

# 1. *The Necessity for Reconstructing Sexual Ethics*

For at least two decades, there have been voices calling for the development of a sexual theology which would reject body/soul dualism and do justice to the Incarnation. Ethicists have made many contributions to the beginnings of such a theology of sexuality with significant contributions found in the work of people like James Nelson, Beverly Harrison, and Andre Guindon. Unfortunately, most of this work is not readily intelligible to the general Christian public still blinkered by the traditional code of Christian sexual ethics which has formed its understanding of both sexuality and morality.

Our society is in a crisis over sexuality, in part because the churches have been paralyzed by fear of stepping away from the confines of the Christian sexual tradition to develop a responsible sexual ethic which not only accords with our scientific and experiential insights into sexuality, but which better accords with our understanding of the central revelations of the gospel. Society looks to the churches to provide moral guidance for public policy in many areas, but especially in sexuality, since the churches have long claimed proprietary interest in sexual behavior. The unwillingness of the churches to risk abandoning a familiar but unworkable sexual ethic has left the broader society without effective moral guidance on sexuality at a time when more and more public policy issues involve sexuality.

The Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa is today being called to repent and renounce its traditional teaching on apartheid; the Catholic church at Vatican II felt required to repent and renounce its historic anti-Semitism. The same kind of renunciation of traditional teaching in sexuality, followed by repentance, is necessary on the part of all Christian churches today in response to the suffering and victimization it has long supported and legitimated.

Churches can no longer justify presenting inherited Christian treatment of sexual ethics with only piecemeal modifications or critique. It is past time that we admit that the reason so many differ with specific conclusions of inherited sexual ethics is that the entire approach of Christian sexual ethics has been and is grievously flawed. Gradual, piecemeal revision is not sufficient.

Traditional Christian sexual ethics is not only inadequate in that it fails to reflect God's reign of justice and love which Jesus died announcing, but its legalistic, apologetic approach is also incompatible with central Judaic and Christian affirmations of creation, life, and an incarnate messiah. Because the Christian sexual tradition has diverged from this its life-affirming source, it has become responsible for innumerable deaths, the stunting of souls, the destruction of relationships, and the distortion of human communities. The Christian sexual tradition uses scripture and theological tradition as supports for a code of behavior which developed out of mistaken, pre-scientific understandings of human anatomy, physiology, and reproduction, as well as out of now abandoned and discredited models of the human person and human relationships. The churches are still today teaching theological conclusions originally based in ignorance of women's genetic contribution to offspring, ignorance of the processes of gender identity and of sexual orientation, and of the difference between them, and ignorance of the learned basis of most gender differences—ignorance which has allowed and supported patriarchy, misogyny, and heterosexism, the assumption that heterosexuality is normative. We are still teaching a sexual code based in fear of the body and of sexuality, in understandings of sexual virtue as the repression of bodily desires by the force of the rational will, on physicality, especially sexuality,<sup>1</sup> as an obstacle to spirituality, and on women as lacking reason and only possessing the image of God through connection to men.<sup>2</sup> The churches have disowned the Mosaic law's assumption of male ownership of women and children,<sup>3</sup> Luther's understanding that women are like nails in a wall, prohibited by their

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<sup>1</sup> In the present, see John Paul II, general audience of October 8, 1980; for earlier historical examples, see Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Women, Sexuality, and the Roman Catholic Church* (1988 German edition, tr. Peter Heinegg; New York: Doubleday, 1990), Chapter 10.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 7:7, 10; Rosemary R. Ruether, "Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in *Religion and Sexism*, ed. Rosemary R. Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Lev. 19:20-22, Lev. 21:10-21, Deut. 22:28-29, Ex. 21:4-11, Ex. 4:22.

nature from moving outside their domestic situation,<sup>4</sup> and Aquinas' teaching that females are misbegotten males, produced from male embryos by physical or mental debility in the father, or by moist winds off the Mediterranean.<sup>5</sup> But we continue to teach most of the sexual moral code which was founded upon such thinking.

