men were once called hermaphrodites but now are called intersexuals) or lost them in battle. According to Isaiah, eunuchs received special blessings from God: "Do not let the eunuch say, I am just a dry tree...to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath, who choose the things that please me, and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house, and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name" (Isaiah 65:3–5). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks about different kinds of eunuchs, saying, "There are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

More important than any specific passage is the overall theme of Scripture: love and inclusion. Early in the Gospels, in a story repeated in all three of the synoptics, Jesus is asked, "'Rabbi, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to them, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all

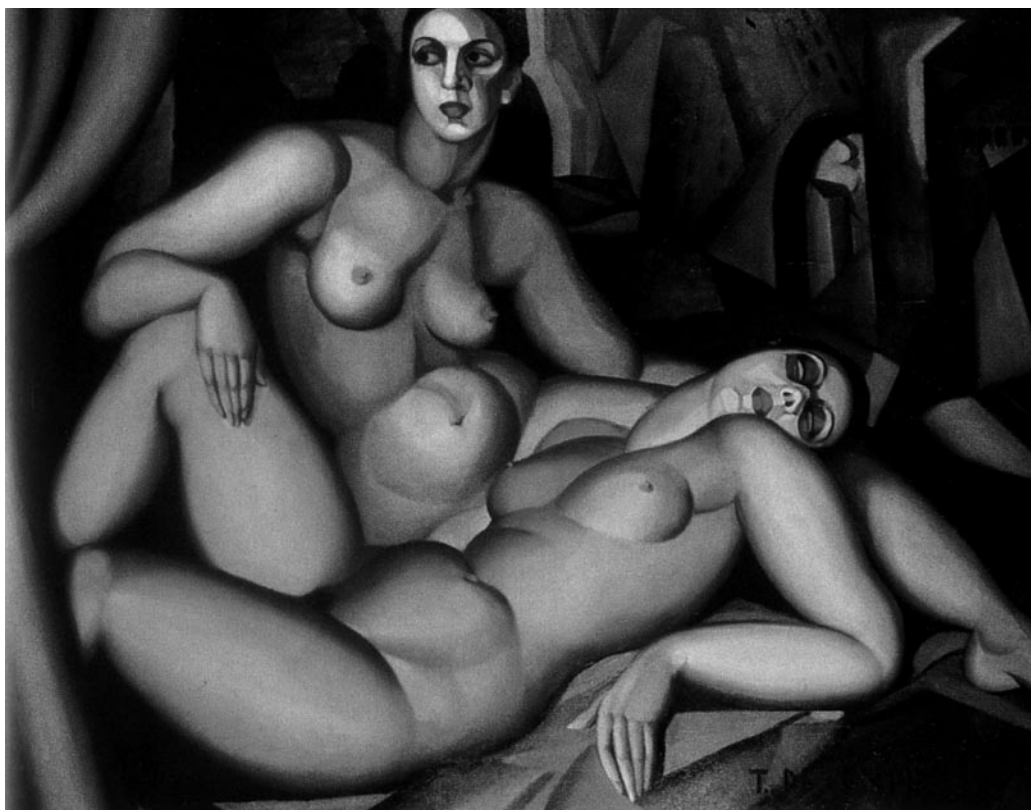
the law and the prophets” (Matthew 2:3 –40). My personal theology is that we express divine intention on earth by how we treat each other, how we understand our own sexuality, and how we express it with others, not simply through acts but through our very relationships. Theologian Paul Tillich, in his book *Love, Power, and Justice*, wrote, “Love is the drive towards the unity of the separated....It is the fulfillment and triumph of love that is able to reunite the most radically separated beings, individual persons.” Likewise, theologian Martin Buber, in his work *10 Rungs: Collected Hasidic Sayings*, said that the route to knowing God is through our own relationships. He said, “To love God truly you must freely love your fellow man; if any one tells you that he loves God but does not love his neighbor, you will know that he is lying.”

Scripture is less concerned with an ethic of sexuality than it is with an ethic of love. I believe

that any use of Scripture that violates people’s essential nature, excludes them from God’s love, and impedes them from living according to their own conscience and integrity violates the very message of the good news.

The foundation of my ministry about sexuality and religion is fundamentally about teaching people to love each other. It is also the foundation of most religions and most sexology. Both ministers and sexologists, and indeed the authors of Scripture, knew that each of us wants to be loved—just the way we are. The ultimate challenge of Scripture, and also of life, is to love generously, courageously, and with integrity our neighbors as well as ourselves. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Love with all your soul, your heart, and your might.” I think Jesus and the rabbis were right: there really isn’t much more that we need to know.

The Reverend Debra W. Haffner is the director of the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing and is an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister serving as the endorsed community minister with the Unitarian Church in Westport, Connecticut. She is the author of *From Diapers to Dating: A Parent’s Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children and Beyond the Big Talk: Every Parent’s Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Teens*, as well as the co-author of a college sexuality textbook and “What I’ve Learned About Sex” as well as several monographs for churches on sexual health. Rev. Haffner’s was honored with the 2000 Distinguished Service Award from the Association of Yale Alumni in Public Health; she has also received the highest honors from Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, and the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality. She received the Connecticut Sexuality Educator of the Year Award in May 2002. She is currently a visiting professor at Yale Divinity School and also teaches courses at Union Theological Seminary. This paper is excerpted from a sermon on “Sexuality and Scripture” at the Chautauqua Institution, Summer 2003.



Neither Male nor Female: Understanding the Complexities of Sex and Gender

By Virginia Ramey Mollencott

As a child and a young woman, I was taught that if I wanted to please God and humanity, my place was secondary and my role supportive. There was no question that the binary gender paradigm of two opposite sexes was the proper context—indeed, the only context within which to think and live ethically.

Even when I was arguing that the Bible supports male-female equality in the 1977 edition of my *Women, Men, and the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), I was unable to lift myself free of the confines of gender duality. There, and in my book about biblical imagery of God as female, *The Divine Feminine* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), I argued that human language about God needs feminine as well as masculine analogies because God, being spirit, is neither masculine nor feminine and every human being is both. That latter phrase, and also my encouragement of nature analogies for God, pointed toward liberation from the cognitive prison of either-or, a male versus female dualism. However, a gender paradigm shift had certainly not occurred to me. This book is my attempt to move beyond the binary gender construct in order to set forth a new gender paradigm, which seeks to include and offer liberation to everyone who has been oppressed by the old model.

Thanks to a remark by Mary McClintock Fulkerson¹ of Duke Divinity School, I began to think that perhaps the baptismal formula recorded in Galatians 3:28 could and should be taken literally: in Christ “no male and female.” Previously, I had taken “no male and female” to mean only that the social and political advantages of being male in patriarchal cultures were to be shared equitably with females within the New Creation. But Professor Fulkerson jarred me into realizing that all the people whose bodily experience is marginalized or erased by gender and orientational dualities would be represented if only the statement were interpreted literally.

It’s worth noticing that the three statements in Galatians 3:28 about the New Creation’s transcendence of race/ethnicity, class, and gender are not precisely parallel in the Greek text. This lack of parallelism is reflected in the New Revised Standard Version translation: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” If there is any meaning to be found in that grammatical shift from “or” to “and,” what might it be? Does it reflect a belief that women and men are so necessary to one another that “or” cannot be spoken, because without either there could be no humankind, a fact Paul emphasized in I Corinthians 11:11-12? And does it point toward a time when instead of separate gender obligations, both physical maleness-femaleness and masculine-feminine social roles will be recognized as a continuum on which individuals may locate themselves comfortably and without fear of reprisal? At any rate, I concur with Professor Fulkerson that “it is time to read Galatians 3:28 with a new literalness, admitting that we are all performing our sex/gender.”

The Gender Crisis

Western society is currently involved in a crisis of gender definition. Throughout all the centuries of heteropatriarchy, the concept of two opposite sexes has served as a boundary to hold in place the established patterns of power. The binary gender construct has dictated that real males must be naturally drawn to those attitudes, behaviors, and roles any

given society considers “masculine,” including sexual attraction to females only. And real females must be naturally drawn to those attitudes, behaviors, and roles any given society considers “feminine,” including sexual attraction to males only. Any person who deviates from these standards is a gender transgressor, outside the pale of genuine humanity, undeserving of full human consideration. The binary gender construct is assumed to be The Way Things Ought to Be—the order of creation, the will of God, unchangeable and beyond question.

So what’s wrong with the time-honored concept that men are men and women are women and *viva la difference*? Plenty.

In the first place, the binary gender construct ignores or contradicts factual reality. Many heterosexual men are not drawn to “masculine” attitudes, behaviors, and roles; and many heterosexual women are not drawn to “feminine” behaviors, attitudes, and roles. Bisexual and homosexual women and men are not attracted exclusively to the “opposite” sex.

I can now acknowledge that to the degree I feel myself to be a masculine woman, I am transgendered. Not transsexual. I feel myself to be female all right, but masculine at the same time, so that dresses and skirts feel rather ridiculous—and this despite the fact that as a child I was not allowed to wear overalls, shorts, or pants. I played with the boys a great deal, and I defended my older brother with my fists, but always I was wearing a skirt. One of the greatest benefits of coming out publicly as lesbian was that I could go through my closets and give away all my dresses and skirts except for a few Gertrude Stein-ish floor-length skirts that somehow seemed less of an affront to my nature.

As many as four percent of all births are intersexual—babies with indeterminate genitals or with both male and female genitals, sometimes internal and difficult to discover.² Some people with apparently normal male bodies sense themselves to be female; some people with female bodies sense themselves to be male; and these people are willing to cross-dress permanently and use hormonal and/or surgical means to become or “pass” as the gender they feel themselves to be. Some people sense that they are heterosexual but “two-spirited” or “bigendered,” so they cross-dress periodically in order to express all aspects of their nature. And some “two-spirited” people are homosexual or bisexual. Some people look like “normal” males or females but are chromosomally different from the

statistical norm of XX for females and XY for males. Differences in hormone levels and in how the cells of some newborns have resisted or responded to hormones prenatally can also be factors in what is often called gender ambiguity. Because common speech often confuses biological categories with gender-assignment, gender-identity, and gender-expression, enormous diversity is possible. I do not doubt that there are people who would read through this paragraph and still not find an adequate description of themselves; for their sake, I will add a category of “otherwise.” In the face of so much diversity, it is no wonder that the binary gender paradigm is in the process of collapse.

