

A CASE AGAINST HETEROSEXISM: A RESPONSE TO PATRICIA BEATTIE JUNG

We have a custom, now five years established, in our theology department at Duquesne University that has some relevance, I believe, for my response. For the July issue of our semiannual newsletter, which I happen to edit, each faculty member in the department is asked to submit the title of one book, along with a brief annotation, which we print under the heading "A Book for the Year." My last submission for this feature was the book entitled *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge*, by Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph F. Smith.

In writing my annotation, I characterized this work with such adjectives as clear, irenic, comprehensive. I could easily have multiplied adjectives, adding to the list such words as challenging, thought provoking, compassionate, thoroughly contemporary, and so on. In all fairness, however, I must add that I also used a less-flattering adjective to describe the thesis of the book. That adjective was *wrongheaded*. Consequently, this response will not simply be a rhetorical flourish on what Prof. Jung has said, but an effort to come to grips with some major differences.

In my response, given the limited time at my disposal, I would like to touch upon only three points. First, I will address the definition of heterosexism and the charge that it is a sin. Second, I would like to say something about the substantive reading of the Catholic tradition on sexuality and the place of the magisterium in that tradition. I will try to include here some observations on the hermeneutic of suspicion. Third, I wish to point to the inflated meaning of sexuality and sex that is current in much contemporary literature on sexual ethics, including the present work, and deal with the consequences of that inflated meaning.

In Prof. Jung's paper heterosexism was defined as "a cognitive system of differential treatment based on sexual orientation." In her book it was defined as "a reasoned system of bias regarding sexual orientation . . . rooted largely in a highly cognitive constellation of beliefs about human sexuality" (13). Expressed in a negative fashion, heterosexism is said to be the belief that there is something wrong with being homosexual, transsexual or bisexual. Before I try to plead the Catholic tradition innocent of the charge of heterosexism as defined, let me affirm what I think Prof. Jung is trying to do here.

I think she is asking us to address the questions of human sexuality from the perspective of social justice, and not simply as isolated questions about the moral status of particular sexual actions. That I think is a quite necessary and legitimate thing to do. For if Roman Catholic teaching, or any other teaching for that matter, on human sexuality can be shown to have as its necessary practical con-

sequences the unjust treatment of all or any gay, lesbian, and/or bisexual individuals—and that, of course, is the charge being made when that teaching is described as heterosexist—then I would be in full agreement with the charge. Nor do I see how any conscientious person could do anything other than agree. Hence I do not think the charge of heterosexism is semantically frivolous, that is, a matter simply of political correctness or a rhetorical exaggeration. Nor is the interesting move to shift the burden of proof in the tradition to those who would uphold the tradition merely a clever methodological ploy. I take both quite seriously.

I do think there is both a danger and a difficulty here, however. For in disagreeing with the position advanced by Prof. Jung, I am no longer just mistaken in my views for whatever failure of learning, reason, or logic that may account for my error. I am guilty of sin, responsible for contributing to and sustaining a system of social sin. I am not just wrong; I am wicked, and so estranged from the God I would worship and obey, and am imperiling the salvation of the people of God whom I would serve.

Despite the fact that such a charge changes the character of our present discussion rather considerably and makes it clear that we are, in fact, issuing to one another mutual invitations to conversion, thus heightening the emotional and personal stakes of the discussion, the charge of heterosexism, it seems to me, captures what is at stake in the discussion with a good degree of accuracy, albeit it is dangerous. It means, I believe, that I cannot hold the position I do hold in good faith, any more than a Catholic theologian today can hold racist views in good faith.

The danger in this charge and the difficulty I have with it, however, is that I find myself unable to recognize the teaching of my tradition in what is described as heterosexism. If there is one thing clear in Roman Catholic teaching about sexuality, it is that sexual orientation is simply no basis for discriminating in matters of human dignity and human rights. Sexual orientation neither entitles nor deprives anyone of any human right. It is neither a basis for inclusion in the Church or in human society, nor a basis for exclusion from either. To hold, as I do and as the Catholic tradition does, that heterosexual, monogamous marriage is the normative context for full human sexual expression, is not to say there is something wrong with being homosexual, or with being celibate, nor is it a license or a justification for violating the human dignity and human rights of anyone in any way.

The more accurate definition of heterosexism, operative in the book at least, is the view that all individuals have a positive right to sexual fulfillment as the circumstances of their lives, the desires of their hearts, and the consent of their partners allow them to find it, and any view that suggests otherwise is prejudicial foolishness and socially oppressive. That is as much of a conversation stopper as is the fundamentalist quoting of biblical texts.

Second, I come to a substantive reading of the Catholic tradition. In both the book and the presentation made here, the gist of the argument about the authority of tradition is that traditions change, develop, and in some ways can be shown to have been simply wrong. And this certainly includes the Roman Catholic tradition of moral teaching, even as that tradition has been articulated and authorized by the official magisterium of the Church. With such generalities there can be little argument, and the oft-repeated examples of slavery, usury, and religious liberty are readily at hand to illustrate the claim.

