

Talking Sex, Desiring Justice

THE DENIAL OF SEXUALITY IS A DENIAL OF HUMANITY

By Marvin M. Ellison

IN CULTURES STRONGLY INFLUENCED by traditional Christian norms about purity, women and sexuality, as one social theorist has quipped, sex is typically “presumed guilty until proven innocent” (Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 1992). Given this negativity, it’s hardly surprising that many people try to avoid this topic altogether or when they do manage to “talk sex,” they’re often defensive, reactive and, at worst, judgmental, rigid and punitive. No doubt the pervasively fearful and shaming messages about sex have had all sorts of negative consequences in people’s lives, as many attest, but silence can be equally debilitating. For this reason, Peggy Brick, a sexuality educator, has dedicated her book to adolescents and young adults this way: “To the young people of this nation who must find their way to sexual health in a world of contradictions—where media scream ‘Always say yes,’ where many adults admonish, ‘Just say no,’ but the majority just say...nothing.”

As a Christian theologian and gay man who teaches seminarians about sexuality and sexual ethics, I’m well aware that sexuality and sexual difference are difficult topics for many, especially when fear gets coupled with fixation, making it all the more difficult to keep things in perspective. And yet, despite disquietude about this topic, the truth of the matter

MARVIN M. ELLISON is Bass Professor of Christian Ethics at Bangor Theological Seminary in Maine and the author, most recently, of *Same-Sex Marriage?: A Christian Ethical Analysis* (Pilgrim Press, 2004).

is that sexuality remains an indispensable component of our humanity. No doubt we humans would be something without our sexualities, but we would surely not be fully recognizable as human if we could not experience the delight, and sometimes the pain, of living relationally as friends, lovers and life companions or if we did not feel such strong desire for entering into communion with others through tender touching.

Doing justice to sexuality, I suggest, requires us to honor as a genuinely life-enhancing gift this amazing human capacity for physical, emotional and spiritual embrace. Our embodied desire for intimate connection with self, others, the earth and God is a fragile moral power. Evidence abounds in the pornography industry that sexuality can be misused to alienate and cause much grief and sorrow. However, the misuse of erotic power does not rule out its proper use, for eroticism can also be a fantastically stimulating vehicle for conveying attentive, mutually respectful loving, as well as for deeply valuing one another. Over our lifetimes we are challenged, therefore, to give sexuality its due and learn how to direct this power with insight, care and sustained regard for personal, communal and ecological well-being. This is not to say that everyone must be sexually active, genitally speaking, much less married or partnered to be complete as persons, but it is to recognize that if we deny whole segments of the community the right (and responsibility) to be sexual persons and to *do* love in and through their bodies, then we have

denied them their full humanity. In other words, we dehumanize persons by oversexualizing or de-sexualizing them.

Several factors make talking about sex difficult. First, “sex talk” is sometimes too clinical, relying on objectifying medical jargon, or much too confessional, bordering on the voyeuristic. A further major complication is our lack of language free of sexist and heterosexist taint. For example, the terms heterosexuality and homosexuality are medicalized categories. More telling, they are patriarchal classifications that mystify rather than highlight what is most important in our living and loving. These labels are not helpful in clarifying the things that matter, including the qualities of an authentic relationship. “In a non-sexist society,” as Mary Daly long ago argued, “the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality would be unimportant.” (*Beyond God the Father*, Beacon Press, 1993) However, in our society, gender, like race and class, is a primary conduit for distributing benefits and burdens. A very great deal is made of gender. After all, the first question asked at birth is, is it a boy or a girl? Furthermore, the gender of a person’s “love object” choice is used to determine his or her “normalcy,” that is their (at least outward) conformity to normative heterosexuality.

Second, we struggle to find helpful methodological approaches to sex and sexuality. Essentialists, in defining sex as natural and unchanging, emphasize “what comes naturally” and the biological imperatives that supposedly determine the

“normal” course of things. Accordingly, both nature and nature’s God have been blamed for such oppressive notions as women’s subordination, the presumption that procreative sex alone is healthy and sound and the pathologizing of men-loving-men and women-loving-women. However, sexuality is more complex, more fluid and more amenable to cultural molding than essentialists readily admit. In contrast, social constructionists emphasize that we develop our sexualities only within institutions and systems, never independently of society or history. Therefore, we cannot grasp sexuality’s purpose and meaning by biology alone. An historical, contextualized approach is needed to analyze sexuality within social power relations.