In the second place, societies vary radically in their understandings of what constitutes “masculinity” and “femininity” (that is, in their gender roles). As I pointed out in *Women, Men, and the Bible*, one multicultural study found that in 12 societies, men carry the heavy burdens, but in 57 societies, women do; in 158 societies, women do the cooking, but in 5 societies, men do; in 95 societies, the making and repairing of clothes is women’s work; but in 12 societies, men do it; in 14 societies, women build the houses, but in 86 societies men do the building.³ And anthropologist Margaret Mead reported finding that in one New Guinea tribe, the ideal temperament for both males and females was gentleness; in a second tribe, it was aggressiveness; and in a third tribe, the ideal for males was dependence and affectionate sensitivity, while the ideal for females was aggressive dominance.⁴ Such variations are enough to prove that there is no universally uniform innate “masculinity” and “femininity” and, therefore, that those concepts neither follow any universal natural law nor constitute the will of God.

In the third place, the social construction of gender has not been even-handed about the assignment of roles and rewards. We westerners tend to think hierarchically, and when there are dualities we prefer one over the other: thin rather than fat, young rather than old, light rather than dark, heterosexual rather than homosexual. Gender is no exception. Although most of our contemporaries might deny preferring boys to girls, males to females, the traditional assignment of males to the more powerful roles of the public sphere and females to the more supportive roles of the private sphere has brought with it a host of inequities. Money, prestige, influence, and honor are accorded to those who function publicly; but domestic work is hardly respected as work, let alone financially rewarded. No one could possibly

cram into one book the tremendous research documenting gender injustice. But such injustice renders urgent the need for a new gender pluralism, a non-hierarchical omnigender paradigm.

What I have learned from my most recent studies is that gender normality is a myth as long as it is forced to locate itself within a binary paradigm that fits very few members of the human race. I am not the only person who limited, shrank, and truncated aspects of myself in an attempt to fit that paradigm. Millions have done the same; and some have killed themselves or been murdered because of their inability to pass gender muster. Many transgender youngsters have run away from home or been evicted by their parents, have lived on the streets and been used by predatory adults, and have become HIV positive. Others have been institutionalized for no other reason than their inability to satisfy society's gender expectations.

So much pain. So much waste of human potential. It cannot continue!

What society has constructed, society can also deconstruct and reconstruct. The goal is worthwhile: to learn from the facts of human sexuality and genderedness and to develop attitudes that match those facts and, thus, alleviate human pain. Although I have written books arguing the human equality of females and males and homosexuals and heterosexuals, I now understand that no matter how liberationist the context may be, as long as these terms are handled in a binary fashion, they continue to reinforce the dominant gender paradigm. This book is my attempt to break out of a system that has worked only by silencing the outcries of millions and to move instead toward a new, omnigender paradigm.

Notes

- 1 Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Gender--Being It or Doing It? The Church, Homosexuality, and the Politics of Identity," *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking (New York: Continuum, 1997), 189, 199.
- 2 Martine Aliana Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex: A Manifesto on the Freedom of Gender* (New York: Crown, 1995), 9.
- 3 See discussion in Virginia Mollenkott, *Women, Men, and the Bible*, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 62. The study cited was reported by Roy G. D'Andrade, "Sex Differences and Cultural Institutions," in *The Development of Sex Differences*, ed. Eleanor Maccoby (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1966), 174-204. In *The Myths of Gender* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), Anne Fausto-Sterling comments that "the division of labor by sex embodies a seeming contradiction: it is a human universal but it has no universal meaning. Instead each culture has its own particular division of labor by sex. . . and attaches to it its own set of interpretations. . . It seems then that we can extract meaning only by examining that division in a particular social setting. . . . There is no single undisputed claim about universal behavior (sexual or otherwise). The notion of a naked human essence is meaningless because human behavior acquires significance only in a particular social context" (198).
- 4 Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1935).

Dr. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott taught college literature and writing for 44 years and is now Professor Emeritus at the William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey. Dr. Mollenkott served as stylistic consultant for the New International Version of the Bible and was a member of the National Council of Churches' Inclusive Language Lectionary Committee. The text above is an excerpt from her twelfth book, *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach* (Pilgrim Press, 2001), which has been warmly welcomed by pastoral counselors, theologians, psychologists, and GLBT people of various religious backgrounds as well as by people working for sexual and gender justice.

Review—William Loader. *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition*

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005.

Reviewed by: Timothy Luckritz Marquis '02 MAR

William Loader's new book attempts to incorporate recent New Testament scholarship into a redactional and form-critical analysis of earliest Christian attitudes toward sexuality. With his terminological choice of the "Jesus tradition," Loader expresses caution about what can be reconstructed based on extant evidence. The book is not a New Testament sexual ethics but an attempt to "know more clearly what was being said" about sexuality in the first Christian century.

The first chapter tackles passages dealing with sexual passion and immorality, beginning with some of Matthew's sayings from the Sermon on the Mount and their synoptic parallels. Loader reads the intensification and internalization of the command against adultery to include a man's adulterous glance in light of ancient understandings of marriage as property; adultery is the defrauding of a (male) neighbor and, thus, involves wronging one's fellow man. Loader also follows recent interpretations of the synoptic sayings advocating the severing of limbs to avoid sinning in light of ancient Jewish discussions of sexual misdeeds such as masturbation (thus, severing the "hand") and pederasty (especially Mark's use of this passage in the context of nurturing children). The second chapter extends these observations to treat discussions of marriage and divorce among New Testament writers, who prohibit divorce across the board except in certain circumstances. The statement in Genesis 2:24 (that the husband and wife become "one flesh") lies behind many of these passages.

The third (and by far the longest) section discusses passages relating to celibacy, beginning with the synoptic controversy over marriage (and, hence, sex) in the afterlife (Mark 12:18–27 and parallels), the unique Matthean statement (19:10–12) in which Jesus' prohibition against divorce is interpreted as a reason to avoid marriage and become "a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven," and synoptic accounts calling on disciples to reject their families in order to follow Jesus. Loader remarks that New Testament authors almost never correlate sex and procreation. On the contrary, like the evangelists after him, Paul reads Genesis 2:24 as depicting sex as a quasi-mystical bond between husband and wife. Moreover,

Loader agrees with other scholars who read celibacy as a social necessity among early itinerant missionaries whose lifestyle forced them to reject household structures common to the day. In this rejection of familial norms, we may see an authentic and provocative teaching of the historical Jesus.

Loader spends much of this chapter discussing Paul, who also took celibacy as a personal obligation. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul expresses a preference for celibacy similar to the one found in Matthew 19. Throughout this passage, Paul gives many reasons for why abstinence from sex is "good" but not mandatory: for example, sex and marriage can distract from prayer and preparedness for the eschaton. On the other hand, those who cannot practice self-control should marry in order to avoid the danger of sin. Those Christians who advocated celibacy may also have been anticipating their angelic lives-to-come in the heavenly temple or restoring a sort of pre-Edenic innocence and gender unity. Loader's discussion of Paul extensively and profitably engages the recent work of YDS's Judith Gundry-Volf yet inexplicably lacks the relevant insights from *The Corinthian Body* by Dale B. Martin of Yale's Religious Studies department. Moreover, the discussion of Galatians 3:28 and relevant parallels would benefit from recent discussions of ancient views of gender as a fluid and hierarchical spectrum.

The reader may well disagree with many of Loader's readings of particular passages. Yet Loader seems to invite such engagement by carefully surveying recent scholarship, presenting dissenting opinions, and often expressing prudent uncertainty as to the correct interpretation. While this book is framed as a reasoned attempt to distill common sexual values from the Jesus tradition, it succeeds in its larger purpose of highlighting the issues and questions that the diverse voices of earliest Christianity raise about living together as sexual beings.

Celibacy as Charism

By Donald Cozzens

Charism, n. a gift freely given by God to a person or community, for the good and service of others in bringing about the Kingdom of God.

“When I run,” said British Olympic sprinter Eric Liddell, “I feel God’s pleasure.” Liddell, played by Ian Charleson in the Oscar-winning film Chariots of Fire, acknowledged with these simple words that his world-class athletic skill was fundamentally God’s gift.¹

While it isn’t clear that he thought of his exceptional speed as directly contributing to the building up of the Kingdom of God, Liddell rightly understood that his intention to use his giftedness for the glory of God made his running somehow sacred. And he felt the presence of God, felt God’s very pleasure. There is an implicit act of humility in this insight. This is no vain boast on Liddell’s part but a declaration that he has been gifted, and using his gift with the right intentionality, in itself, pleased God. Not to run, not to compete, was unthinkable. Unused gifts, the missionary Liddell knew from his theological studies, frustrate the divine plan and, to a greater or lesser degree, shrink the human soul.

Since believers commonly hold that grace builds on nature, they understand a charism as building on a natural aptitude for a specific behavior or way of life. In theory, at least, monks possess an aptitude for monastic life, married people for family life and parenthood, teachers for developing the art of questioning, scientists for research. It is only a small stretch to concede that calls to monasticism, parenthood, teaching, research, writing, and other vocations are rightly understood, from a theological perspective, as charisms—as gifts from the divinity for the welfare of society for the personal fulfillment of the one gifted, and for the glory of God. Temperament, personality, intellectual bent, kinetic ability, and genetic predisposition all coalesce in the emerging charism. Charisms, therefore, are grace

abilities grounded in natural gifts and human potential ordained for the common good, for the building of the Kingdom of God. Moreover, they shape the destiny of the recipient. His or her spiritual and personal development remains intimately linked to how one respects, develops, and responds to the gifts bestowed.

Like Eric Liddell, at least from time to time, the exercise of God-given gifts and talents humbles the human actor who finds aptitudes and abilities embedded in his or her body/spirit. Preachers blessed with the charism of preaching experience the same mysterious, uncanny awareness of “God’s pleasure” when they preach. Not always, of course, but sometimes. The same can be said of teachers, artists, administrators, counselors, and pastors, to name some of the more obvious gifts of the Spirit given for the common good and the building up of the reign of God. The same, we might add, can be said of any human activity—work, play, service, prayer—done with awareness, mindfulness, and reverent attention. For the believer, life itself is the fundamental charism to be “used” for the glory of God and the welfare of society. At different times individuals of all ages, temperaments, and dispositions may sense that their very living gives God pleasure.

Possessing a charism, a gifted predisposition for outstanding achievement or performance, does not mean that the exercise of the gift is effortless. Liddell trained strenuously to bring himself to the



point of optimal conditioning for his 1924 Olympic races. Charismatic preachers study scripture and theology, literature, and the arts in general, in order to proclaim God's liberating and transforming word to contemporary ears. Gifted teachers prepare long and hard to capture the attention and imagination of their students. Musicians and actors rehearse untold hours to hone and develop their talents and skills. Charisms are anything but a free pass from the discipline and toil of preparation and practice. They remain, however, the foundations of graced ministry, performance, and achievement.