But there is little careful historical analysis of the actual tradition itself, of the kind, for example, that John Courtney Murray did on church-state relations and religious liberty. It seems to be taken for granted that the Catholic tradition on sexuality is dualistic, antisex and antibody, patriarchal, and interested only in sex for procreation. Consequently, there is little point to trying to retrieve the tradition or find what it might have of value to say to us today. So no careful work of returning to the tradition needs to be done. It simply is addressed through a hermeneutic of suspicion.

A hermeneutic of suspicion surely has its place in evaluating any position, including the ones being advocated here. But such a hermeneutic has as its practical aim the disestablishment of the authority of tradition, the liberation of the present from the weight of the past in the interests of a freer future. That is something Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of Liberal Protestantism, long before we ever heard of liberation theology, was also interested in achieving and did so by the same means, the appeal to the authority of human experience. There is much for Roman Catholic theologians to learn from this history of the struggle for freedom, but it seems a strange path for Roman Catholics to adopt as their exclusive method. A theological tradition that embraces as a central truth the ongoing presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, and recognizes the magisterium as a privileged place of that guidance, need not abandon a hermeneutic of suspicion, but surely must attend more earnestly to a hermeneutic of retrieval.

The Catholic tradition on sexuality, for all its ambivalence and ambiguity, is, after all, a tradition that steadfastly fought to affirm the goodness of marriage precisely as a sexual, embodied relationship in the face of many severe attacks by those who claimed a higher wisdom, a higher spirituality. It is a tradition that recognized the vocational significance of this sexual relationship and its fundamental orientation to the social good of children and so named it a sacrament. It is a tradition that came to understand that this relationship was not about the realization of just one good but of a number of goods that were intrinsically linked to one another. So it understood that marriage served both the common good and the individual good only by serving both together. Even as recently as the debate over *Humanae Vitae*, the majority report of the papal birth control commission recognized the essential link between the unitive and procreative

goods of human sexuality, albeit they located the link in a relationship and not in an action.

I am not unaware that in our contemporary society our human procreative capacities strike many people as more of a problem than a possibility for our sexual relationships and that children are increasingly seen as accidental to, almost peripheral to, and certainly inconvenient for sexual relationships by the cultural elites who would shape our views of sexuality. What I do not understand is how such views can escape Roman Catholic notice as anything else but dualistic in the extreme. Nor do I understand how we can fail to challenge the unmitigated gall of such views in presenting themselves as champions of the deep goodness of human sexuality even as they destroy, ignore, or treat as arbitrary choice what the Catholic tradition has persistently seen as the highest blessing of human sexual relating, the gift of children.

The third point I wish to touch upon is the inflated meaning of sexuality and sex and the problems it raises. Sexuality has come to be understood as a mode of being in the world, sexual orientation as central to and pervasive of an individual's sexuality and sexual identity, and sexual identity as the very core of personal identity. In that light all that we do, feel, express as personal beings is sexual, is an expression of who and what we are. Everything is sexual or has a sexual dimension; nothing is exempt, and so it is nonsense to ask persons who are sexual, homo- or hetero-, not to act out their sexual identity. One cannot help but do so, and so the distinction between orientation and behavior is said to have collapsed.

This all found its way into American Catholic theology in the CTSA-sponsored study *Human Sexuality* where the criteria for "good sex" developed there were clearly applicable to all human relationships in general. But as more than one critical reviewer pointed out, these criteria failed to be sex specific. The study provided value criteria, not action criteria, and steadfastly refused to make any firm moral judgments about specific forms of sexual behavior and sexual relating.

This method of approach to sexuality is characteristic of the arguments in *Heterosexism*. Sexual relationships we are told are valuable insofar as they are just, loving, and perhaps even faithful, although fidelity is subject to question if one understands fidelity to mean sexual exclusivity and lifelong commitment. Now since no sane person can argue against just, loving, and faithful relationships—what could one say? that they should be unjust, unloving, unfaithful?—and since the evidence for the reality of such values is the joint personal testimony of the people living in such relationships, the case is carried. Personal experience testifies that such relationships are surely as possible for gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons as for heterosexual ones. They are also quite possible, of course, for celibate persons of the same or the opposite sex, and for all people who would describe their relationship as friendship.

But if I understand the Catholic tradition, the claim there is that the terms just, loving, and faithful do not refer exclusively or even mainly to values present in the psychological experience of the persons in the relationship. And there is more to the morality of our actions than our seemingly virtuous intentions and our respect for the freedom and the uniqueness of others, as important and central to moral evaluation as these factors are. Taking out the garbage and having sex can each be expressions of the virtues of justice, love, and fidelity, but they can also be something quite different. And they are quite different actions. In choosing to do one or the other I make quite different choices. The object of my choice is quite different, and the search for moral truth which authentic virtue requires of us demands that we attend to the object of moral choice. I do not know who today is trying to remind us of that any more vigorously than the ecclesial magisterium which some of us seem so often to find so embarrassing.

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