### **Beginning with Sexuality, Not the Christian Sexual Tradition**

The first step in restructuring Christian sexual ethics is to understand as best we can human sexuality itself, and in this day and age this means consulting both biological science and social science, as well as the experience of human individuals and communities. I do not suggest that Masters and Johnson or Bell and Weinberg<sup>6</sup> replace the Bible, church fathers, and the classic theologians as more or less infallible authorities. Sexuality is a social construct in which biology is only one part. Neither are the social sciences of themselves capable of defining or interpreting human sexuality. But we must take seriously the broad areas of scientific consensus regarding reproduction, sexual response, sexual difference, and the development of sexual identity and orientation. It means, for example, that we admit into our discussions of what is "natural" sexual behavior the fact that human infants' second instinctual physical feat, after satisfying oral gratification, is manual genital stimulation, and that infants under one year are observed to produce all the signs of orgasm through self-stimulation.<sup>7</sup>

As in other areas of ethics, we need to begin doing ethics with a description of the reality of our situation. Only after this can we turn to theological reflection regarding the meaning and significance of the various factual elements we have described. To do social analysis—the investigation of the surrounding reality—in sexual ethics will involve using not only the tools of social science that we are accustomed to using in social ethics, but the biological medical sciences as well. For the influences on sexual behavior include our individual genetic inheritances, the worldview and customs inculcated by our specific culture and society, the shape of the economy and political system in our society, and our social location within that society.

It is often mistakenly assumed that the hard sciences are normative in a way that the social sciences are not. But it is not the case that medical-biological research describes the givenness of human sexuality, and social sciences such as sociology and psychology only present facts about changeable responses of human persons. The biological sciences are fallible even in the twentieth century. Until relatively recently medical science taught that there were only two sexes, identified by an XX or an XY pair of chromosomes. Now we know that there are over 70 sex chromosomal abnormalities; that within the human population are numbers of persons with triple X, XYY, and single X chromosomal make-up—information with tremendous importance for human sexuality.<sup>8</sup> How can the biological sciences be both foundational and fallible? Because the findings of scientific research must be interpreted in order to be assembled into larger models of reality, and the human reason which performs the interpretation and assembly is fallible. Despite the large number of scientific experiments—flawlessly repeated—which demonstrated that humans who exhibited male body characteristics turned out to have XY chromosomal structure and humans who exhibited female body characteristics turned out to have XX chromosomal characteristics, it subsequently became clear that interpreting these as the only two patterns was not justified. We must always work on the basis of what we can know at the moment, recognizing that there may always be missing pieces which, when known, will significantly alter the general interpretation. But the very history of recent scientific work in sexuality should serve as a constant reminder that science is one, often fallible, tool for understanding creation, and not a method of defining, much less controlling in any final way, any aspect of God's dynamically developing creation.

In sexuality as well as other areas of human life, we must steer a course between, on the one hand, the human arrogance that causes unforeseen disasters by impelling intervention in systems incompletely understood, and on the other hand, a rigid refusal to accept the human role of co-creator through responsible intervention when necessary.

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<sup>4</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*: Gen. 3:16, *Luther's Works*, vol. I, ed. J. Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 202.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1:92:1 ad 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), vol. 13, 35-39.

<sup>6</sup> William Masters and Virginia Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966) and *Human Sexual Inadequacy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970); Alan Bell and Martin Weinberg, *Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity Among Men and Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978); Alan Bell, Martin Weinberg, and S. Hammersmith, *Sexual Preference: Its Development in Men and Women* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> J. Kestenberg, "Orgasm in Prepubertal Children," *Medical Aspects of Human Sexuality* 13, no. 7 (1979): 92-93.

<sup>8</sup> M. Levitan and A. Montagu, *A Textbook of Human Genetics*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford, 1977).

At the present moment in the AIDS crisis, for example, the global community must resist the temptation to regard the pandemic as the hand of God at work in the world against which human efforts are both sacrilegious and ultimately doomed. At the same time the global community must resist two related temptations. The first is to assume the possibility of a technological fix which removes the need for rethinking and resocializing global patterns of sexuality. The second is to assume that since a technological fix is possible, any shortcuts to that fix can be morally justified, even morally required, despite their danger to specific communities.

The social sciences provide additional limits to moral reflection on sexuality: it is social science which has illustrated the tremendous influence of culture on sexuality, an influence which extends into every area of sexual organization and behavior, as well as determines understandings of the significance of sexuality and sexual relationship.<sup>9</sup> It is social science which has demonstrated the folly of assuming any universal, natural code of sexual morality.

Once we have discerned contemporary scientific consensus regarding the general parameters limiting the social construction of sexuality, we can begin to ask what reflection on our Christian experience has to say about sexuality. Christian experience is a broad, multifaceted reality which includes the experiences of the early church recorded in scripture, the teachings of later church communities and of theologians of different cultures and races up to the present, *as well as* the contemporary experience of people today all over the world.

