

New religious scholarship on Sexuality

*Mary E. Hunt**

October 2004

New religious scholarship on sexuality features changes in both the assumptions that underlie it and the methods used to accomplish it. Religious scholarship in general is woefully behind the secular tide on these matters. The challenge to progressives is twofold: (1) to get up to speed on sexology and related research so as to develop religious positions that are consistent with today's reality; (2) to disseminate our findings and insights through the most effective public means possible rather than engage in old debates among ourselves.

I bemoan the state of religious scholarship on sexuality. The vast majority of publications, especially from mainline Christian religious presses, reflect embarrassingly basic sexological knowledge. They mix scientific data with faith-based prejudices. There are exceptions, of course. I think of Marvin M. Ellison's helpful book, *Same Sex Marriage: A Christian Ethical Analysis*, and Christine E. Gudorf's "The Erosion of Sexual Dimorphism: Challenges to Religion and Religious Ethics" [*Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69 (2001) 863–891] in which she rejects thinking about sexuality in either/or terms. But looking to religious scholarship for innovative sexual theory is, in my view, a wrong bet. Sociological, psychological, anthropological, and even economic analyses reveal a good deal more about the reality of contemporary American sexual practices, attitudes, and values than the religious literature.

However, religion brings something to the conversation that I do not want to lose, namely the dual claims: (1) that our sexualities are dynamics of connection between us as human beings; (2) that sexuality has meaning and value that transcends the everyday and links us with the divine. While these are articulated variously in our many faith traditions, I take them as working assumptions and look at the emerging scholarship for what insights it might reveal. First, a word about my perspective.

As a Roman Catholic feminist, I can honestly say that I do not so much disagree with the institutional Catholic Church on sexuality, misguided as it is on virtually every sexual theme from masturbation and birth control to abortion and same-sex marriage. Rather, I live in a different universe than the one the institutional church seems to address. The Catholic Church provides answers to virtually everything. However, the answers largely are to questions that most Catholics are not asking and have not asked in decades. For example, no one I know worries at all about masturbation and yet the Catholic Church teaches it is a grave sin. Most people I know are concerned about access to health care, especially reproductive health care, as a matter of necessity and justice at a time when it is unavailable to millions of people in this country and rationed even to those for whom it is available. Yet the Catholic Church makes a business of abortion, as if one woman's hard choice, and not war, the economy, and the environment, were the most important moral issue of the moment.

I have come to think of this as the "Jeopardy" model of doing theology (after the TV show) except that Catholics don't even get to pick the categories. If it were simply a parlor game, it would be amusing. But in the face of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, and sexual violence, such theology is harmful. When used as a basis for making public policy, it is dangerous unto deadly.

* Doutora em Teologia Feminista e coordenadora da Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual – WATER.

That is why I reject teachings that are unhelpful, and propose alternative models and ideas from within the Catholic sphere of influence.

It would be ecumenically impolitic and impolite of me to offer such a critique of other religious traditions' religious scholarship on sexuality. But with few exceptions like the 1991 Presbyterian report, "*Keeping Body and Soul Together*", which was a minority report to that church's more conservative Presbyterians and Human Sexuality; or the Unitarian Universalist Association/United Church of Christ religious education curriculum, "Our Whole Lives"; and "Keeping It Real!" developed by the Black Church Initiative of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, all of which will save lives – there simply is not an abundance of useful material coming from single religious institutions. Fortunately, there is a flowering of new projects that approach the subject differently, leaving behind the single denomination or tradition in favor of collaborative work, forsaking apologetics for analysis, and substituting inclusivity and tolerance for truth and doctrine.

There is still relatively little exchange between religious professionals working on sexuality and our secular counterparts. Again, exceptions prove the rule with the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing; Catholics for a Free Choice; and a few other religious groups collaborating with secular organizations like Freedom to Marry and Planned Parenthood. I observe that religious people are still talking among themselves in language and images that feel comfortable to them even in the midst of deep disagreements, but do not make much of a difference beyond their closed circles. If I were to use their vernacular, I would say, "The Holy Spirit is no respecter of viruses regardless of what conservative Christians think about condoms".

Four major changes on the sex scene in the past two decades demand a wholesale rethinking of religious sexual ethics. Taken together, these form a checklist against which to evaluate religious

scholarship on sexuality and ethics. If these four assumptions are not given, the analysis and/or ethical approach is most likely out of date.

