

The Challenge of Sexual Diversity in Ultra-Conservative Times

By Mary E. Hunt

WE LIVE IN DIFFICULT times, especially for those who deal with and promote issues related to reproductive rights.

But, while those who work on reproductive rights may have their hands full, it is important to broaden their agenda to include sexuality in a wider sense, especially to support rights for lesbian/gay/bisexual and transgender people. Some might say that taking on issues of sexual diversity will only muddy the waters. But the opposite is the case. Not only are the issues connected, but the people who are working on them share common commitments. Making some of these connections explicit will help those of us in religious movements and those in the so-called secular movements to see our connections as well.

This position is grounded in the feminist commitment that none of us are free until all of us are free. That itself is located in the Catholic social justice tradition that

affirms the dignity and value of each human being. And this is speculative theology at its best, a Catholic call for sexual diversity. (Disclosure: my perspective as a white, middle class, North American, lesbian feminist conditions my view.)

When we say “the right to decide” or “the right to choose” we mean more than whether to have an abortion or not. We mean also to decide whether, when, with whom and how to be sexual. Because the Catholic thinking on these questions has been so formative in the oppression we experience, and because the same tradition has resources that could be so useful, this essay concentrates on the Catholic expression of the problem with the hope that the analysis, beginning in the Catholic tradition, may be helpful well beyond it.

CONSERVATISM IN CONTEXT

The United States has had a disproportionate impact on the rest of the world. The election of George W. Bush and the arrival of Vice President Dick Cheney, Attorney General John Ashcroft and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on the global scene has meant more restrictions on personal freedom and more support for hegemonic US military and economic policy. After September 11, it has meant a war on terrorism that is really a war on anyone and anything that is not white, European, Christian, mon-eyed and married. Muslim immigrants in

the US live in terror; many women with dependent children live in poverty, and the rest of us live with the difficult experience of seeing gains we have made toward inclusion and justice, for example women’s reproductive choices, being eroded at every turn.

This would be bad enough if it were confined to one country. But because of the long reach of US economic, political and military arms, these same dynamics of oppression operate all over the world. The war in Iraq is but one example. Our best efforts to stop it were unsuccessful, and thousands of people have lost their lives as a result. Likewise, recent threats against North Korea portend a similar war. Reports show how the economic collapse of Argentina was instrumentalized by US business people on Wall Street who made millions of dollars speculating on the Argentine situation where now many people are hungry and unemployed.

The Roman Catholic church has this same kind of disproportionate impact on world opinion and laws around the globe on sexual matters. While the pope’s pleading against the war in Iraq was all but ignored by the Bush administration, the Vatican only intensified its efforts in the sexual arena, the only place left where it has the kind of clout it had in former times. The institutional, or what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has aptly

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called the “kyriarchal” church (a hierarchical model based on interlocking structures of oppression or structures of “lordship”), has squandered its moral capital. Because of its teachings on issues like birth control and masturbation, no one really takes it seriously where it counts, namely, on war and economic injustice. The recent statement against same-sex marriage is proof that the Vatican forges ahead regardless.

Add to this political and theological mix the HIV/AIDS pandemic and you have a deadly recipe. Four billion dollars a month are being spent to keep US troops in Iraq. But we cannot find the billions needed to fund research for a vaccine against HIV/AIDS and to get effective medicines to those who are already infected. HIV/AIDS is now an unequal opportunity killer, a chronic if manageable disease for those with access to drugs, and a death sentence for those without.

Once again the lines are drawn between developing countries and developed countries, and between those with resources within those countries and those without. In the US, one of the fastest growing groups of newly-infected people is African American women, many of whom are infected by men they did not know were sexually active with other men. In Washington, DC, the male-to-female transgender community has an infection rate of more than 35%. Surely this has parallels around the world where women are infected unknowingly and men engage in sexual behaviors that are taboo and for which they take little public responsibility. Likewise, the transgender community is oppressed by ignorance and discrimination.

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AND SEXUAL DIVERSITY

Sexuality is therefore not a trivial sideshow in our current ultra-conservative situation. It must be addressed along with issues of reproductive choice and other forms of social justice. How does the relationship between reproductive rights and sexual diversity as expressed in the Roman Catholic setting impact on

this? Three basic ideas underline the need to broaden our agenda.

1. Similarities in Language

The same kinds of arguments are used by the institutional Catholic church to condemn abortion and same-sex love, namely that they are gravely morally wrong without any concern for the context, circumstances or intention involved.

The first and most obvious linkage is that the same kind of language is used to condemn abortion and homosexuality. They are called “grave evil,” “morally disordered,” “intrinsically wrong.” It is essentializing language that treats abortion and homosexuality in every instance in the same way, allowing no differentiations or distinctions. For example, an abortion at five weeks and an abortion at 30 weeks are judged the same way. A monogamous committed homosexual relationship is considered equal to a one-night stand.