Lisa Cahill, in *Between the Sexes*,<sup>10</sup> proposes four sources for a Christian sexual ethics: scripture, theological tradition, philosophical accounts of the human, and descriptive accounts of the lived reality of persons and societies. While I appreciate her nuanced understanding that none of these sources is either determinative or always primary, and that the weight of each source will change in particular cases depending on how its direction agrees with or diverges from those of the other sources, I am dissatisfied with the disproportionate weight given the traditional Christian religious sources. That is, the anti-sexual attitude of the Christian West permeates the theological and Christian philosophical traditions as well as much of the New Testament, and a related misogyny winds through these three and the Old Testament as well. The fourth source—"descriptive accounts of what is the case in human lives and societies"—is often too insufficiently developed to be able to counteract this inherited anti-sexual and/or misogynist bias in the other sources.

This fourth source is not precise enough. It collapses the most objective knowledge we have—e.g., of the human reproductive process—with the evaluations of individuals, of academic disciplines and professions, and of entire societies regarding the interpretation and value of sexual activity. We should not either absolutize science as the interpreter of sexuality, or treat science or scientific method as infallible. We must maintain an understanding of sexuality, and of human nature, as social constructions limited by biological/psychological realities. We must preserve a critical approach to the inevitable ideology present even in science, despite continuing popular and professional assumptions that science, both hard and soft science, is value-free. But Christian ethics cannot responsibly ignore or deny the general areas of scientific consensus regarding sexuality. Once those parameters are established, ethical reflection can proceed to discern "meaning"—to look at interpretations and evaluations of sexuality in scripture, in theological tradition, and in contemporary theological, philosophical, and literary, as well as general popular, thought. It seems incontestable that science—all the scientific disciplines together—has replaced philosophy as the privileged discipline for describing humanity, in this case human sexuality. Science is no more infallible than philosophy was in interpreting human sexuality, and the time may come when scientific understanding of humanity, like philosophy at the dawn of the scientific age, becomes less fruitful than other paths of investigation. But for the moment, despite the arrogance and presumption of contemporary science, despite all its limitations in defining the human, we are forced to acknowledge that the sciences have revolutionized human understanding of our sexuality in the twentieth century, and, at least for the present, continue to add more pieces than any other sources to the puzzle that is human sexuality.

### **Christian Experience Regarding Sexuality**

In doing sexual ethics, or any other Christian ethics, we must be both consistent and explicit about our use of scripture. Most Christian ethicists, by training, turn to scripture as a primary resource in doing ethics. There are a

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<sup>9</sup> For example, see Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (New York: Morrow, 1963).

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress and Paulist, 1985), 5.

number of different approaches to scripture among Christian ethicists and even some who seldom make explicit reference to scripture. Though it is possible to address sexuality meaningfully in Christian terms without reference to scriptural texts, and though a strong case can be made for scripture being largely unhelpful in sexual matters, I agree with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza that popular attitudes toward scripture as revealed truth make it necessary to deal with scripture if one is to address the majority of Christians.<sup>11</sup> However, it is not enough to demand that ethicists address scripture in treating sexuality or other contemporary ethical matters. Frequently the only ethicists who clarify their approach to scripture are those specifically addressing the methodological relationship of scripture to ethics. Ethicists addressing other issues, about which scripture is a source, seldom explain what degree of authority they ascribe to scripture, or whether that authority is equally distributed among all texts, much less the justification for that authority or the criteria for discerning what is authoritative within specific texts. Some of this silence stems from a failure to comprehend the profound degree of ignorance about basic scriptural scholarship which characterizes the general Christian audience; many ethicists have so thoroughly absorbed scriptural criticism and have lived so long in universities and seminaries that they miscalculate the needs of their audience and thereby reinforce many of the very attitudes towards scripture which they oppose. Some ethicists select texts which support their particular interpretation; some ethicists survey scriptural texts dealing with their specific topic and point out problems with interpreting them or contradictions between them. Sometimes this latter involves limited exegesis demonstrating that the text has been misinterpreted or was influenced by prevailing customs of the time (as if all texts were not influenced by the culture and history out of which they emerged!). None of these approaches tackles the authority question directly; virtually all assume a "hermeneutics of consent," rather than the "hermeneutics of suspicion" which Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza suggests is appropriate in approaching scripture.<sup>12</sup> Most Christians tend to approach scripture as revealed truth and to assume that the truth scripture reveals is ordinarily self-evident. For this reason, when ethicists treat scripture as a primary source, but fail to make critical distinctions regarding the authority of scripture, they reinforce in the popular mind the tendency to revere all of scripture as revelatory.