This alternative approach recognizes, first, that sexuality is not a “static thing,” but rather a dynamic process, constantly being reshaped and reassigned value and meaning in the midst of conflicting social interests. Second, sexuality has a history, some of which is oppressive. Moreover, because sexuality is a social, cultural and political issue and not only a personal concern, a *social* ethic is needed to examine how social structures and belief systems affect sexualities for good or ill. Thirdly, transformations have occurred in social practice and meaning about sex, gender and social power, but these shifts take time, require social as well as personal struggle and are not accomplished at will.

Yet another reason many Christians find “talking sex” difficult is that while there are rich resources about these matters within the Christian tradition, there are also serious obstacles, including a spiritualistic tendency that elevates spirit above body and a related gender dualism that elevates males and things associated with men and disparages (or idealizes) females and things associated with women. Fortunately, the task before the faith community is never simply to repeat the Christian past and apply it, but rather to critique the distortions within the tradition and help transform it in more life-enhancing directions. Today our inquiry must be, what’s the “good news” to

communicate about sexuality and spirituality? If our speech is to be truthful and relevant, the “we” here must intentionally include those who have been historically marginalized and excluded from the theological conversation. In fact, what has stirred the waters are all those women and gay people of all colors across the globe who are no longer content to be the objects of someone else’s speech, but rather have asserted themselves as sexual subjects and claimed their rightful place as full partners in a democratized discourse about these humanly important matters.

Despite official rhetoric that spiritualizes Christian love and, in particular, Protestant boasts about “discovering” companionate marriage, the fact is that Christian conventions about gender, power and sexual intimacy hardly constitute a noble tradition, but rather burden us with a confused and oppressive legacy that begs for critique. For centuries, church theologians have intoned that the best sex was “no sex.” Sexually active couples were expected not only to be married, but to reserve sex for making babies and, as quickly as possible, move beyond youthful passion in order to live together not so much as husband and wife, but more as Christian brother and sister. Even when Protestant theologians flipped the celibacy/marriage dichotomy on its head and began to promote marriage as a Christian duty expected of nearly all, they did so not because they thought marriage was morally or spiritually superior, but because they were ever alert to the power of sin (read lust) and had strong doubts that a consistent lifestyle of celibacy was attainable for very many. Advocates of so-called “traditional family values” fail to appreciate the extent to which the Christian tradition has been cautious even about marriage, given the concerns about a sex/sin connection.

For too long, then, the Christian response to sex has been fear and suspicion, and the prevailing watchwords have been control and restraint. Moreover, in an imperial ecclesiastical system, sex and hierarchical power have been intimately linked and sexual categories have been

used to differentiate the godly from the ungodly and legitimize the persecution of the sexualized Other. To this day, those most conforming to the norm of marital, procreative heterosexuality often feel authorized as “moral police” to monitor and discipline everyone else.

Given this fear-based control system, the dominant Christian tradition has largely failed to generate anything resembling a life-giving theological ethic of human sexuality. Instead, it has transmitted a moralistic, highly restrictive “marriage morality” that has focused on controlling, if not eliminating, sex altogether. Marriage has been designated as the only approved site for sexual activity and all sexual activity has been evaluated in terms of whether it upholds this marital mandate. Certainly, premarital and extramarital sex has been condemned. So has non-procreative sex, including same-sex intimacy and “solo sex” or masturbation. The greatest scorn, however, has been aimed at sex that violates patriarchal norms of male supremacy. Sex between men, if discrete, has been tolerated, especially if one man “uses” another man “as if” using a woman and, therefore, reinforces his entitlement as a “man on top” and, therefore, in control. At the same time, displays of genuine affection and loving intimacy between men have been sharply denounced as sinful and morally repugnant.

Within the rules of the prevailing Christian sex/gender paradigm, when sex has been authorized at all, it has been licit only within an unjust power structure requiring a dominant male to exercise control of (or benignly to “guide and protect”) his dependent “weaker half.” Because Christian sex has been patriarchal sex, it has had definite deficiencies. On the one hand, until recently, little or no attention has been given to domestic abuse, marital rape or spousal neglect. On the other hand, there has been considerable investment in protecting male property rights and great zeal in containing pleasure. Contemporary Christians must look long and hard to find theological affirmation of erotic pleasure, and they must look even longer and harder to find

theological interest in *women's* sexual pleasure or erotic empowerment.