Second, the issue is always defined in terms of acts, not intentions. The Catholic rhetoric reads as if an abortion existed on its own, separate from a pregnant woman. Likewise, homosexuality is treated as a thing one could hold up and measure rather than a dimension of a whole personality that comes into play when one seeks to show love. In a post-modern world we make moral judgements not simply on acts, but on the context in which they are set, on the intentions behind them, and on the basis of their consequences. To look only at an act isolated from these factors is to operate out of an outmoded epistemology. This is important because sometimes we think we simply disagree with the kyriarchal institution. I think it is important to know that we operate out of very different worldviews and one obviously has more power than the other.

Third, the language gives clues to the worldview of those who condemn what they do not understand. For allegedly celibate men to pronounce on questions of women’s reproductive choices is dubious at best. Such deeply personal matters handled by a woman, her physician and her significant others are beyond the scope

and competence of ecclesial officials. Why do clergy think it is their business? Do they speak for the whole Catholic community? Why we allow them to claim to do so?

Likewise, healthy same-sex love expressed responsibly and mutually is simply beyond the frame of analysis of most Catholic clergy. What we have learned through the priest pedophilia scandals and episcopal cover-ups in the US is that most Catholic clergy function with a primitive knowledge of sexuality, and an even more limited capacity to imagine what healthy, responsible adult sex might be. This inability, perhaps refusal is a better word, to understand the complexity of human experience renders them unhelpful. Their apparent willingness to put the institutional church’s well being ahead of the safety of those who are vulnerable makes it impossible to have confidence in their moral judgements. Again, the primary issue is why anyone takes them seriously.

This is a great loss for a tradition that in earlier generations produced sophisticated moral thinking and that has in its history opposition to slavery, war and economic injustice. Catholic church leaders cause harm to those whose lives are objectified through their pronouncements. They do a disservice to the rich moral tradition that produced a “preferential option for the poor,” for example. The moral leadership that is needed in the current ultra-conservative climate does not exist in the Catholic hierarchy.

2. Similarities in Tactics

The same tactics are employed to force those who are most vulnerable, namely, pregnant women and lesbian/gay/bisexual and transgender people to defend their actions while those who act in harmful ways toward them are tolerated.

Another connection between Catholic positions on abortion and homosexuality is the ways in which those who are most vulnerable, namely women who are pregnant against their will and those whose sexual orientation is toward members of the same sex, are subject to the most pernicious objectification imaginable. That

objectification can and often does lead to violence.

Cloaked in the rhetoric of doctrine and teaching, people are written about and spoken about using language and concepts that are hurtful. For example, women who have abortions are said to have sinned gravely and excommunicated themselves from the church regardless of their intentions. People who assist them are also said to be sinful. Violence at abortion clinics that has left medical personnel dead and women frightened to exercise their right to choose is easily traced to such rhetoric.

Gay and lesbian people, even those in monogamous committed relationships, are considered sinners in need of repen-

A CATHOLIC PROCHOICE POSITION

It is important to affirm publicly that a Catholic prochoice position means taking women, our bodies and our choices seriously, trusting that we will exercise the same generous care that our ancestors have exercised before us. A Catholic prochoice position means taking fetal life seriously, according a fetus increased moral value over time, never pitting it against the woman in whose body it resides, nor confusing a fetus with a person when it comes to moral decision-making. A Catholic prochoice position means working to assure that the means of decision-making are available to all women: sex education, birth control, and legal and economical abor-

does not have heterosexual procreation at its base. Laws are codified on this basis and lives are ruined and/or lost when the laws are transgressed. The challenge is to articulate a Catholic pro-sex position regardless of sexual orientation or identity that is based on contemporary understandings of sexology and sociology.

Just as in abortion, a pro-sex Catholic position is based on the notion that sex is a human right, not a privilege accorded to those who choose to be sexual with persons of the opposite sex. It is a pro-sex Catholic moral theology that is missing and that needs to be created. I have begun to do so in “Just Good Sex” (contained in the collection I edited with Patricia Beat-

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tance, our every expression of love condemned. Hate crimes against lesbian/gay/bisexual and transgender people are rooted in teachings that objectify homosexual persons. Church teachings are not innocent.

As a theologian it would be easy to reject these theological opinions of the kyriarchal church as technically inadequate. They fail to take account of contemporary social scientific data. They pass over the experience of good people. They stand in contradiction to basic values of love and justice that trump any narrow reading of scripture, any stalwart adhesion to earlier doctrine. They are a form of violence against persons of good faith and should be rejected. However, the painful experience of some women who choose to terminate their pregnancies for reasons only they need to be persuaded of, and the experience of many homosexual persons who feel excluded from the church community they love make it impossible to simply pass over such teachings as if they were trivial.

tion—whether pharmaceutical (RU-486) or surgical. Just as important, a Catholic prochoice position involves creating the economic and social supports that permit women to make real choices about their bodies, including women’s ability to decide whether, when, with whom and how to be sexual. Many of these matters are regulated by laws that governments make with pressure from the Catholic church to maintain its worldview. A Catholic prochoice position presents another Catholic worldview, which needs to be taken seriously as Catholic and reflected in the legislative process.