Since the majority of scripture scholars seem to regard scripture as a kind of intricate historical and anthropological puzzle to be explored, and are impatient with demands that they discern what contemporary meaning can be found in scripture, ethicists must, for the most part, use a great deal of discernment in using scriptural scholarship. Nevertheless, scripture scholarship is far beyond the point where we can ignore the fact that scripture is not only revelatory, but also counter-revelatory. That is, there are clear scriptural messages which run counter to the character and will of the God we worship. This is a far more important issue than the evidence of historical inaccuracy in scripture, or the evidence of differing accounts of the same event, from creation to the accounts of the Resurrection. It is not enough to say that scripture is conditioned by the person and context of its writers. We need to admit that sometimes the scriptural authors/redactors and their communities either misinterpreted or completely reversed the content of God's revelation. It is not enough to point out that two texts contradict one another, for so strong is confidence in the revelatory character of scripture that audiences are fully capable of concluding that we are not able to reconcile the texts, but that such a task is possible, given another perspective or a more gifted interpreter. We need to connect contradictory texts to the conflicting acts they legitimate in order to demonstrate the necessity for choosing between the meanings of texts.

Arguably, sexuality is the area of ethics demanding the greatest clarification in order to show the general Christian audience that scripture is sometimes counter-revelatory, that not only are some direct scriptural imperatives and statements of theological fact mistaken but the message conveyed in countless stories is also false in terms of human experience of God. There can be little doubt that the authors of Genesis 34, Judges 19, and II Samuel 13 meant that the accounts of the rapes of Dinah, the Levite's concubine, and Tamar were to be a clear message to the reader that injury in Israel was to be avenged in order that God's justice prevail. Yet as Marie Fortune makes clear, the primary message of these passages conveyed to readers today, which was an unreflected assumption in the authors' societies, is that women were property whose welfare was not important in itself (for nothing was done to redress their loss).<sup>13</sup> The injury to the welfare of these women was important only as an affront to their male owners and their colleagues, who take revenge on the women's attackers. And today we wonder why it is necessary to counsel so many fathers

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<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), xviii-xix.

<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Contemporary Biblical Scholarship: Its Roots, Present Understandings, and Future Directions," in Francis A. Eigo, O.S.A., ed., *Modern Biblical Scholarship: Its Impact on Theology and Proclamation* (Villanova, PA: Villanova Press, 1984), 21-22.

<sup>13</sup> Marie Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* (New York: Pilgrim, 1983), 48-53.

and husbands of rape victims that their primary role is to deal with the hurts and fears of their daughters and wives, rather than to dedicate themselves to personal vendettas against the rapists?

Similarly, the author of Leviticus 18:6-18 presented the law against incest as one against sexual union with near kin, because that would be union with one's own flesh, a practice which was to distinguish the Canaanites from the Israelites. Yet when the author cites a long list of persons with whom a man is forbidden sexual congress, it includes not only his parents, his sisters, his aunts, and his granddaughters—his blood kin—but also his sisters-in-law, his daughters-in-law, and his aunts by marriage, none of whom are blood kin. However, Fortune notes that few commentators have noted that the list fails to mention a man's closest blood kin, his own sons and daughters, in the list of kin with which he is forbidden sexual congress.<sup>14</sup> As Fortune points out, the inclusions and omissions of the list are much better explained in terms of respect for the ownership rights of men over women and children than in terms of respect for the sexual integrity of near kin.<sup>15</sup> All those named in the list, though they may be under the practical control of the patriarch of an extended family (in the case of the patriarch's father, the father may be helpless and senile from old age), are nevertheless formally recognized as responsible to themselves as men or to some other man. The major effect of the incest taboo here was to limit the sexual prerogatives of the patriarch, and to protect the property of other men in the family. The emphasis given men's property rights in women and children and the general failure to attribute any sexual autonomy to women elsewhere in the Old Testament give indirect support to such an interpretation.

Judges 11 presents the unnamed daughter of Jephthah as pleasing to Yahweh because she agrees that she should be sacrificed to Yahweh to satisfy her father's vow in return for Yahweh's having allowed Jephthah's victory over the Ammonites.<sup>16</sup> When we fail to point to these stories, and to point out what acceptance of such stories as revelatory says about the character and will of the God they supposedly reveal, we promote idolatry—the worship of a false God.

Because of the patriarchy and misogyny which permeate scripture, it is crucial in sexual ethics that we do not merely select the more positive texts, or merely point out biblical texts which conflict with each other, but that we are clear that not all of scripture is revelatory, that some is counter-revelatory. This is as true of the New Testament as of the Hebrew Scriptures, as we shall see.