Some few men and women appear to possess the charism of celibacy, a graced call from God to pledge themselves to celibate living for the good of others and for the building up in history of the reign of God. For these individuals, celibacy is their truth—the right way for them to live out their lives. Without disparaging marriage and with regard for the goodness and wholesomeness of human sexuality, they sense a mysterious pull of grace toward singleness that seems to fit with their inner life and spiritual journey. It is mysterious because it often makes no sense even to themselves, let alone to their family and friends. It is a pull—like being drawn by a magnet—because it is not necessarily, at least in the beginning of their discernment, their choice. As the Dutch theologian Edward Schillebeeckx once said of the celibate: he or she has an existential inability to do otherwise. Celibates sense, moreover, that herein lies the key to their spiritual freedom; and that fidelity to this mysterious, perplexing gift is all-important. Intuitively, they sense that their gift of celibacy is linked to the mission of building up the Kingdom of God. Charisms, by their nature, are not given for the fulfillment of the individual alone but for the welfare and betterment of others—for the sake of the gospel.

Consider that roughly half of the world's population is unmarried. Widows and widowers, the divorced and separated, adults whose circumstances have precluded marriage find themselves living outside of marriage. Some, disillusioned with marriage or tired of the stress and tensions of dating, proclaim themselves, more or less seriously, "celibates."² Celibacy, as discussed here, is, of course, much more than not being married. It is the decision, I have emphasized, to live out one's life without spouse for the greater good of the gospel. For the person who has received this charism, it is the best way, if not the only way, to live out his or her life. As commonly understood, the charism of celibacy implies sexual continence, the

forgoing of all deliberate sexual experience. In most cases, there is a public, social dimension to recognized celibacy such as public vows or ordination to the priesthood in the Latin rite. While it is true that true holiness is evident in the ordinary lives of countless single men and women, they are seldom acknowledged as celibates by the larger community of believers. Charisms, however, refuse to be strictly delineated. Dorothy Day, by way of example, the heroic social activist, pacifist, and co-founder of the Catholic Worker, lived a devout, celibate life, bearing extraordinary witness to gospel values following her conversion to Catholicism. Many would hold that Day's celibacy was charismatic.

Gifts, understood in the religious sense of charism, are seldom realized or claimed beyond all doubt. When they are claimed by individuals, the assertion itself creates doubt. It seems more in harmony with the working of grace that one believes he or she has received the charism. More often than not, the charism is confirmed by the faith community as a gift to the church for the mission of the church. In the case of celibacy, I have heard priests say that they have come to believe that their "truth" is celibacy. But this understanding often comes after many years of pastoring and well into the autumn of their lives. These men understand that the gift of celibacy does not mean that sexual abstinence is easy, without struggle or temptations, without loneliness. Nor does the charism of celibacy mean that they never long for the companionship of marriage, for children, for the warmth of family life. Charismatic celibates have come to believe that the mystery of grace has called them to lead lives of celibate chastity for the sake of the reign of God. This belief goes hand in hand with doubt. But the belief holds.

Because we are discussing here the mystery of grace, charismatic celibacy as described above is a little too facile. The "charism of celibacy" remains a construct. It is a human attempt to understand an apparent divine design that prompts and allows red-blooded men and women to lead healthy, full lives without the support and consolation of a husband or wife. A number of questions arise.

Are charisms in general, and the charism of celibacy in particular, necessarily permanent gifts? Can an individual be called to celibate living for a specific period of time? Can the gift of celibacy die a natural death? Can a priest grow into authentic celibate living who first embraced it for less than healthy reasons—for example, fear of mature, sexual intimacy or fear of the commitment entailed in marriage?

Many if not most priests, I have come to think, are reluctant to claim the charism of celibacy—even when they have led authentic celibate lives that have deepened their humanity and enhanced their preaching and pastoral ministry. A fundamental ambiguity remains. Many say they would marry if given the freedom to do so. Others, often depending on their age, think not. Still others would not even consider the option to marry. A large number of priests, I suspect, would say they're not sure, that they need to pray about it, to test the idea with friends and spiritual guides. While many priests may hesitate to either claim or disclaim the charism of celibacy, most would claim the charism of priesthood. Priesthood, they believe, is their truth, their calling. What is less clear is the rightness, the fit of their celibate state.

Bishop John Crowley of the diocese of Middlesbrough in the United Kingdom addressed the deep tension priests experience when they feel called to both priesthood and marriage. On the occasion of his fortieth anniversary of ordination, he expressed the personal hope that within his lifetime “the Church might more generally allow married priests.” Crowley is right to say “more generally,” because there are hundreds if not thousands of married Latin rite priests who, upon converting to Catholicism from ministerial roles in Anglican and Protestant denominations, have been dispensed from the law of celibacy. Writing in *The Tablet*, Crowley offered the following reflection on his life as a celibate.

I would want to sing my song in favor of celibacy as one blessed route to living priesthood. How could I do otherwise when, having just clocked up forty years as a celibate priest, I personally have found it such a grace from God? Like any other celibate, I could tell of the times when that call from God has seemed to cost not less than everything. No need to expatiate on the seasons of struggle, the sometimes profound aching within, when the human heart feels all the God-given drive toward the most intimate union with one other. That is how we are gloriously made, and there is no need to labor that side of the celibacy challenge.

Rather, let me labor a little the other side of the celibacy opportunity. For me, and for countless others, it has offered deep down a possibility of that kind of relationship with the person of Jesus as friend and brother, which is life giving, joyous, and potentially—transforming. Read that last sentence by the way within the real context that (and this I imagine is also true within a good marriage) you simply get on with the day-to-day routine of being faithful in word and deed to the other.³

As Crowley proposes, there are countless priests who have learned how to make celibacy “work.” Through struggle, prayer, and commitment, and through grace-filled, life-giving friendships with both men and women, they have deepened their humanity and their effectiveness as bearers of the Word.

While there is indeed a mystique to celibacy, there are characteristics commonly found in the lives of healthy celibates well into their senior years. While these qualities are present to healthy, altruistic individuals of every age and walk of life they are the markers of authentic charismatic celibacy. Let me to tell you of an elderly woman who embodied many of these characteristics. While teaching at Ursuline College in Cleveland during the 1980s, I had the good fortune to meet an Ursuline nun by the name of Kilian Hufgard. She graciously agreed to tutor me in the history and theory of art and architecture from the perspective of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the great inspiration of her life. Almost a generation older than I, Sister Kilian spoke quietly—but with undeniable passion—about things well made, about the transcendent quality of that which is good, about the dynamics and mystery of human creativity. She was, I believe, the most fascinating woman I have ever met. There was no doubt in my mind that she possessed not only the heart and soul of an artist and scholar but also the gift of celibacy. I believe what defined her life as a vowed religious and celibate is characteristic of charismatic celibates in general.

Sr. Kilian demonstrated a freedom of soul, an at-homeness, an at-easiness, that put others at ease in her company. She was a woman at peace with herself. Like healthy, integrated celibates, she welcomed others without judgment and those who came into the circle of her presence were touched by the ease and peace she radiated. Keenly aware of the fundamental goodness of creation and things well made, Sr. Kilian radiated a consistent spirit of reverence. She was alert to the divine spark present in all manifestations of reality, especially in the most humble of creatures. Most charismatic celibates display a similar reverence in their human interactions and in their approach to nature and the created world.

Charismatic celibates exhibit a spirit of gratitude. Like Dorothy Day and Sr. Kilian, they sense the hidden drama of grace unfolding in both the ordinary moments of life as well as the more critical, life-shaping events that mark our lives. With Bernanos's country priest, they understand that “all is grace.” Building upon this insight, they see blessing upon

blessing. Because celibacy itself is perceived as a blessing, they are seldom tempted to self-pity. When their solitude gives way to unmitigated loneliness, when they long for the companionship of their dearest, distant friends, when their celibacy makes no sense whatever, they trust that their darkness of soul will pass. With believers everywhere, with married, single, and separated, they see that indeed “all is grace.”

Sr. Kilian greeted her visitors with unconditional hospitality. In her presence, one felt truly welcomed—sincerely, warmly welcomed. A visit with her, no matter how brief, left me with the feeling that I had just been blessed. In her final years, Dorothy Day left her visitors with the same sense of blessing. Paul Elie, in his acclaimed *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, captured this arresting presence, “Now she was a holy person, who inspired others to come to see her, to be in her presence, to enjoy the favor it bestowed, and to recall the encounter precisely.”⁴ Without the leveling potential inherent in marriage, celibates may easily become self-absorbed and more or less taken with their special status. Whenever this is the case, their ability to extend hospitality is diminished.

Healthy, charismatic celibates, like Hufgard and Day, resist this tendency. Their own centeredness, the result of their unwavering integrity and radical commitment, make them masters of graced hospitality.

Finally, if we look closely, many of the celibates we may know turn out to be some of the most passionate people we know. They are far from the asexual, other-worldly, slightly weird individuals portrayed in film and television sitcoms. Their passion, uncluttered by the simplicity of their lives and filtered through the strain of contemplative awareness, unmasks a thirst for life in its fullness. They have come to know the truest, deepest longings of their hearts. And so freed from the created, false thirsts of superficial culture, their great frustration is with all that is unreal. When I have been in their presence, I imagine a bumper sticker that reads: “Celibates make the best lovers.”

Certainly these characteristics are found wherever individuals, regardless of their celibate or married status, endeavor to live lives of integrity and genuine concern for others. They remain, I believe, signs that a publicly committed celibate man or woman may indeed be the recipient of what the church deems the charism of celibacy. We have had a glimpse into the lives of two healthy, life-giving celibates, Ursuline Sister Kilian Hufgard, and the social activist and writer Dorothy Day. Each woman, beyond their noteworthy and exceptional accomplishments, is perceived as thoroughly real. Though no longer among the living, their stories ring true. Most believers, I suspect, know of celibate men and women who have touched their lives in meaningful ways, sometimes in profound ways. Wherever and whenever we encounter such individuals, the value and blessing of celibacy is vindicated and strengthened. True celibates remind us of what really matters, or what matters most in life. They remind us of the mysterious ways of grace—that different paths may be equally valid choices in living out one’s fidelity to the gospel; that what appears to be unhealthy self-abnegation in the eyes of many might indeed be one’s liberating truth. Healthy, charismatic celibates will be some of the most spiritually liberated people we will ever meet. For these believers, celibacy is indeed freeing.