1) At a meeting a dozen years sponsored by Catholics for a Free Choice, Dr. Jose Barzelatto, then of the Ford Foundation, made the case that in large parts of the world, including the U.S., a woman engages in heterosexual intercourse with the intention of getting pregnant perhaps twice in her life. The rest of the time she uses, or would like to use, some form of contraception. Likewise, new reproductive technologies are becoming ever more widely available for better and for worse such that pregnancy without heterosexual intercourse is increasing in frequency. The default assumption that pregnancy and heterosexual intercourse are linked is simply no longer the case. Many people in the meeting were surprised by the bald nature of this claim, but it is now taken as quite commonplace although you would never know it to read much of the religious literature on sexuality.

2) Another major change is the shift from homosexuality being taboo and sinful to the now growing acceptance of same-sex marriage. Of course, there are many homosexualities and many continuing problems ways in which race, class, gender, age, nationality, and the like shape what it means to engage in same-sex love relationships. For example, *The Washington Post* ran a recent series on young lesbian/gay people. I wish *The Post* had looked at some of the healthy, well-adjusted lesbians/gays, rather than perpetuating the stereotype that all lesbian/gay kids have psychological problems (what heterosexual teens don't?). But the series showed the variety of people whose love runs in the same-sex direction. The rural redneck young man profiled lives on the edge of danger all the time as backlash abounds. The young African American girl's life on the streets of Newark, New Jersey is profiled sympathetically despite her masculine demeanor and streetwise ways.

Even if the majority of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer people are not as white, middle class, home owning, and grass cutting as I am, homosexuality simply is not the horror it was a generation ago. Polls indicate that for young people homosexuality is of relatively little importance, not a huge problem. Even the Religious Right has figured this out, which accounts for their frantic efforts against same-sex marriage. They have to make their moves now because their long-term hopes on this front are limited; it simply will not be an issue in 20 years. Same-sex marriage then will be like divorce, which went from the unheard of to the commonplace in mere decades. Nonetheless, religious people debate these issues on both sides as if it were the 1960s all over again, as if Ozzie were leaving Harriett for Beaver Cleaver's dad.

3) A third change is the fact that transgender people have upset the sexual applecart. We used to know what a man was, what a woman was, indeed, who was a lesbian on the basis of her object choice for a sexual partner, that a man was gay because he loved another man. The challenge of trans people is that we cannot be so sure of any of this anymore. We all have to rethink our identities and commitments. Trans activists like Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg have taught us that gender is far more fluid than we think, and that there are more than two choices. While most religious people have not figured this out yet, they ignore it at their peril.

Religious leadership on transgender issues has come from a relatively unlikely source, an evangelical feminist. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott's book Omnigender: A Trans-religious Approach makes obvious the limits of binary categories and the need to rethink all gender assumptions. This "good news" is not universally well received, even among religious lesbian/gay/bisexual/queer people who are working day and night to change their respective faith communities' positions. They are forced to stand back and rethink analyses and strategies crafted as if sex and gender were fixed.

More work is needed to tease out the implications of these insights. However, the genie is

out of the bottle and she is trans. Any work on sexual ethics that does not recognize the creatively destabilizing impact of trans people is back a decade or two.

4) The fourth change is the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. It has morphed in two decades from a disease found in the U.S. mostly in white gay men to a disease now found disproportionately in developing countries, in poor communities with women and dependent children the fastest growing cohort. The data tell the tale:

- Total number of AIDS deaths between 1981 and the end of 2003: 20 million.
- Total number of children orphaned by AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa between 1981 and the end of 2003: 12 million.
- By December 2003, women accounted for nearly 50% of all people living with HIV worldwide, and for 57% in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Young people (15-24 years old) account for half of all new HIV infections worldwide, more than 6000 become infected with HIV every day.
- An estimated five million people in low and middle income countries do not have the AIDS drugs which could save their lives.

<http://www.avert.org/worldstats.htm> (10/4/04)

Experts from the World Health Organization indicate that we are still at the beginning of the pandemic. Religious groups have been helpful on the charity front, providing food, shelter, and medical care for those who are sick. But few of them have been justice workers, trying to change the globally unjust conditions that ground the disease. Some religions, especially conservative Christianity, such as the Catholic ban on condom use, have contributed to the spread of the disease.

In light of these four new sexual realities decoupling of heterosex and pregnancy; increased normativity of homosexuality; challenge to all gender assumptions from trans people; the HIV/AIDS pandemic the need for new religious scholarship on sexual ethics is urgent.