Justice-loving Christians owe an enormous debt of gratitude to (the overlapping communities of) feminists and gay people of all colors, to survivors of abuse including clergy abuse, to people with disabilities, to single and divorced people and to their heterosexual allies of all ages for pressing for the reconstruction of Christian norms about sex and sexuality. A broad-based global movement for sexual justice has called for a genuinely gracious affirmation of, and respect for, gender and sexual difference. It has also advocated a profound shift toward a justice-centered approach that seeks not to control, but rather empower people to live more freely in their bodies and more compassionately in their relationships and communities. Feminist Christians, along with feminists in other religious traditions, have insisted on mutuality between co-equals as the normative relational expectation, and in doing so, they have sparked a quiet and not-so-quiet revolution in the bedroom and throughout the social order. The personal, it seems, is not only political; it is also theological and ecclesiological.

The faith wager of progressive people of faith is that the Christian tradition may well become a resource for renewal about power-in-relation and intimate justice, but only insofar as the dominant tradition is transformed in explicitly women-friendly and gay-friendly directions. Given the entrenched character of patriarchal Christianity, such transformation will not happen without sustained struggle. One sign of Christians' willingness to enter into this "great work" will be their candor about Christian complicity in sexual injustice and their humility about the changes needed and the likely costs, personally and institutionally. A second sign will be the readiness to celebrate an incarnational faith that, indeed, embraces the body—and, indeed, all bodies with their imperfections and limitations—as a privileged site for encountering the sacred in the midst of everyday life. A third sign will be deepening respect for women's full

moral standing and their empowerment in their families, faith communities and social and economic institutions, and a fourth will be men's willingness to be held accountable and to learn constructive ways to share power and live and work alongside women as allies and partners. A fifth sign will be lifting up gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons of moral character and courage as exemplary models of living and loving humanly. No longer will homosexuality be mislabeled as sinful or denigrated as "intrinsically disordered." No longer will the focus be on fixing the "problem" of homosexuality. Rather, the ethical issue will be rightly named as heterosexism, the institutionalized devaluing of gay people and the unjust privileging of heterosexuality. A final sign is that the church will no longer fixate on the "sin of sex," but instead engage in overcoming gender and sexual injustice, along with race and class oppression, in their myriad forms, internally and beyond.

Granted, there is danger in all this, because an erotically empowered, justice-loving people will likely become more and more disgruntled with the status quo and increasingly dissatisfied with anything less than radical (to the roots) renewal. And if the truth be told, doesn't the danger lie perennially in the power of the "good news" to be made, once again, flesh and dwell among us, deepening our hunger and thirst—and our embodied hope—for justice and mutual well-being for all peoples, including ourselves, and for the earth itself? If this is not the spiritual quest, then how else do we make sense of all the ecclesiastical craziness and the ferocious, mean-spirited political backlash that has been steadily mounting against queer people of all genders and sexual orientations? Here I use "queer" not as a synonym for gay, but to demarcate that motley band of "ethical and ecclesiastical dissidents" who refuse to accept patriarchal Christianity's erotophobia as normative, but instead hold themselves and others accountable for pursuing a higher righteousness. As Flannery O'Connor wrote, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you *odd*." In that spirit, perhaps we should

affirm that being "flamboyantly queer" is the Christian mandate for our time.

British scholar Karen Armstrong accurately points out that "sex and gender have long been the Achilles' heel of western Christianity," and further, that "for most of its history, Christianity has had a more negative view of *heterosexual* love than almost any other major faith." (*Guardian* (UK), June 30, 2003) Therefore, all is far from rightly ordered when it comes to Christianity and sex/sexuality. Much is needed to transform the Christian tradition toward fostering gender and sexual justice and both communal and ecological well-being. To engage in that project, we must be clear that the crisis in sexuality is not located in (much less caused by) a marginalized community of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, but rather is situated in the prevailing sex/gender power system with its restrictive, highly punitive rules. In other words, the crisis is lodged primarily in the heterosexual majority's institutionalized norms and practices that reflect body-alienation, contempt for women and moral disdain for the non-heterosexual other.

Although the Christian tradition is deeply implicated in this crisis, there is cause for hope, although, given the obstacles, not necessarily for optimism. There is a pathway toward redeeming "our bodies/our spirits." It comes through unleashing the spiritual/moral power richly exemplified in the early Jesus movement. What's required is entering into solidarity with those we fear and imagine are "not like us," especially the victims of sexual and other forms of oppression and then devoting our life energies to rebuilding communities so that all persons are welcomed and each has access to the political, economic and spiritual resources needed to thrive, as well as for the earth to be protected.

Otherwise stated, the favored route to love and, *mirabile dictu*, ethically "good sex" is through the passionate pursuit of a comprehensive justice that joyfully embraces, and finds great pleasure in, sexual justice for all. ■