Notes

- 1 "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure." Eric Liddell, played by Ian Charleson in the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*.
- 2 A beer advertisement in the June 2005 *Vogue* magazine proposed carrying a membership card that reads, "Celibacy United, Member in Good Standing." Beneath the signature line was the following: "I pledge to remain celibate for the rest of my life, content with the joy of good friends and fine conversation." The ad's copy: "Can we make your night out better? Sure. If the guys don't see that you want to be left alone, let them see this [the clipped-out membership card]. It'll douse their flame real fast. In fact, the only thing colder is that Bud Light in front of you." Both clever and cynical, the ad is nevertheless telling. Freed from the undercurrent of sexual politics, celibate friends make for good company. They are no strangers to "the joy of good friends and fine conversation."
- 3 John Crowley, "The Gift of Married Priests, *The Tablet*, July 2, 2005.
- 4 Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 444.

Donald Cozzens, a Roman Catholic priest and writer, is author of three award-winning and best-selling books, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, *Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church*, and *Faith That Dares to Speak*. Formerly the president-rector and professor of pastoral theology at Saint Mary Seminary in Cleveland, he currently serves as writer-in-residence at John Carroll University, where he teaches in the religious studies department. This essay is an excerpt from his forthcoming book, *Freeing Celibacy*, which will be published in spring 2006.

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Review of Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religion

Reviewed by: Christiana Peppard '05 MAR

The binary of “private” and “public” is a legal distinction in the United States, and in that context it significantly protects reproductive freedom for women and diminishes the power of those who may seek to instantiate a legislative or judicial hegemony of heterosexuality.¹ In this sense, the courts have determined that “private” is good. Beyond the legal realm, since the 1970s American feminists have insisted that “the personal is political” – societal attention to the erstwhile private realm can be important, particularly when the “private” (or “domestic”) realm is manipulated to conceal injustices based on gender or sexuality. This is not to say that the private/public distinction is universal or normative, but it is a recurrent theme in the book *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religions*, which “was formulated in the West and structured according to [the editors'] ever expanding but always limited horizons.” Indeed, the contributors agree that “sexuality is more than the private practice of individuals. It is behavior that arises within a complex set of power dynamics. In every instance, sex is intimately interwoven with the economic, social and political possibilities of the actors.” Thus *Good Sex* offers assessments of the seemingly private act of sex, but it also widens the context by asking how sexuality and morality are embedded in – and shaped by – larger patterns of political, economic, and especially religious power relations. This volume explores ways in which religious strictures continue to bind women's bodies, practices, and pleasures.

Good Sex is neither a “how-to” manual nor a definitive answer to its own implicit question (what is good sex?). Instead, it is the result of a series of dialogues among women from eight countries and different religious backgrounds on two primary questions: “What is good sex in a globalized world in the twenty-first century?” and “What do feminists have to contribute to the understanding and embodiment of good sex?” Religion in particular forms a hinge for the discussion since, in the words of the editors, “[R]eligions have been the traditional guardians of sexual norms and practices. In fact, patriarchal religions are infamous for their taboos with regard to women and sex.” Consonant with other feminist critiques, the contributors variously claim that injustices toward women result from the structure of patriarchal societies, in which women's voices are undervalued or ignored; the hegemony of “traditional” interpretations of gender comple-

mentarity or gender roles; and the predication of social order upon control of women's bodies and reproductive capacities.

The book is divided into three sections: “Creation of Desires,” “Prices of Sex,” and “Reconstruction of Sexualities.” The first section charts “desire” as a function of socioeconomic, cultural, and religious influences. One of the more interesting suggestions here is that capitalism itself functions as a “religion” in the construction of desire and its impact on the lives of women (see “Capitalism and Sexuality: Free to Choose?” by Radhika Balakrishnan). The second section focuses on “prices” of sex—namely, the cost to women's well-being, livelihood, and life options in relation to the resulting “prize” of femininity (most often understood to be motherhood, which may or may not come with actual honor or status). In this section, Pinar Ilkkaracan's essay “Islam and Women's Sexuality: A Research Report from Turkey” is especially compelling for its sociological methods and conclusions, particularly when paired with Ayesha M. Imam's essay from the first section, “The Muslim Religious Right ('Fundamentalists') and Sexuality.” The third section includes constructive proposals for striving toward sexual justice in the context of several religions. Of the three essays in this section, Judith Plaskow's “Authority, Resistance and Transformation” is the most notable; she suggests that “the feminist critic must begin, not by allying herself with dissenting voices within her tradition, but by questioning the authority of tradition, resisting any framework that leaves no room for women's agency, and then proceeding to transform tradition by placing women at the center” (135).

The strengths of the book lie especially with its methodology, insofar as it is the product of numerous meetings of women of different religious backgrounds, academic backgrounds, and global regions. Also impressive are several authors' attempts to explore, and then to challenge, religiously based “justifications” of women's situations or treatment; as noted above, the two chapters on Islam are particularly compelling. Finally, *Good Sex* offers persistent attention to the ways in which sex is constructed publicly. There is much more work to be done here, but *Good Sex* is an important start.

The book is also limited in several ways; I focus on three. First, two of the three essays on non-monotheistic traditions – Buddhism and the historical Chinese practice of footbinding

— do not really engage the lived experiences of contemporary women. This seems odd for a volume concerned with interreligious dialogue about the lived experiences of women. (It does better for monotheistic traditions.)

Second, the volume self-consciously flirts with challenges and insights from postcolonial theory, and the editors admit deep vexation about the hegemony of Western epistemology; but the volume notes these issues only in passing. This is a significant and unfortunate omission. A book that more fully addresses these issues in the context of feminism and religion is *Postcolonialism: Feminism and Religious Discourse*, edited by Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-Lan (Routledge, 2002). *Postcolonialism* does not set itself up primarily as a sexual ethics book, but it leans heavily into issues of sex and related cultural practices (veiling, footbinding, etc.). Donaldson and Kwok's volume does so with an explicit suspicion toward the colonizing, Othering, and autonomy-obsessed Western gaze.

My third and final critique is has to do with myriad issues raised but not sufficiently addressed by the essays in *Good Sex*. Practices such as veiling in the Muslim world, the historical practice of footbinding, compulsory motherhood or compulsory heterosexuality, the practices of bride price or female circumcision all stand as examples of how religion, tradition, or "culture" shape women's bodies and experiences. The editors of *Good Sex* are concerned with the morality of such practices when read through the lives of women around the world; they assert that "the most compelling reason [for thinking interreligiously about sexual ethics] rests with the need to understand in global terms the relationship between the economic and political damage inflicted by corporations, governments and patriarchal religions" upon the lives of women. Such concerns are important, but enormous, and invite myriad questions — for example, what exactly constitutes a "culture" or "tradition" or "religion"? What sort of authority should a tradition have to shape the lives of its participants? Is the survival of "tradition" a moral good, even if women are oppressed within it? How should sexual norms and practices across cultures be evaluated — should sexual morality simply be relativized? Can women's well-being be a *sine qua non*, a litmus test for the validity of any religious practice or set of beliefs? These are more or less questions that obtain in recent debates about multiculturalism and feminism, but *Good Sex* is ill-equipped to deal with such issues.

What to do? I suggest another companion volume, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, which features an essay by the late Susan Moller Okin and fifteen brief commentaries (edited by Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum, Princeton University Press, 1999). Okin argues that a "multiculturalism" that leaves out the well-being of women and children, assigns their well-being to the determination of male representatives of "tradition," or privileges male voices (whether formally or actually) is in fact very bad for women. While this book is not strictly about religion, most of Okin's arguments rely upon the ways in which tradition or religion or culture is enacted upon female bodies. As a result, multiple commentators navigate a bevy of vexing questions to do with women, religion, justice, and the problems of charting morality in a multicultural world.

It should be clear that one book cannot say it all when it comes to feminism, religion, and sexual ethics. I would suggest that the search for hard and fast answers to such problems is a futile one, because the problems are multiple and dynamic. This should lead us — that is, pastors, theologians, activists, ethicists, humans — into a certain sort of humility, but not into apathy. It is possible to identify correctives for lurking injustices, especially those right under our noses; to create a wide berth for notions of justice based on the experiences of women worldwide; and even to identify moral and material prerequisites for what makes sex good, for women, in the context of religion.

- 1 The original is *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), which established the right to privacy by striking down a Connecticut law (set in 1879) that forbade the use of contraceptives. This precedent was invoked in *Roe v. Wade* (1973). *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) did not use "right of privacy" language in striking down a state sodomy law but stands nonetheless in the *Griswold* genealogy.

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The Church's "Sexual Crisis": It's Not About Sex

By Marie M. Fortune '76 M.Div

The difficulty for the Church to respond adequately to clergy sexual abuse and crossing of sexual boundaries in the pastoral relationship runs parallel to the angst that has characterized the Church's addressing heterosexuality and homosexuality for the past thirty years.

Sometimes these parallel tracks have blurred—for example, right now as we see gay priests too often scapegoated in the face of the disclosures of pedophilia by priests and the efforts of Roman Catholic seminaries to exclude gay men from the priesthood. But each track is assumed to be about sex and our difficulties in Christian churches in dealing with sexuality.

Conservative churches have generally taken the "sex is a necessary evil: save it for someone you love" approach to promoting abstinence outside of marriage. This has encouraged the ethical discussion to focus on technicalities—for example, is oral sex really "sex"—rather than on qualities of intimate relationship.

The liberal churches have pursued the "sex is a good gift from God" strategy, resulting in some excellent religious education curricula on human sexuality but also in a laissez faire attitude that can avoid a critical, ethical discussion. Sex *is* a good gift from God. But this affirmation does not go far enough.

Both ends of the spectrum seem to continue to focus on "sex" as the issue: *the issue* isn't about sex after all.

Let's revisit II Samuel 11–12. David, the most powerful king of biblical Israel, is attracted to Bathsheba. He has Bathsheba's husband sent to the front lines of battle, where he is killed so that David can have her to himself. Nathan, David's adviser, comes to him and tells him a story about a rich man who takes a lamb from a poor man for the rich man's own use. David reacts with outrage and

says that the rich man deserves to die and that he should restore the poor man fourfold. Nathan then says, "You are the man!" and proceeds to delineate the ways that David had betrayed the trust that so many, including Nathan, had placed in him. In spite of your great gifts, in spite of your deeds, in spite of your power and prestige, "You are the man." Nathan names the abuse of David's power as king to have what he wants and so to compromise his moral authority. In scripture, David is chastened and sobered, and he acknowledges Nathan's naming of his sin and betrayal of trust. He accepts the consequences, which include the loss of his first-born son. David, however, does not have to deal with the political consequences of his recklessness. He is, after all, still king. He goes on to be Israel's greatest king.

What is most significant about this story is that when Nathan confronts David with the story of the poor man's lamb being taken, *he never mentions "sex" as the issue*. He never refers to adultery. He tells a story about the meager resources of the poor man being stolen by the rich man. There is still much confusion and resistance to dealing with sexual abuse in the Church. I believe the core of these issues has much more to do with theft than sex.