The link between reproductive health and lesbian/gay/bisexual and transgender issues is clearest when it comes to basic understandings of sexuality. It is those basics that have changed in our culture and are being resisted by ultra-conservative forces. Just as pregnant women are told that they are sinners if they abort, so too are people who choose partners of the same sex told that they contradict natural law when they engage in behavior that

tie Jung and Radhika Balakrishnan, *Good Sex, Feminist Perspectives from the World’s Religions*, Rutgers University Press, 2001). Sex that is safe, pleasurable, community-building and conducive of justice is a human right.

The move toward same-sex marriage is based on this thinking. Models of friendship and community that are inclusive of everyone regardless of whether one is partnered are preferable to the reinforcement of marriage as the dominant relational paradigm. Religion and politics must be separated in this regard, shifting all civil matters regarding relationships to domestic partnerships. Then any two people can choose to make a legal arrangement. Religious matters should be set aside for the respective faith communities to handle.

However, in the practical order, if marriage is to confer privileges (economic, social and legal; in the US over 1000 federal matters are regulated by marriage laws) it ought to be equally available regardless of the gender of those in the relationship. This view is grounded in the radical equal-

ity we share as part of creation, and the frank fact that marriage is no longer necessary for procreation, and procreation is no longer the reason for being for women. Rather, sex in its varied forms is in our time a symbolic sharing of love, a physical expression of the life force, a playful way to interact with a responsible partner that adds to the community's well being. A Catholic pro-sex moral theology needs to reflect this reality. While some people may intentionally engage in heterosexual for procreation, I think it is reasonable to assert that procreation is simply not the main issue anymore. Population concerns and women's choices to have fewer children make that obvious and welcome.

cism that has so conditioned sex as to limit it to procreative marriage.

Currently laws in most countries prohibit same-sex marriage. This is changing because the view of sex has changed. In addition to conferring certain rights, marriage or its equivalent also implies public social approval. These legal changes reflect a pro-sex morality that the Vatican resists so mightily. Its recent document against same-sex unions is really against the implications of this view of sex. Like birth control before it, same-sex marriage efforts will only be clarified and intensified in light of the Vatican's protests, thus advancing a pro-sex agenda.

homosexual unions, Catholic politicians are obliged to do so in a particular way," just as was the case in abortion. They cite the encyclical *Evangelium vitae* to urge legislators to do the best they can, all but admitting that they are engaged in a political battle, having lost the theological one. Another round of Catholic lobbying on same-sex marriage is in the offing, using corporate Catholic resources to urge positions that contradict a pro-sex moral theology.

Why do we permit this when other churches have assemblies, general conferences and other transparent and democratic processes for dealing with the dynamism of religion and ethics? This is the heart of the problem. We as Catholics

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In such a context, homosexual sex is simply one way in which people exercise this human right to be sexual. Another way is by choosing to be celibate, while still another is to be in heterosexual relationships that do not lead to marriage or children. Catholic moral concerns focus not on the gender of the individuals or the genitals involved, but on whether the relationship is mutual and consensual. Catholic pro-sex morality promotes precautions taken to assure that the sexual activity will be safe. It affirms sexual choices that enhance the wellbeing of the community. It promotes public models of love that others can emulate, regardless of the gender of those involved. Such a theology encourages sex that increases justice in the world, both sexual justice with regard to this human right and other forms of economic, racial, and political justice that flow from right relationships. This pro-sex approach differs fundamentally from the anti-sex approach that is the root of the anti-abortion and anti-gay agenda in that it assumes that sex qua sex is good. That is new for Catholi-

3. Similarities for Supportive Policymakers
Politicians incur the wrath of the kyriarchal church when they are supportive of progressive legislation.

When the Vatican's June 3, 2003 text emerged, "Consideration Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons," signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger with the explicit approval of Pope John Paul II, there was a sense of déjà vu about similar pronouncements made to politicians about abortion. The writers argue that same-sex unions bear no resemblance to heterosexual marriage, and that allowing the adoption of children by same sex couples "would actually mean doing violence to these children." Both of these statements are wrong on their face: unions of two people are unions regardless of the gender constellation involved; studies show that children adopted in same-sex families fare quite well in the world.

But after arguing such dubious positions, the writers turn their attention to politicians: "if it is true that all Catholics are obliged to oppose the legal recognition of

need to assert our rights as members of our community, affirming and rejecting according to our best experiences and expecting that others will do the same. We need to confront not so much the matters of sexuality on which this analysis focuses, but the matters of ecclesiology that determine who decides what is morally correct, what are the Catholic positions (note the plural) on issues, and how those will be represented in the public arena.