This need points to a second, closely connected proposal. We should not be surprised that a great deal of the theological tradition, as well as scripture, which deals directly with sexuality is not revelatory. Schüssler Fiorenza, dealing with women's leadership in the New Testament, suggests that it is the liberatory practice of the New Testament community, which the texts attempt to reverse, and not the practice urged by the texts themselves, which is revelatory.<sup>17</sup> This is a very effective way to deal with the issue of revelation regarding some scriptural issues. However, Schüssler Fiorenza never proposed universalizing this approach. The scriptural texts depicting women and children as property of men did not have that property status as the point of the texts, but as the taken-for-granted background of the texts. The intended messages of these texts did not concern the status of women and children, but rather concerned the status, and relationships and rights of men vis-à-vis other men.

The dismissal of texts as revelatory must be done on a text-by-text basis, but it is apparent to all persons not blinded by idolatrous, uncritical worship of scripture or theological tradition that both are permeated not only with patriarchy and misogyny but also with anti-sexual attitudes which are in conflict with the central messages of the gospel. James Nelson has made clear that the foundational meaning of the Incarnation—the complete unity of human and divine natures in the fully embodied Word—is nullified if we accept the Gnostic-influenced, anti-sexual attitudes of the Fathers and their theological successors.<sup>18</sup> The anti-body, anti-sexual attitudes which have predominated through most of Christian history are at curious odds with Christian insistence that Jesus Christ was fully human, born of a human mother, suffered bodily pain and death, and was bodily resurrected. One would expect that Christians, compared to other world religions, would be clearest about the goodness of the body and most accepting of embodied expressions of love.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 54-56; Florence Rush, *The Best Kept Secret* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Judges 11:30-40.

<sup>17</sup> Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 29-30.

<sup>18</sup> James Nelson, *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience* (New York: Pilgrim, 1985), 18-20.

Traditional acceptance of patriarchy and misogyny in the churches undermines both Jesus' insistence on a discipleship of service, not domination, as well as his parables and example establishing radical inclusivity as the symbol of the reign of God.<sup>19</sup> What records we have of Jesus tell us virtually nothing about his approach to sexuality, either personally or pedagogically, except for his radical openness to women which he demonstrated in the inclusion of women in his travelling band, contrary to the practices of the day (Lk. 8:1-3), in his inclusion of parables from women's activities such as housecleaning (Lk. 15:8-9) and baking bread (Mt. 13:33), in his refusing Martha's request to make Mary accept women's domestic role rather than join Jesus and the disciples (Lk. 10:38-42), and in his disregarding customs limiting women's social intercourse with males to family members (John 4:7-29, esp. 9 and 27). The later excessive weight given to sexuality—and to very negative approaches to sexuality—in Christian discipleship is not supported by what we know of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

I do not advocate setting aside the Christian sexual tradition on the grounds that it doesn't appeal to us today, or that it is historically conditioned. Of course it is historically conditioned, as is all scripture and theology, including our own. But we are compelled to jettison large parts of the Christian sexual tradition for two interconnected reasons.

First, large parts of the Christian sexual tradition are incompatible with the God we experience and worship. The discovery of such incompatibility has been the source of innumerable changes in the Christian tradition from its very beginning. In the Acts of the Apostles, for example, the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem were initially certain that Jesus' teaching that he had been sent to the Jews constrained the church to insist that the Gentiles convert to Judaism in order to become followers of Jesus. Nevertheless, they were later persuaded by arguments such as Peter's—that since faith was God's gift, and since their experience was that the gift of faith was already present among the Gentiles, *God* had evidently decided to admit Gentiles to the Christian community.<sup>20</sup> Experience is always open to fallible interpretation, but the bottom line is that experience is, and always has been, the most reliable source for discerning God's will. Today it is experience of sexuality within the contemporary church which has led many to question or reject those aspects of the Christian tradition which present sexuality as morally dangerous or sinful, devoid of the capacity to reveal God. In constructing ethical and theological arguments supporting such rejection of the anti-sexual tradition, equal stress should be given to the experiential basis of the rejection, rather than focusing exclusively on locating supportive texts from scripture or the classic theologians. Rejection of anti-sexual attitudes in the tradition should not be primarily based on intra-traditional grounds (if it were, the rejection would have taken place centuries ago) but rather on positive experience of sexuality.