When the U.S. Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church produced the Dallas policy on the sexual abuse of children, we saw some interesting revelations. The bishops directly tied the definition of sexual abuse to a moral standard based on the sixth commandment in Hebrew scripture: "You shall not commit adultery." If this is the basis of their ethical understanding of sexual abuse, then no wonder the

perception persists that the bishops simply don't "get it." The average layperson would rightly ask, "I thought adultery was about adults having sex with someone they are not married to. What does sexual abuse of kids have to do with adultery?"

The fundamental ethical question is "why is it wrong for an adult to be sexual with a child or teen?" The answer is not rocket science. It is a betrayal of trust, a misuse of adult authority, the taking advantage of a child's vulnerability, and sexual activity in the absence of meaningful consent. When you add to this the fact of a priest being sexual with a child, it is also a betrayal of the role of the pastor. Our job as clergy is to nurture the flock, protect them when they are vulnerable, and empower them in their lives – especially children and youth. Our people assume they can trust us to do no harm *because* we are clergy. Sexual abuse betrays that trust.

Sexual abuse harms the child or teen. It is a sin to cause this harm. In Christian scripture, Jesus is very clear: "It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble" (Luke 17:2). The bishops got the wrong commandment. Instead of the sixth commandment, they should have gone to the seventh: "You shall not steal." To steal is to take something that doesn't belong to you. To sexually abuse a child is to steal their innocence and their future, often with profound and tragic consequences.

When an acknowledged pedophile priest can say that he didn't see what was wrong with his sexual behavior with a child since he was taught not to have sex with adult women, we can begin to see the inadequacy of this ethical analysis. The sexual abuse of a child or teen is about the misuse of power by the adult. It is about theft: taking advantage of a child's naivete, stealing his or her future. The Roman Catholic bishops will never be able to move forward and restore credibility to the Church and the priesthood unless they can get their commandments right. They should be worrying about the theft of their children, not about some abstraction of adultery.

The resistance to opening the door wide on the problem of clergy sexual abuse directed against children or adults is not simply because it is often viewed as being about sex. The real resistance is because it is about entitlement. To confront boundary crossings and sexual abuse by clergy is to challenge their entitlement to sexual access to vulnerable people, which appears to be a time-honored tradi-

tion at least among some male clergy. Entitlement is the assumption on the part of those who have some degree of power that they can take what they want (see King David) without consequence and that the rules don't apply to them. Whether their behavior is naïve wandering that crosses boundaries in harmful ways or predatory patterns of abuse, it rests on the amoral assumption that because they have power (role, status, money, etc.) there is no problem misusing that power to meet their own needs and desires. So to challenge the long history of sexual abuse by clergy is to challenge the history of entitlement. It is no wonder that our religious institutions have been slow and resistant to addressing this problem. It is no wonder that the modern-day Nathans have seldom been welcomed by denominational hierarchies.

Now don't get me wrong here. I know very well that the unethical, abusive members of clergy, both male and female, are a minority. But frankly, we don't know how many there are. I know that the majority of clergy, male and female, are thoughtful, conscientious, careful, and responsible in their clerical roles. However, I have heard too many stories and been involved in too many cases of boundary crossing and abuse by clergy not to know that we have a serious problem among us—even to the extent that some male clergy have described being taught by their older clergy mentors that sexual access to the women of their congregation is a perk of ministry, in lieu of an adequate salary.

As clergy we are privileged to be placed in a position of trust and authority, a position that makes ministry possible. This does not entitle us to take—sexually, financially, and emotionally—from those who trust us. The solution here is not creating a faux sense of mutuality between clergy and laity. The solution is to teach clergy to use their resources responsibly, and when they don't, to take away their power and deny them access to vulnerable people.

I have no doubt that a healthier view of sexuality in general would make for a healthier church, and no doubt that accepting *the fact* of gays and lesbians in the pew and in the pulpit would free up enormous energy and resources for ministry in our denominations. But unless we as church deal with power and vulnerability, entitlement and woundedness, we will not see the day that sexual abuse by clergy is a rare and peculiar occurrence and the integrity of the pastoral relationship is restored.

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Homosexuality and Dr. Dobson: What's at Stake in American Christianity?

By Ludger Viefhues-Bailey

It is a staple of my visits to my native Germany to hear friends and family express bewilderment about the protracted controversies surrounding the legal acceptance of gay and lesbian love in the United States. So, I wonder often why American Christians seem obsessed with issues of same-sex love. I sit in the pews and listen to the specter of division in my church, the Episcopal Church, USA.

Given that we, gays and lesbians, are such a minority, and given that nowadays we don't promulgate the overthrow of capitalism through boundaryless copulation, but that we simply desire participation in the bourgeois institution of marriage, I am befuddled. Are the schools in this county in such good shape that you have to worry about this? What about the state of medical care, human rights abuses, racism, fair labor practices, equal pay for women, and divorce rates? What about instilling a desire for the loving union with G-d through Jesus Christ, and the thirst to find divinity in prayer, meditation, and caritas? Why is the love between two women or two men (and the many shades in between) such an obsessive topic for American Christians?

This question demands an exercise of understanding—and more specifically an exercise of theological understanding. What is religiously at stake? My goal is not to convince religiously committed Christians to change their opinion. Rather, my goal is to make publicly available for broader discussion a position that for many secular people seems utterly alien. As such I wish to translate the religious concerns that I see embedded in texts of conservative Christians. By translating them, I want also to raise the question of whether these theological concerns can be conceptualized and lived in alternate ways. For those of us who are theologically minded, we will see how normative and ideal sexuality is used to express theological tropes. This is an important lesson: for a religious person, the body is never private. The body and how we live sexually are im-

mediately of symbolic importance, and it is the field of experience in which we realize our religious lives. Furthermore, I want to show that we are dealing with an American conversation and with a conversation that has deep resonances between a specific religious discourse and popular American mythologies about masculinity. Why is conservative evangelical discourse about homosexuality so effective? Because it is embedded in American constructions of masculinity, and because it presents a powerful body-theology for the Christian traveler.

Let me begin with a distinction from the field of ethics: the difference between ideal norms and practical norms. We adapt to the constraints of real-life situations and negotiate the meaning and importance of what we consider an ethical ideal. Thus, many Christians find practical compromises in their dealings with their homosexual friends and family members. I am reminded of the Catholic family who invites their lesbian daughter, her life partner, and their children to all family festivities while embracing, in principle, the idea that homosexuality is an unnatural abomination. Whence, however, the need to uphold the "ideal norm" that homosexuality is a sin? What is this about?

First, let me say what this is *not* about. For starters it is not about the Bible. The sociologist Sally Gallagher, in an examination of evangelical attitudes toward feminism, concludes, "Beliefs about the Bible, on the other hand, have no significant statistical effects on attitudes toward feminism. Neither thinking that the Bible should be interpreted word



for word nor the idea that the Bible provides the most important source of knowing how God wants you to live has any independent effect on whether feminism is seen as presenting a competing and hostile set of beliefs and values.”¹ Belief in biblical inerrancy *alone* does not predict whether someone will consider feminism as a threat. Independent of religious affiliation, the amount of hours spent consuming Christian evangelical radio or television serves on the other hand as a strong indicator for aversion to feminism.

I assume that this is true for attitudes toward homosexuality. The lived context—the embeddedness in a politico-religious context—establishes the frame of reference according to which religious texts assume their normativity. The general web of plausibilities about gender, power dynamics, sociological position, and so on establishes expectations according to which texts are considered to be normative (or negotiable).

Secondly, it is not about women. When asked who comes to mind when they think about a homosexual person, most respondents name a male figure. This echoes the somewhat peculiar use of language of Dr. Dobson, the founder and chairperson emeritus of the influential Christian media organization Focus on the Family. Mostly, when he talks about homosexuality, he seems to imagine homosexual men. Women are only an afterthought.

If maintaining the ideal norm that “homosexuality is a sin” is not about the Bible and it is not about women, what is it about? Apparently, it is about some form of threat to the American order and structure of the family—a threat that affects men first and naturally. So what is at stake in the maintenance of the ideal norm proscribing homosexual love?

Looking into the Bible would not help, as we have seen. But we can look into the places where evangelical media organizations produce the structures of plausibility that maintain the ideal norms against same-sex love.

LEARNING FROM DR. DOBSON

In the world created by the texts of Focus on the Family, “homosexuality” plays an important role in creating an ideal manhood. We will first meet the “hypermale homosexual” and then the “hypo-male” homosexual and then ask what they contribute to the construction of ideal masculinity.

Hypermale

One of the many examples of the rhetorical construction of homosexuality in Focus on the Family’s literature is Linda Harvey’s “A Checklist to Assess Your School’s Risk for Encouraging Homosexuality.”² Homosexuality is described as “dangerous” and “risky” behavior and is linked to the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Schools that support gay-straight alliance group meetings become “breeding grounds” for homosexuality, and “students’ lives and welfare are put at extreme risk.” Homosexuality is “dangerous, unhealthy” behavior. By contrast, a school resisting the homosexual agenda “maintains high health standards.”

Homosexuality is associated not only with health risks but, moreover, with predatory sexuality targeting children and youths. “Sexual promiscuity is undoubtedly rising among students and teachers, and academics are likely to be suffering” at a school where the homosexual agenda is far advanced, states Linda Harvey’s above mentioned checklist. Students and teachers wanting to engage in homosexual behavior will feel encouraged to do so at those schools. A gay-straight alliance “club provides a venue where students curious about . . . [homosexual] behavior, but who have not yet engaged in it, can readily meet students and even adult advisors to begin homosexual relationships — with school support!”

A discussion of gay “special rights” quotes Matt Staver, the president of the Liberty Counsel, as saying: “he predicted that they won’t stop until their lifestyle is totally accepted by society.”³ The next sentence reads: “The ultimate agenda is to dominate—not to have tolerance, but to dominate—the worldview, and that worldview is homosexuality.” In general, the rhetoric of Focus on the Family presents us with a cluster of associations in which gays are linked to disease, violence, and a predatory sexuality.

It seems as if these predatory gays are fulfilling the dominant ideal of a violent masculinity. Indeed, Dr. Dobson writes that men are “designed” to “value change, opportunity, risk, speculation and adventure” and “boys are designed to be more assertive, audacious and excitable than girls.” A real boy has the tendency to risk life and limbs and “harasses grumpy dogs. . . . He loves to throw rocks, play with fire, and shatter glass. He also gets great pleasure out of irritating . . . other children. As he gets older, he is drawn to everything dangerous. At around sixteen, he and his buddies begin driving around town

like kamikaze pilots on stake. It is a wonder any of them survive.”⁴ In Dobson’s anthropology, boys and men are chemically hardwired to be risk takers and to be assertive and aggressive.