New scholarship is the fruit of new voices, new modes of work, and new ways of understanding issues. One such project issued in a book Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religions, edited by theologians Patricia

Bettie Jung and Mary E. Hunt, and economist Radhika Balakrishnan. The project was sponsored by the Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health, and Ethics, the brainchild of Daniel C. Maguire, professor of moral theology at Marquette University. He and Harold Coward of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, University of Victoria, Canada developed a model to bring diverse scholars together with a scholarly book and a popular publication (perhaps a video) resulting from the collaboration of each team.

Under the aegis of the Religious Consultation, we gathered a dozen feminist scholars from eight countries (including Thailand, Nigeria, England, Brazil etc.) and six religious traditions (Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Christianity etc.). Scholar activists from several fields (including religion, economics, social sciences) met first in Philadelphia for three days of introductions to one another and our thoughts. We asked the obvious – but to that point, unasked question of what women from various religious traditions think of as “good sex,” knowing all too well what our patriarchal religious traditions say. We each wrote a draft of an essay, then reunited in Amsterdam for another round of discussion, after which we rewrote our essays for publication. The volume reflects both individual views and the fruit of our collaboration. It became clear that while we did not agree on what is “good,” nor even what we mean by “sex,” we did agree that the boardroom issues, not the bedroom issues, are most important: safety, violence, economics (trafficking and prostitution), colonialism, and the right to pleasure.

I learned three things that I now consider axiomatic for doing sexual ethics: First, I learned that reframing of issues is necessary to develop new approaches. Wanda Deifelt, a Lutheran priest from Brazil, described compulsory motherhood for upper middle class women in her country because of proliferation of in vitro fertilization clinics. Suwanna Satha-Anand declared that in a Buddhist view the best sex is no sex. Patricia Beattie Jung took a Roman Catholic approach. She claimed that contrary to current

Catholic teaching that privileges male pleasure in heterosexual intercourse, women’s sexual pleasure needs to be part of the equation or the criteria for good sex are not fulfilled. My own essay “Just Good Sex” involves a rethinking of “good sex” as a human right, assuming good sex is safe, consensual, community-building, and conducive of justice. Each of these approaches represents an angle on the issues, enough of a change in perspective to leave aside old arguments and break new ethical ground.

A second insight that emerged from this work is that the days of in-house, single tradition religious work on sexuality are numbered. International/interreligious approaches are increasingly normative. Scholars from the U.S. especially need the challenges of our colleagues from abroad to point out the hegemonic dimensions of our own discourse.

A third learning is that process and not only product requires attention in religious ethical work. Even on most basic issues where there may be disagreement, it is important to build dynamics among co-workers that keep the discussion going, that instill trust. Of course, common strategies are important, but these emerge not so much from the common mind as the common necessity.

These criteria are employed in several new volumes that emerged from Consultation-sponsored projects. The Sacred Energies Series (published by Fortress Press) is popular volumes based on the project’s academic work. For example, Daniel C. Maguire’s Sacred Energies Sacred Choices: the Right to Contraception and Abortion in Ten World Religions is a useful study. It begins not with a defense of a pro-choice position, but with data from various religious traditions that show the seeds of such a position within them. Another new perspective is articulated in John C. Raines The Justice Men Owe Women: Positive Resources from World Religions, an innovative approach to gender justice. A third project on heterosexism is in the works. That team of men and women, straight and lesbian/gay scholars includes colleagues from China, Nigeria, Pakistan, and elsewhere.

In each case, an academic volume was written by an international/interreligious group of scholars and then these popular books were crafted to make the ideas accessible to a wider audience. Each of these works includes a significant reframing of the issue, a willingness to value dialogue over final answers, process over product, while still having deep commitment to social change and public policy.

Conclusion

This production of new knowledge in religion does not change the fact that most people consider religion a conservatizing social force, not the place one looks for innovative insights on sexuality. Such need not be the case; religion can be useful for sparking change. Daniel C. Maguire was right when he observed that the "renewable moral energy of religion" could be brought to bear on a range of topics.

I believe that it is the responsibility of religious adherents to embrace and reshape their traditions according to the needs and priorities of their day, and in concert with people of other faiths who seek to do the same. This is the other side of religious fundamentalism, which is the dynamic that claims that there is one way to understand, interpret, and live out a particular faith.

Fundamentalism and expansive, inclusive, religiously diverse approaches are competing worldviews. At the moment, fundamentalism seems to have the upper hand. New religious ethics on sexuality formed according to the criteria I have outlined will not replace one form of fundamentalism with another. It will bring the energies of our traditions into a new constellation of shared power so that all people might exercise the human right to good sex. Then the task is to get the good word out as widely as possible.