FROM TWO AGENDAS TO ONE

At base, the question on the table is: "who is the church?" If we are content to leave it in the hands of the hierarchy, we will spend the next ten years fighting similar battles. Instead, we should recognize that organizations working on reproductive and sexual rights around the world have begun to be church in a quite different way. We are acting as church, as responsible, mature, critical Catholics who are unafraid to ask hard questions of ourselves and one another just as we ask hard questions of the hierarchy. Then we can expect that the next decade's work will involve

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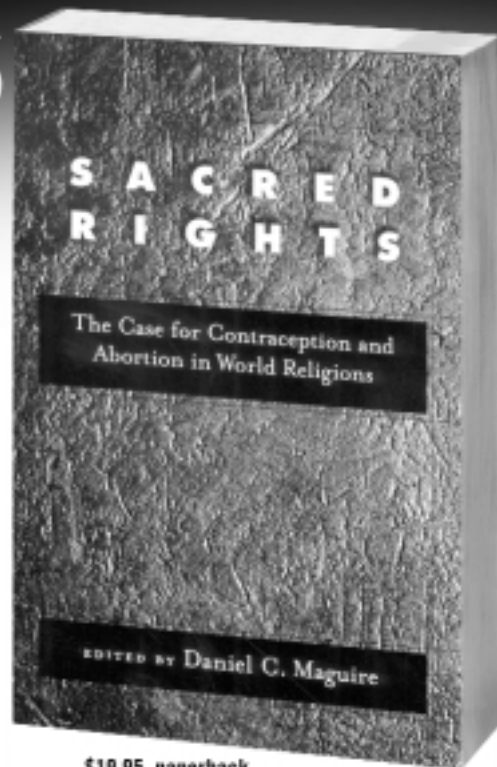
As the global population continues to grow, family planning is fast becoming one of the most critical issues facing the planet. While many organizations—most prominently the United Nations—are trying to implement policies that will help curb the population explosion, the scholars in this book show that religious conservatives, including the Vatican, are on shaky ground when they say that religious doctrine prohibits the right to contraception and abortion.

In many of the world's religions there is a restrictive and pro-natalist view on family planning, and this is one legitimate reading of those religious traditions.

As the essays in this volume demonstrate, however, this is not the only legitimate or orthodox view. Seeking to counteract the simplistic idea that all religions are completely antagonistic toward family planning, the authors—all scholar-practitioners of the religions about which they write—present alternative interpretations of religions' views about family planning.

Arguing for the existence of equally valid traditions that allow contraception and abortion, they seek to escape the confines of oversimplified either/or, pro-choice/pro-life arguments. Instead, they point the way toward a more open discussion of family planning. Just as the world's religions sanction both pacifists and "just war" theorists, so those same religions support the no-choice and the "just abortion" view.

Dispelling the notion that the world's religions are uniformly conservative on issues of family planning, the authors show that the parameters of orthodoxy are wider and gentler than that, and that the great religious traditions are wiser and more variegated than a simple repetition of the most conservative views would suggest. Ultimately, these authors argue that the right to an abortion is a religiously grounded civil right; the denial of it is a violation of religious freedom.



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less critical and more constructive work, less reacting to the institution and more building communities that create their own ethical standards in concert with others. It is this model that will be most able to develop a pro-sex moral theology and live it out even in ultra conservative times.

A first step in this direction is to see the sexual agenda as really one agenda, moving from anti- to pro-sex. We need to acknowledge that sexual diversity is real among us and honor it just as reproductive rights are sacred even for those of us whose sexual practices do not result in pregnancy.

A second step is to make this clear and public so that those who seek to fragment efforts at justice-making cannot divide us from one another. Those of us who work on reproductive rights need to make specific reference to sexual diversity as conditioning how those rights are lived out. Those of us who work on sexual diversity need to make explicit reference to reproductive rights as part of our agenda.

A third step is to embrace one another in this diversity and commitment. We can be confident that over time our choices may change, our relationships will take many turns. We can humbly affirm that none of us has the final answer. With profound changes taking place thanks to transgender people in what we know to be male and female, women and men all of our categories are in flux. But a pro-sex theology that affirms safety, pleasure, community building and justice can provide some moral orientation in the midst of change.

In these ultra-conservative times, such steps may seem risky and even ill advised. It may make more sense to struggle even harder for one's own small piece of the whole. To the contrary, I think in the long run we are each other's best insurance policy. Not only are we condemned by the same people and opposed for similar reasons. But we are also united in our commitment to use the rich resources of the same tradition to create constructive policies and communities in a just world. My hope is that in the decade ahead we will do just that in the good company of one another. ■