For Dobson, and in the world of the Focus on the Family texts, the assertiveness of males and the passivity of females are not only biologically given but also theologically mandated. The man is the head, the provider, and the guiding force of the family. Given this gender symbolism, we can see that the threatening force of unbounded sexuality that endangers the American family is, in fact, a masculine sexuality. In the world evoked by the Focus on the Family texts, the image of the embattled Christian family at the frontiers of civilization is co-produced with the wild hypermale homosexual whose normative sexual and physical masculine aggression and risk-taking has gone wild.⁵

The Hypo-Male Gay

Side by side with the narrative of the hyper-male predator-queer threatening the pure childlike underdog Christians, we find the narrative of the hypo-male gay male. In *Bringing Up Boys*, Dobson begins his chapter on homosexuality with a letter by a gender-confused thirteen year-old boy: “All through my [very short] life I have acted and looked much more like a girl than a boy. When I was little, I would always wear finger nail polish, dresses, and the sort. I also had an older cousin who would take us (little cousins) into his room and show us his genitals. I’m afraid I have a little sodomy in me.”⁶

Dobson writes in this context that homosexuality is a “sexual identity disorder” related to “cross-gender behavior.” In Dobson’s world, great care has to be invested so that the affected boys and girls learn the proper gender behavior and become comfortable with their sexual identity. Dobson concludes that “masculinity is an achievement.”⁷ Failure to achieve masculinity, or “nonmasculinity,” is characterized by lack of athleticism, passivity, lack of aggressiveness, and by disinterest in “rough and tumble play.”⁸

In general, within the context of the narrative of coming out of homosexuality, we encounter over and over again the compassionate plea to understand the confusion that homosexuals are going through due to their sexual identity disorder. The goal is to allow the homosexual to identify with and embrace his or her biologically given and divinely assigned sexual role. Men have to become comfortable being men and identifying with male role models, while women have to become comfortable being women. As we can read in the testimony of

Andrew Comiskey, the president of Desert Stream, “As I continued to grow in my security as a man among other men, I began to feel and think differently towards women. God began to release my heterosexual desires.”⁹

AN EMBODIED THEOLOGY OF GRACE

Delineating Boundaries

On the background of Focus on the Family’s gender system, we can see that the rhetorical construction of homosexuality produces an image of gayness both as feminine and as over-masculine. What is the link between these “homosexualities” and the production of normative masculinities?

The rhetorical construction of both homosexualities is located within the rhetorical production of normative masculinity. In this reading, both constructions of homosexuality present the feared positions into which normative Christian manhood could devolve. The over-aggressive homosexual is in rebellion against the divine will and natural order. Re-citing this image of chaotic maleness over and over again thus represents the normative vision of submissiveness. The gay hypo-male presents the opposite danger for the normative Christian male. Normative Christian masculinity has to embrace the natural and divinely ordained aggressiveness and assertiveness. Homosexual males are therefore construed as the Scylla and Charybdis between which the normative male Christian traveler has to find his way.

Interestingly, the rhetorical constructions of homosexualities in the world of Focus on the Family’s texts exhibit a clear and deep uneasiness about the foundations of sex and sexual behavior. On the one hand, boys are boys, and they are hardwired to assume their natural and God-given roles. “The sexes were carefully designed by the Creator to balance one another’s weakness and meet one another’s needs.”¹⁰ As we have already seen, Dobson explicitly states that “what it means to be masculine” and why “boys are a breed apart” is determined by “testosterone, serotonin and the amygdalae.”¹¹ On the other hand, “masculinity is an achievement” and growing up straight takes work.¹² Men should not be “feminized, emasculated, and wimpified [sic].”¹³ On the one hand, less than 3 percent of the population is homosexual, according to Focus on the Family. On the other hand, the threat to our boys is great. Children can be seduced and contaminated by homosexuals.

If what it means to be a man is biologically determined, and if male and heterosexual desire and behavior are hardwired into our bodies, then there should be little room for achieving masculinity, nor should there be room for feminizing men or for luring them into homosexuality. Dobson writes that the feminist agenda of “wimpifying” men will never succeed because “it contradicts masculine nature.”¹⁴ Instead of a logical conundrum, I understand these conflicting messages as expressing a deep uneasiness about the foundations of sexuality and our biological nature.

To further this line of analysis, let me finally look into some more theological references to our sexual nature in the texts of *Focus on the Family*. In connection with homosexual desires we find nature fallen into Godless chaos—hence the allusions to paganism and chaotic lives and sexualities in the construction of both feminism and homosexuality. The values that sustain the family “are continually exposed to the wrath of hell itself.”¹⁵ Theologically speaking, the so-called homosexual and feminist agendas are associated with a fundamental corruption of nature. In the construction of these homosexual or feminist movements we see nature as fundamentally corrupted by rebellion and sin.

This threat to God’s natural order, however, reveals at the same time the instability of this very order of things—or the potential for this order to be thrown into chaos by forces of sin and evil. Behind the appearance of a stable order of nature we find a world threatened to disintegrate into chaos at every step. The texts of *Focus on the Family* construct a double vision of nature: there is nature corrupted and there is nature redeemed. In the textual struggles surrounding both homosexualities, we see nature as cast in the image of sin or nature as created by God. Given this double vision, the Christian life appears as a passage from one form of nature to the other.

It is therefore not surprising to find this double vision of nature at another place in the world of *Focus on the Family* (a place which does not deal with homosexuality at all)—namely, in Heather Jamieson’s article “Pursuing Holiness in Marriage.” She describes marriage as a struggle for forgiveness and for holiness. “Holiness means that we are to become different from our natures, which have nursed us and comforted us. Our perception of holiness may be intimidating or fuzzy at first. But in time our minds will be renewed with the Truth, which gives us clear perception and a reflection of God’s glory.”¹⁶

Jamieson names the different ways in which her own nature and her natural desires hinder holiness and a fulfilling life of marriage. Jamieson concludes that holiness “goes against our flesh. It is in opposition to our natures.”¹⁷ This natural resistance to holiness is grounded in our resistance to Jesus’ holiness. To overcome this natural resistance Jamieson advises to “rest in Jesus.”¹⁸ She continues, “Adore Him for yourself. When you do, you will soon find that those bull’s-eyes you painted grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. You will also find that reclaiming intimacy in your marriage is not only possible—it is *natural*.”¹⁹

Resting in Jesus suddenly brings to light a different experience of nature in line with holiness. Nature corrupted becomes nature redeemed through passivity, that is, through resting in Jesus, adoring Jesus, and trusting Jesus to fulfill my needs.

What does all this mean for the production of normative masculinity? The predatory queer homosexual hypermale represents, in the world of *Focus on the Family*, nature corrupted by sin. More importantly, this homosexual character represents nature refusing redemption. The gender-instability gay, on the other hand, represents nature redeemable and nature redeemed. In his turn to Jesus, the feminized gay finds redemption of his nature. If the feminized homosexual actively embraces Jesus and passively “rests in Jesus,” then Jesus will restore his masculinity.

In this body theology of natural redemption we find an intricate play of agency (a play not unfamiliar to students of Christian theology). On the one hand, the Christian male has to rest in Jesus or submit to the power of God. This submission to other-power itself, on the other hand, is an activity: Submission means to submit yourself. We thus see how this tension between activity and passivity is inherent in the mode of bodily producing normative Christian masculinity. None of this is made explicit. Instead of conceptual theology, we can glean an embodied theology from the texts of *Focus on the Family*. Folded into the production of an ever-unstable normative masculinity is, in other words, a potent discourse on nature and grace.

Notes

- 1 Sally K. Gallagher, "Where Are the Antifeminist Evangelicals? Evangelical Identity, Subcultural Location, and Attitudes toward Feminism." *Gender and Society* 18, no. 4 (2004): 468.
- 2 Linda Harvey, "A Checklist to Assess Your School's Risk for Encouraging Homosexuality," (2002), retrieved on March 20, 2003, from <http://www.family.org/cforum/tempforum/A0015282.html>. Note that this article is not accessible anymore, but it can be found through the following link of the "Web Archive," <http://web.archive.org/web/20021020141332/www.family.org/cforum/tempforum/A0015282.html>.
- 3 Steve Jordahl, "New Hate Crime States Released" in *Family News*, (2002), retrieved on July 9, 2003, from <http://www.family.org/cforum/fnif/news/a0023536.html>.
- 4 James Dobson, , *Bringing Up Boys*, (Wheaton, Ill. : Tyndale House, 2001), pp. 27, 2, 4.
- 5 These findings echo Didi Herman's readings of the movie *The Gay Agenda*. According to Herman, for the Christian Right gay desires embody in this movie a "hyper-masculinity, a maleness so extreme it literally (ex)implodes." Didi Herman, *The Anti-Gay Agenda, Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago Univ. Press, 1997), p. 87.
- 6 Dobson, *Bringing Up Boys*, p. 113. This letter talks about how the boy tried to "suck [his] own penis," lusts at himself "wearing skimpy underwear," and enjoys the "sexual sensation" when he wiggles his "body rapidly, making [his] genitals bounce up and down." The reader wonders why Dobson prints this piece in detail.
- 7 Ibid., 118.
- 8 Ibid., p. 119. Dobson quotes here the psychiatrist Dr. Joseph Nicolosi, who is also a contributor to Focus on the Family's websites. Cf., Joseph Nicolosi, "Is This Really Good for Kids?" in *Teachers in Focus*, (2000), retrieved on July 9, 2003, from <http://www.family.org/cforum/teachersmag/features/a0013018.html>.
- 9 Desert Stream is one of the "resources" linked to by Focus on the Family as providing "Help for the Homosexual," (CitizenLink, 1999), 24.
- 10 Dobson, *Bringing Up Boys*, p. 27.
- 11 Ibid., p. 26.
- 12 Ibid., p. 22. Here Dobson quotes Nicolosi.
- 13 Ibid., p. 26.
- 14 Ibid., pp. 26-27.
- 15 James Dobson, "To the Husbands of Christian Homemakers," *Husbands and Wives: Communication*, (2003), retrieved on July 9, 2003, from <http://www.family.org/married/comm/a0019596.cfm>, paragraph 8.
- 16 Heather Jamison, "Pursuing Holiness in Marriage (Part 3 of 3)," *Husbands and Wives: Sex and Romance*, (2003), paragraph 7. Retrieved on July 9, 2003, from <http://www.family.org/married/romance/a0019336.cfm>
- 17 Ibid, paragraph 11.
- 18 Ibid, paragraph 25.
- 19 Ibid, paragraph 26. Italics mine.