Secondly, internal contradiction, beginning with the New Testament itself, forces us to set aside large parts of the Christian tradition. There can be little doubt that contradiction exists between Gal. 3:28, "There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," and the household code "Wives, be subject to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord .... Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them" (Col. 3:18). The first denies the difference which grounds dominant/subordinate relations, while the second reinforces those same dominant/subordinate relations. We must choose one or the other. When we deny the necessity of choosing between these contradictory texts, we transform Galatians' denial of difference into an affirmation of a romanticized, abstract, and non-relational equality which is not affected when some persons own, control, and use others.

In the same vein, contrast 1 Timothy 2:15, "Yet woman will be saved through childbearing," with Jesus' words in Luke 11:27-28, "As he said this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and cried, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that gave you suck!'" But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" Women are saved either by the exercise of their reproductive function or by following the path of discipleship laid out by Jesus for men and women alike; these are clearly two very different claims. Again and again in scripture, and in subsequent theological tradition, texts conflict, and we must choose that which accords better with the overall message of the gospel as that gospel is experienced in our individual lives and in communities.

Experience often causes some radical revision in the interpretation of texts. For example, over the last 20 years in my own Roman Catholic church, there has been some very radical revision in the interpreted meaning of Luke 10:38-42, the story of Jesus' refusal to rebuke Mary for not joining Martha in the kitchen. For centuries, the prevailing Catholic interpretation was that Jesus was commending Mary's choice of a life of vowed contemplation (as a priest, brother, or sister) over Martha's choice of a life as a layperson amid the cares of the world.<sup>21</sup> Today the

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<sup>19</sup> Hugo Echegaray, *The Practice of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 29-30, 81-82, 84-85, 94-95.

<sup>20</sup> Acts of the Apostles 11:1-18.

<sup>21</sup> John XXIII, "Notre joie est grande," October 20, 1960, *Actae Apostolicae Sedis* 52 (1960): 897.

debate over women's roles in contemporary society is so extensive that it is difficult to miss this story's message about the inclusion of women in discipleship. There is also a greater awareness that Jesus rejected John the Baptist's ascetic withdrawal from the world as a model for ministry, and understood withdrawal from the world, as in his temptation in the desert, or his periodic fleeing from the crowds, as moments of preparation for ministry.<sup>22</sup> Jesus went from town to town, and to Jerusalem itself, seeking out the popular masses. He made himself available to the sick, and sent out his disciples to heal and to teach in the towns and villages. Neither Jesus' Jewish society nor the records we have of Jesus' life and teaching placed great value on a life devoted to solitary prayer and contemplation to the exclusion of service to concrete human persons.

As our world and our experience continue to change, there will doubtless be other, new interpretations of the meanings of scriptural texts. Every generation must reinterpret scripture anew, and that reinterpretation includes weighing the value of scriptural texts.

## A New Theological Framework for Sexuality

In addition to clarifying a more critical approach to the authority of scripture and theological tradition, Christian sexual ethics needs to rethink its framework for evaluating sexuality. The Christian tradition on sexuality has centered on individual sexual acts, specifically on sexual acts regarded as sinful, and consequently has failed to reflect on the meaning of sexuality itself and its revelatory meaning for humans.

Though ethicists have agreed for years that sexual ethics should be more "relation-centered" and not so "act-centered,"<sup>23</sup> all but a few texts<sup>24</sup> and courses in Christian sexual ethics remain largely structured around acts. Though the treatment of sexual acts—premarital sex, masturbation, homosexuality, contraception, and adultery—has changed a great deal over the past quarter century, even many liberal authors have found it difficult to break from the format of traditional treatment.<sup>25</sup> Even when this format adds a chapter on marital sex which attempts to develop a Christian sexual theology, a chapter on conscience development, and perhaps even a chapter on changing understandings of women and/or sexuality itself,<sup>26</sup> the overall framework still suggests that it is the physical

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<sup>22</sup> Mt. 11:18-19; Mk. 2:18-22.

<sup>23</sup> Vincent Genovesi, S.J., *In Pursuit of Love. Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987), 154-155; Philip Keane, S.S., *Sexual Morality: A Catholic View* (New York: Paulist, 1977), 98; John Shelby Spong, *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988) 45-46.

<sup>24</sup> Those few include James Nelson's *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) and his *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) and Andre Guindon, *The Sexual Creators: An Ethical Proposal for Concerned Christians* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Spong, Keane, and Genovesi, above, as well as Andre Guindon's *The Sexual Language: An Essay in Moral Theology* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1977).

