

## SEXUAL ETHICS AND THE EXPERIENTIAL CRITERION

This workshop met on Friday morning. Organized by Lisa Sowle Cahill, CTSA President, and chaired by Susan A. Ross (Loyola University Chicago), four panelists addressed the issues of experience and sexual ethics from their own experiential perspectives, followed by discussion.

Margaret Farley (Yale Divinity School) began her presentation by outlining three presuppositions: (1) Experience is not just one source among many; it constitutes a source for other sources (e.g. Scripture, science, etc.). (2) Experience gives us access to reality; this access is never direct but always mediated (everything is received according to the mode of the receiver). (3) Experience is particular but it can be shared in that positions can be rendered intelligible to others who may differ. She pointed out the value of a position like Foucault's, who observed that sexuality is the most examined form of human experience and posed the question whether our own experience of sex is *so* governed by social norms that we cannot change. Yet experience is a necessary but not sufficient criterion: not all voices are equal. As an example, Farley cited the experiences of women and men in the Asian sex industry. Questions raised about experience by women include past interpretations of active/passive partnership, the so-called "privacy" of sex, the "two in one flesh" motif, the heterosexual paradigm, and problems of violence. She concluded her presentation with a story about her experience discussing contraception with poor women in Manila.

Paul Lauritzen (John Carroll University) began his presentation with a quote from Ursula LeGuin's 1986 Bryn Mawr commencement address, in which she advises the graduates to "offer your experience as your truth." Lauritzen gave as an example his own experience of accompanying his wife in the process of artificial insemination. He experienced this as violent and coercive, and yet he recognized that this experience needed further reflection. It is not enough simply to offer one's experience; Lauritzen argued that we must find ways to assess experience. To offer your experience as your truth, Lauritzen pointed out, is to make yourself vulnerable, as was his and his wife's experience. To assume that people will simply and quietly discuss their own and others' experiences is mistaken, since the outcome will sometimes be passionate disagreement.

Timothy O'Connell (Loyola University Chicago) began by pointing out the loss of credibility on the part of Church and society in the area of sexual morality. While experience is crucial, some experience counts more than others. Speaking from the perspective of a priest, he argued that this experience should be seen as an aberration, as positive, but not paradigmatic, as off-center: in short, "don't build a case on it." The experience of male clergy has three characteris-

tics: (1) it is concerned with issues of domination and control (i.e., don't do something); (2) it is monadic, in that it begins with autonomy and not relationality; (3) it is monogendered. The ethical issues that arise from these experiences are that (1) concerns for celibacy, virginity, continence, have become paramount; (2) the monadic focus is on masturbation, when it is of very little importance; and (3) homosexuality takes on heightened moral significance. What insights can be derived from this typology? (1) A need for integration rather than domination; (2) communion and commitment rather than a monadic focus on self; (3) a dual-gendered understanding of fruitfulness and generativity. When the aberration is paradigmatic, O'Connell concluded, serious problems can result.

Margretta Stokes Tucker (Director of Religious Education at St. Benedict the Moor Parish in Pittsburgh) spoke from the African-American experience as a way of challenging reflection on the issue of sexual ethics for its accountability for difference. The issues of gender difference, sexual identity, the family, personhood, dignity and self-worth, are all shaped by a history of slavery and racism, and African-Americans who understand themselves in the image of God have come to see the blackness of God in that what God has made is beautiful. The stereotypes of African-American men and women have had a devastating impact on the black community in that men are seen as irresponsible, criminal, hyper-sexed, immoral; women are seen as oversexed, promiscuous, lacking in pride, and immoral. These stereotypes were present at the Thomas hearings and have been exploited by Hollywood. Tucker argued for the need for African-Americans to determine for themselves a sexual identity not given by the larger white society. The consequences of accepting the stereotypical picture result in couples being reluctant to marry, high divorce rates, and too many women and children in poverty. In conclusion, Tucker argued for more attention to the history of black Americans and the pressures of race and economics, for a holistic view that stresses the total person, and for self-determination among African-Americans.

The discussion that followed was spirited. Giles Milhaven cited Carter Heyward who suggests sexual ethics as the model for other issues in justice. Dee Christie argued for a view of human development that goes beyond generativity, and suggested looking for commonalities between homo- and heterosexuals. Andre Guindon suggested that when people don't confront their own experience, things get distorted. Ed Vacek argued that experience can be distorted, and posed the question whether there is anything uniquely normative about sexuality. Margaret Farley responded that the embodied aspect of sexuality is essential, but that general ethical norms nevertheless apply to the sexual sphere. Public discourse on sexuality is itself a relatively recent development. Janet Ruffing pointed out that women spend half their lives as single, not all by choice, and that Tim O'Connell's remarks were aimed more at males. Women religious are always in community but single women are not, and there is not enough written by and for the experience of single women. Barbara Andolsen raised the issue of the ethics of doing sexual ethics in the Roman Catholic Church in the 1990s

as a central justice issue. We may deplore what is going on, but we still accept it. Richard McCormick responded that not only the ethics of sexual ethics is at issue, but *all* ethics where there is an authoritative position. In response to a comment of Farley's on his position on homosexuality, McCormick made a distinction between procreativity and generativity without arguing for the procreative sense as the only one. Mary Aquin O'Neill argued that O'Connell had made an unfair comparison by taking the worst of the celibate experience and the best of the married experience. In response to a question of Lisa Cahill, Margretta Tucker commented that the negatives dominate in discussions of African-American experiences and that the questions asked are frequently the problem. And in response to a question from Sallie McReynolds on his experience of artificial insemination as violent, Paul Lauritzen pointed out that his own feelings were put into a larger perspective by his and his wife's commitment to a family.

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