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Tasting the Wine: The Nun, the Filmmaker, and the Risk of Freedom

By Michael Bernard Kelly

Wearing her sensible shoes and carrying her oversized handbag, Sister Jeannine Gramick walks along the grand colonnade that frames St. Peter's Square. Her dark skirt and checked jacket stand out against the pale old marble of the huge pillars. The viewer's eye is drawn to her, this small figure moving amid all the immense immobility.

*Editor's Note: A funny thing happened on the way to publication. A key presence in the award-winning documentary film discussed below, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was elevated to pope on April 29, 2005. The film, *In Good Conscience*, is receiving standing ovations at festivals around the world, at a time of increasing religious and political fractiousness regarding the rights of lesbian and gay people in the church and society.*

Sister Jeannine stops to talk to a Swiss guard, then turns left and walks to the front door of the Holy Office, the headquarters of the Inquisition. She has come with a gift for the Grand Inquisitor. It is her little book, newly translated into Italian as *Anime Gay*.¹

Sister Jeannine's gift giving is daring and symbolic. For more than twenty years her ministry to lesbian and gay Catholics has been under investigation by officials from this office. She has been scrutinized, criticized, silenced, and condemned. She has borne it all with grace and gentle resolution, and quietly found ways to continue her work.

Finally, in May 2000, in an attempt to silence her permanently, she was banned from ever speaking about the procedures used in the Vatican investigation. Gramick responded in an unforgettable statement: "I choose not to collaborate in my own oppression."²

It was this statement that first drew the attention of New York journalist and filmmaker Barbara Rick. As part of her freelance work at ABC News, Rick was poring over the *New York Times* when she discovered this nun "standing alone, standing on principle, and standing up to the Vatican. I knew I had to make a film about this woman."³ Four years

later, in June 2004, Rick's film *In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith* had its premiere at New York's Lincoln Center. Over the past two years it has been screening at film festivals from Milan to Toronto to Sydney, where it has received standing ovations.⁴

I met Barbara Rick and Jeannine Gramick in Manhattan on a windy afternoon. The warmth between them, the good humor, and the mutual respect were striking. The sixty-one year-old nun, with her smiling eyes and soft pastels, and the feisty forty-five year-old New York filmmaker in her basic black, seemed like sisters as they argued and chuckled about the Church and the world.

Barbara Rick's office is filled with awards. Three gleaming Emmys hold pride of place and the walls are covered with commendations from institutions across the United States, including the prestigious Peabody Award. There are also framed clippings and photographs from her years working with legendary television journalist Gabe Pressman, who spotted her talent while she was still in college and hired her as his assistant and later as his producer. Success came early to Rick. For more than a decade she threw herself into the world of television journalism and was rewarded with professional respect



and material prosperity. She tells me she enjoyed the gracious lakefront home, three boats, and light aircraft that she shared with her first husband.

As she shows me around her office it becomes clear that she takes pride in her achievements. I decide to probe a little. "Do awards matter to you?" "Yes, they do," she says. "It's great to have your work acknowledged. Of course, a BMW convertible and a house in the Hamptons would also be nice!" "Didn't you already go on that trip?" I protest. She laughs and leaves me to take a phone call. I scan the panoply of awards and wonder how an ambitious, heterosexual Manhattan journalist came to make a film about a demure Catholic nun silenced for her ministry to gay people. Clearly, there was more to this woman than success and prosperity.

Barbara Rick grew up in New Jersey, the eldest of six children in a devout Catholic family. She imbibed three quintessential Catholic qualities: a sense of the spiritual, a concern for the oppressed, and a gnawing shame around sexuality. As we talk, she hunches her shoulders and lets her dark hair fall forward, mimicking her own adolescent attempt to hide her developing breasts, to cover the shame of being sexual, being female. There is still a quiet fury in her at the Church's treatment of women and at the burden of embodied guilt that so many Catholics carry. She tells me she cannot endure the hypocrisy in the Church, the aggressive patriarchy, the abuse of power. "How can anyone remain in an institution that treats you as inferior and unworthy, that refuses to let you speak?"

I think of the twenty-one year-old woman in those framed photographs, surrounded by political and media heavyweights—most of them male. She looks vulnerable and naïve. Yet her talent and passion drove her to succeed in one of the toughest professions of all. Was she proving something to herself, I wonder—or perhaps to the hierarchies of power that would have kept her in her place?

Either way, she chose a very particular proving ground. The documentaries that earned her so many awards focused on heavy issues that she produced: *Homelessness: The Shame of a City* (1981); *Asylum in the Streets* (1983); *The Politics of Cancer* (1985); *The Hungry* (1982); and *To Bear Witness* (1981) – which chronicled the first world meeting of Holocaust survivors. Rick likes to be on the cutting edge – but it seems to be the edge where the disenfranchised gather, simply not the edge where the glittering prizes are found. Her journalism in those years shows a person who, almost in spite of her drive for success, is passionate about the rights of the underdog.

In 1993, Rick left her job at WNBC-TV. She says it was because the network had been sold to corporate America and it no longer championed the serious journalism to which she was committed. However, I cannot but wonder whether, having moved beyond the need to prove herself, she was ready for a more radical life challenge. Around the same time she had also left her troubled first marriage and her luxurious but unhappy home. When she speaks of this period, Rick uses terms like "my life's turning point" or "having my shackles removed." She began to turn regularly to meditation, seeking guidance for her new and uncertain path. In time, inspiration came in the form of four short statements that Rick has embraced as her mantras for living: Be humble. Walk erect. Enjoy everything possible. Seek God always and in every situation.

In 1998, Rick founded her own independent film company and brought together into a new synthesis her skills, passion, and deepening spirituality. Her company, Out of the Blue Films, operates out of an office on East 11 Street. Its mission statement reads like the climax of Rick's personal journey and a blueprint for her future: "to serenely, enthusiastically and profitably create critically and commercially successful documentary and feature films that explore, articulate and celebrate humanity."⁵

On a steamy spring evening in Manhattan's West Village, Barbara Rick is speaking at a seminar for up-and-coming documentary filmmakers. As usual, she is disarmingly frank, and it soon becomes clear just how deep her commitment goes. This woman who once shared ownership of an airplane now works a second job to keep her film company afloat. She has had to learn the ancient mendicant art of begging for funds. She has struggled to release her anxious grip and "trust the Spirit." She speaks of her filmmaking as a "vocation—not in any messianic sense, but in the sense that this is what I deeply believe I am called to do in the world, and if I can make space for the Spirit then the vision and the means will be given." In a brief exchange when strategies for fund-raising are being earnestly debated, Rick says plainly, "the people I ask for money are not my true 'source.' They are simply a generous expression of it."

Rick goes on to talk about the duty she feels to be "responsible, frugal, and practical" with the funds she is given. She speaks of "surrender and trust," of "putting in the effort and leaving the outcomes to God," of "following your call"—and suddenly I am struck by the similarity between her words and the admonitions given to spiritual seekers in any number of traditions. The conclusion becomes clear: for

Barbara Rick, filmmaking is not just grounded in a spiritual vision, it is itself a spiritual practice. For all the challenges and the uncertainty, she clearly feels a new sense of freedom and purpose that brings creativity and vision into her life.

The more I listen to Rick, the more I understand how she was drawn to the story of Jeannine Gramick. Sister Jeannine could easily have been one of Rick's convent school teachers. For many years she was, in her own words, "a good little nun," wearing the habit and following the rule. Then in 1971 a young man named Dominic told her he was gay. As a good nun she was accepting and compassionate. And then he challenged her: "What is the Catholic Church doing for my gay brothers and sisters? And what are you doing, Sister? You better do something!" Gramick says she looked at this whole class of people who were neglected, silenced, and oppressed in the name of Christ and knew her life was about to change. In Rick's film, Gramick says that today, after some thirty years of ministry to gay Catholics, she still feels Dominic at her side, supporting and encouraging her.

It is this profound sense of the dignity of each person that has compelled Gramick to persevere in her ministry. Where others see issues, she sees persons, and so she will face (has faced?) down the Vatican's condemnations by begging Cardinal Ratzinger, for example, to "meet the wonderful lesbian and gay Catholics I have known," and she will refuse to condemn those who condemn her, encouraging gay Catholics to have compassion for Church leaders since "we always have to meet each person where they are." A moment in Rick's film captures this perfectly. As Gramick walks through St. Peter's Square, bringing her troublesome little book as a gift for the man who silenced her, she says, "We have to forge ahead. We have to keep taking steps that are liberating for others."⁶ This is true whether those "others" are gay Catholics or red-robed cardinals.

In May 1999, when Jeannine Gramick was ordered to remain silent about her own experience of the Vatican investigation, she reached a turning point. "Here I was being told I couldn't speak about my own life, about what I had gone through. That's not right. You can't deny a person the right to speak about her own life." It was at this point that she took her faith and her future in her hands and said, "I choose not to collaborate in my own oppression."

This simple statement echoed around the Catholic world. I remember reading it in Australia, where I live, and cheering for this nun. As a gay man and a Catholic, I sensed that this woman, after years of

ministry to others, had finally been brought face to face with the deepest oppression of all: the oppression that we ourselves collaborate with, the oppression that has taken root in our own hearts. Gay people call this "internalized homophobia," but it is common to all people who have endured entrenched, sanctified abuse, denigration, and hatred. At some point we learn to take the oppression into our own hearts and to act out of it, accepting it as the truth about ourselves and as the voice of God. There is nothing worse that can be done to a person's spirit, and nothing harder to undo. It is soul murder, and it bears deadly fruit.

This fruit can be as varied as the anguish of a young man who believes his only options are suicide or celibacy since he thinks he may be gay, or a young woman who hunches forward to hide her developing breasts. This poisonous fruit ripens at the point when we no longer need any religious authority to condemn us as "unworthy," and we start doing it ourselves. At so many levels, and with so many rationalizations, we learn to collaborate in our own oppression.

On this foundation rest all the protocols of duplicity, the abuses of power, the structures of patronage and hypocrisy that so disease the Church. People who believe, at the deepest levels, that they are "unworthy" are easily intimidated by those wielding "sacred power," and they readily learn how to survive in a system that rewards silence and pious complicity. How else can we explain the fact that in an age when there are more educated, articulate Catholics than ever before, it is still so rare to hear any priest, theologian, bishop, or lay person say the words Sister Jeannine said in 2000?