<sup>26</sup> For example, Vincent Genovesi's *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality* divides into two halves. The first half consists of chapters on Christian living, conscience and the magisterium, theology of sin, and human sexuality. The organization of the second half is traditional, and revolves around the traditional sins: premarital sexuality, contraception, homosexuality, masturbation, and abortion. The first quarter of Phillip Keane's *Sexual Morality: A Catholic Morality* is devoted to theological anthropology, the changing role of women, and an overview of relevant traditional moral themes; the rest of the book is organized into chapters around masturbation, homosexuality, the limitation of sex to marriage and the limitations on sex within marriage, celibacy, the 1975 Vatican document on sexual ethics, and a chapter on "other sexual issues," which includes critical treatment of traditional moral maxims, new sexual technology, and sexual offenses (abuse). Gennaro Avvento's *Sexuality: A Christian View* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1982) spends four chapters on developing secular and Christian views of sexuality, the development of conscience, and "The Emerging Woman" before devoting the remaining 12 chapters to contraception (4 chapters), sterilization, masturbation, artificial insemination, sex for singles, extramarital sex, homosexuality, and abortion. Helmut Thielicke's *The Ethics of Sex* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), though older than any of the above and thus unable to draw on the extensive secular literature on sexuality since 1964, is nevertheless less organized around traditional Christian sexual sins than any of the above. It does, however, draw the most rigid distinctions between men and women. Thielicke devotes only one-third to treatment of birth control, abortion, homosexuality, and artificial insemination, and two-thirds to biblical anthropology, eros and agape, the plasticity of human sexual behavior, a historical survey of Christian treatments of marriage, and the

structure of the act or the status of those engaged in the act, rather than the qualitative nature of the relationship in which the act occurs, or the motives emerging from that relationship or lack of it, or the consequences of the act on persons, which determine the morality of the act. This approach is responsible in part for the moral blindness of Christian societies regarding practices such as marital rape, for the implication of this approach is that if a licit sexual act (male-female vaginal intercourse) occurs within the properly sanctioned contractual relationship (marriage), there can be no sin. The implication that marital sex is never problematic contributes to a widespread callousness about the quality of marital sex which causes society to ignore the seriousness of not only sexual violence in marriage but also sexual dysfunction.

Additionally problematic is the fact that most of the acts upon which the tradition has focused have been regarded as sinful, for such a focus implicitly teaches sexual moral minimalism, i.e., that virtue in sexuality consists of avoiding these specific sexual acts. This moral minimalism gives no guidance in or opportunities for reflection on sexual virtue as the process of constructing sexual relations, genital and non-genital, which are just, loving, and promotive of individual and social growth.

But even if we could avoid teaching moral minimalism in teaching sexual ethics as structured by sexual sins, the traditional list of sexual sins is woefully inadequate, both in what is included, and in what is excluded. For example, the typical table of contents includes chapters on masturbation, contraception, non-marital sex, adultery, abortion, and homosexuality. Yet, as many authors point out, both social science research and the general rejection of procreationism among Christians beginning with the 1930 Lambeth Conference have undermined traditional theological objections to both masturbation and homosexuality. Social science research reveals genital self-stimulation beginning in infancy (by eight months) and extending through adolescence in the majority of humans.<sup>27</sup> In addition, there is evidence both that masturbation is relatively absent in infants and children deprived of affectionate touch and personal care,<sup>28</sup> and that persons who have never masturbated are much more likely to have sexual dysfunction problems in sexual relationships.<sup>29</sup> Since most Christian churches have accepted the use of artificial contraception, and most Christians within churches which ban artificial contraception (principally the Roman Catholic) reject that ban, the fact that masturbation is sexual activity without possibility of procreation—the foundational objection in the tradition—is not compelling.

Similarly with homosexuality. The agreement within medical and social science that sexual orientation is not chosen but more commonly discovered<sup>30</sup> absolves homosexual orientation of sinfulness, and calls into question not only the judgment that homosexual activity is deliberately and defiantly chosen activity, but also the unnaturalness of homosexual acts for those with homosexual orientation. Again, for the tradition, unnaturalness was determined almost exclusively on the basis of procreative possibility; but given the general acceptance of deliberately

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contemporary shift toward equality of the sexes. Is this the result of differences in Catholic and Protestant treatment of sexuality? Perhaps. The Anthony Kosnick, et al., *Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought* (New York: Paulist, 1977), which was commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society of America, follows Thielicke in outline—it is not until the fifth and final chapter that the book takes up the traditional sexual sins. But that final chapter begins on page 99 and ends on page 239! The point here is that it is very difficult to break the historical conditioning that makes us organize our thinking about sexual ethics around traditional sexual sins, even when we no longer understand some of them as serious or perhaps even sinful.