Barbara Rick says these words struck her to the core when she read them in the *New York Times*, and she knew immediately that this woman's courageous stance had to be put before the world. Four years of intense involvement with her subject have only deepened her respect. In Sister Jeannine she sees a woman who shows every woman, and every Catholic, that you can, and sometimes you must, stand up to abusive systems and refuse to collaborate. As we talk, Rick is anxious to ensure that I realize that the Vatican office to which Gramick delivered her book was the headquarters of the Inquisition. Its name has changed through the centuries, but here was housed the system that oversaw the torture of heretics, the condemnation of Galileo, and the burning of countless women who had been condemned as witches.



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As she filmed Sister Jeannine walking up to that Vatican door, I wonder, did Rick see this nun as standing up for her, facing down the religious system that so repressed her as a young woman and that still treats her as inferior? When I put this to her, Rick responds with a passionate "Yes!" She goes on to express her outrage at Archbishop Sean O'Malley of Boston, who refused to wash the feet of women at the Church's traditional Holy Thursday liturgy. As an artist Rick understands the power of symbol, and as a woman she feels the pain of such toxic discrimination.

So this film, while it continues Rick's practice of exploring issues of justice, also emerges from that personal place where she has known the pain of oppression and had to find the path to freedom. There is something potentially transformative, I believe, about touching this place in oneself. It can move us from "doing good for others" to realizing that we are also the abused "other," that we too have a right to liberation and that only when we claim our dignity can we truly stand in solidarity with other oppressed people. This is the moment when the political becomes personal. If we can integrate this experience we are freed to risk in surprising and radical ways.

I see this happening in Sister Jeannine herself. Throughout this film we see three deepening levels of liberation within her. First, she says she is "building bridges" between gay and lesbian Catholics and the Church hierarchy. Her role is to bring the two sides together in dialogue, without judging either side or declaring her own position. Admirable as this is, it remains a ministry to "others." Second, we see her talking with groups of gay Catholics. Here it is clear that she is taking sides, she is passionately involved, she is committed to empowering gay Catholics to listen to their consciences in ways that liberate them.

It is this level of Gramick's ministry that most disturbed the Vatican. Unable to prove, however, that she had ever actually contradicted Catholic teaching, Church officials demanded that she reveal her innermost, private thoughts about gay love. She refused, and this was used to bolster the accusation that her ministry was "ambiguous," "confusing," and "harmful" to the "faithful."⁷ On this basis she was permanently banned from all pastoral ministry to gay people. Significantly, she accepted this ban but continued to talk critically about her own experience of the Vatican investigation and to discuss issues related to homosexuality.

The third level of liberation comes when Sister Jeannine is ordered, under her vow of obedience, to remain permanently silent about the investigation itself, about “my own life, about what I had been through,” as she puts it. Here, the oppression that she had always opposed in the lives of others touched her in her own deepest place. Risking expulsion from her religious order, she responded by doing what she had encouraged others to do—she refused to collaborate in her own oppression. The political had become deeply, painfully personal.

My belief is that this moment will prove transformative for Sister Jeannine. For the time being she has side-stepped the looming crisis by transferring to another order of nuns, the Loretto Sisters, whose superiors are willing to support her in standing up to the Vatican. However, with the current controversy over same-sex marriage stirring Catholic bishops into something rather like a frenzy, it is hard to believe Church authorities will leave her alone for long. They will not have missed the fact she has begun speaking again—both in the United States and in Italy, where the new translation of her book is drawing widespread support. This speaking could look either courageous or foolhardy, but I suspect there is a growing freedom within Sister Jeannine that no Vatican edict will stop.

Throughout her life Gramick has steadfastly maintained two protocols. First, she has never revealed her own sexual orientation, arguing that this silence keeps the focus on her ministry of “bridge-building.” Several times in this film, however, she talks openly of her deepening unease about keeping her orientation private, especially since she has been so forthright in calling others to “come out” and claim their right to live with dignity. Listening to her, it is hard to resist the feeling that she is approaching a new edge of openness.

The second protocol is, perhaps, even more crucial since it concerns official Church teaching: Gramick has never openly stated what she personally believes about sexual expression in gay relationships. However, with the issue of same-sex marriage heating up, it is inevitable that she will be challenged on this. Over dinner I put this to her and she replied, “I support the statement made by the National Coalition of American Nuns in 1996, that ‘if heterosexual unions are recognized by the state, a lack of similar recognition of same-sex unions is an unambiguous discrimination based on sexual orientation. Such discrimination is politically and morally wrong.’”¹³

Struck by this, I say to her, “Does this mean you believe sexual expression in gay relationships can be good and even holy?” She replies, “As I say, I support the 1996 statement by the National Coalition of American Nuns.” Not to be outdone, I repeat, “Yes, but do you believe sex within loving gay relationships can be good and holy?” She pauses then says, “Yes.” A little stunned, I continue, “You do realize what you are saying?” She smiles and says, “Yes.” I sit back in my chair, take a breath, and look across the table at Barbara Rick, who is also quietly smiling.

In this brief moment, in a noisy Manhattan restaurant, the liberation in love promised by Christ suddenly seems palpable. I look at these two very different women who have been brought together by their love of justice and their journeys of integration, and who even now are taking new risks as they embrace freedom for themselves and for others.

Is there a deeper purpose moving within humanity, I wonder, that inspires our small actions for justice, our brief moments of courage, our fragile hopes of freedom, and that gently, almost unobtrusively, sweeps them up into a greater, grander story of liberation? Do we begin by caring for the oppressed other, only to discover that there is no “other,” and that liberation must take root in our own lives if we are ever to truly stand for justice? What is the hidden energy that draws us into freedom, leading us through the gateway of our own hearts, and releasing us to risk everything for a vision of life that only love can give?

I look at Sister Jeannine, this woman who has spent her life challenging sanctified oppression on behalf of others. I think of how she is claiming her own freedom and saying “Yes” at deeper levels. I raise my glass to her, and wonder who it is that works within us, often in spite of us, to draw us into a new life we hardly dared imagine. I take a sip from my glass and wonder if, even now, I am tasting the new wine of the Kingdom of God.

Notes

- 1 Gramick, J. and Nugent, R. “Building Bridges: Gay and Lesbian Reality and the Catholic Church,” Mystic Rivr, Conn.: Twenty-third Publications, 1992). Translated into Italian as *Anime Gay* by Editori Riuniti in 2004.
- 2 Quoted in the film *In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith*, Out of the Blue Films, 2004.

- 3 This and all other unreferenced quotes are from personal conversations the author of this essay held with Barbara Rick and Jeannine Gramick in New York City in May 2004.
- 4 From the film *In Good Conscience*.
- 5 Quoted on the company's Web site: www.outofthebluefilms.com.
- 6 Quoted in the film *In Good Conscience*.
- 7 Ibid. The reference is to the "Notification" concerning the ministry of Sister Jeannine Gramick and Father Robert Nugent, issued by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in May 1999, authored by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.
- 8 "Statement on Same-Sex Marriage," issued by the National Coalition of American Nuns, 1996.

Michael Kelly is a writer, educator, and spiritual activist who is known internationally for his work in gay spirituality. His background includes 17 years as a teacher and lay chaplain in Catholic schools and universities in Australia and the USA, and he holds degrees in theology, education and spirituality. Recently, he served as scholar in residence at Easton Mountain retreat center.



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and the racetrack
one of a throng of Maries waiting at the finish.
Eager to meet the arms of a well-chiseled creed,
willing to believe again.

—Meredith Farmer Grubbs '06 M.Div.

From the Editor



There is no doubt that in our culture, especially our media, sex sells. Whether the venue is advertising, television, music videos, video games, or movies, it is hard to avoid encountering some form of sexual imagery or sexual reference. Though only fifty years ago the word “pregnant” was banned from being uttered on “I Love Lucy,” and married couples on shows like “Leave It to Beaver” slept in separate beds, today the amount of pandering to sex to get people to watch or to buy seems limitless. Our culture has quickly moved from a state of repression vis a vis sex, to a frenzied obsession.

Ironically, the churches, which so often pride themselves on being counter-cultural, are finding themselves wrapped up in a situation that is not dissimilar. Questions about sexuality are plaguing and rending every Christian church at this moment. From the Catholic Church to the mainline Protestant churches to the Evangelical churches, none is immune from a litany of sexual controversies: pre-marital sex, divorce, contraception, abortion, pedophilia, sexual abuse, ordination of gay priests, same-sex relations, transexuality, intersexuality, and perhaps the most egregiously overlooked sexual issue: the treatment and exclusion of women.

For those who believe that gay and lesbian issues are the only issues of sexuality facing the churches, it is important to remember that these are but one petition on an increasingly long prayer list. The intensity of alarm over same-sex relations and their polarizing, if not schismatic, power may be evidence that the root cause of concern is deeper than homosexuality. The cause of this controversy may very well be rooted Christianity’s timeless and universal struggle with sexuality itself—a struggle that is born in the Genesis narrative of Adam and Eve, a depiction of whom appears on the cover of this issue of *Reflections*.

While many have interpreted the Adam and Eve story as a chronicle of the birth of life and death, a closer reading also reveals that it is an account of the genesis of our shame towards our sexuality. Before

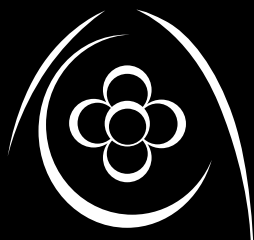
taking the fruit, the man and the woman are said to be naked and unashamed. After realizing their nakedness, they hide from God, convinced that God, too, will be embarrassed by their exposed genitalia. When God realizes that they are hiding because they are ashamed of their nakedness, God is angry and, with a heavy heart, makes them clothes and expels them from the garden. This is not how God wanted us to understand our nakedness, our sexuality.

The artist who depicts our cover image of Adam and Eve and all of the other images in this latest issue of *Reflections* is Tamara de Lempicka, a Polish-born Russian who fled to Paris when the Bolsheviks arrested her husband during the revolution. Though de Lempicka was one of the twentieth century’s most sought after portrait artist, she gained little notoriety during her lifetime because she was a woman. While few would argue that de Lempicka held any explicit religious beliefs or values, it would be hard to doubt the depth of her understanding of female strength, the holiness of sensuality, the fluidity of gender, and the joys and sufferings bound up in our bodily vulnerability.

It is precisely the church’s traditional perception of our nakedness, our sexuality, and our embodiment as stumbling blocks on the path to spiritual integration that is at the root of so much of this current consternation surrounding issues of sexuality. It is our hope that the words and images contained in this issue of *Reflections* will help religious communities undo the tragedy of Adam and Eve, by facing their our own sexuality, accepting it as a gift from God (and therefore very, very good), and re-integrating it into healthy and whole vision of themselves as body, mind, and spirit.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. L. Manson'.

Jamie L. Manson
Editor



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