<sup>27</sup> T. Langfeldt, "Childhood Masturbation: Individual and Social Organization," in L. L. Constantine and F. M. Martinson, eds., *Children and Sex* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981).

<sup>28</sup> R. A. Spitz, *Autoeroticism: Some Empirical Findings and Hypotheses (on three of its manifestations in the first year of life)*, vol. 3/4, *The Psychoanalytic Life of the Child* (New York: International Universities Press, 1949). Still the authoritative work.

<sup>29</sup> Shere Hite, *The Hite Report* (New York: Dell, 1977), 73-78; John Money and C. Bohmer, "Prison Sexology: Two Personal Accounts of Masturbation," *Journal of Sex Research* 16 (1980): 258-266. In addition, masturbation is a central feature of most sex therapy programs, e.g., Helen S. Kaplan, *The New Sex Therapy* (New York: Bruner-Mazell, 1974) and *How to Overcome Premature Ejaculation* (New York: Bruner-Mazell, 1989); and J. R. Heiman and J. Lo Piccolo, *Becoming Orgasmic: A Sexual and Personal Growth Program for Women*, rev. ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> F. L. Whitam, "The Homosexual Role: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Sexual Research* 13 (1977): 1-11; C. Silverstein, *Man to Man: Gay Couples in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), 102-103; and A. Bell, M. Weinberg, and S. Hammersmith, *Sexual Preference: Its Development in Men and Women* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981), 186-190.



contraceptive heterosexual coitus, to ban homosexual acts on the grounds that they cannot be procreative when non-procreative heterosexual sex is accepted would be unjust discrimination.

But the greatest problem with the traditional list of sexual sins is its brevity. A truly relational perspective on sexual sin would both greatly expand the list and divide it into two categories, individual and social.

In other areas of ethics and moral theology, we recognize two general categories of sin. Just as liberation theology has taught us to recognize both structural violence (the social denial to the poor of basic human needs) and violent individual and group responses to that structural violence,<sup>31</sup> traditional Christian theology posits the existence of original sin, an inescapable predisposition to sin among humans, as well as individual sin, often called actual sin. Many contemporary treatments of original sin suggest that the tendency to commit individual sin may best be understood as the result of the fact that all humans are born into a particular society which is already permeated by sin.<sup>32</sup> Original sin, sometimes called social sin, or the sin of the world, is socialized into us as we learn our world, as we learn to speak a language, to interact with different persons and groups, to accept a specific role in society. Born into a society permeated with racism, sexism, poverty, and violence, we learn varying degrees of complacency toward, and come to accept, these realities; that acceptance, once socialized into us, forms the groundwork for our committing overt acts of sin. In sexuality, too, original sin is present in our world. Patriarchy, misogyny, the related evils of homophobia and heterosexism,<sup>33</sup> and alienation from and disdain for the body and sexuality are forms which original sin takes in the sexual context. They set the scene for the innumerable varieties of overt acts of sexual sin. Our baptism into a church community which is pledged to recognize and resist sin in the world is supposed to free us from bondage to original sin, but baptism's effectiveness depends upon the church community recognizing the specific forms that original sin takes, teaching individual members to resist, and supporting their resistance to that sin.

Our churches have not done a great job at recognizing sexual sin. Parents who disown a child who has gathered the courage to disclose to them his/her homosexual orientation are overtly responding to their learned homophobia. Is the severing of the intimate bond that binds parent and child any less grievous than that of the spouse who commits adultery? If sin is a distancing of the individual from God, do such parents not distance themselves from God, our loving parent? But many of our churches encourage just this form of sexual sin.

It is unconscionable that many forms of sexual violence are omitted from most textual and sermonic treatments of sexual sin, and that some are not even recognized as sinful within the tradition. Fourteen percent of wives in our society are victimized by marital rape,<sup>34</sup> to which our tradition is blind. Between one half and three quarters of working women in our society report sexual harassment in their jobs,<sup>35</sup> but the law has been quicker to recognize both of these as sexual evils than have the churches. Even sexual sins recognized by the Christian tradition are often excluded from many texts in sexual ethics. By ignoring rape, child incest, and child sexual abuse in teaching sexual sin, the implication arises that masturbation and adultery, which are treated, are more serious sins than these sins of sexual violence, as does the implication that these acts of sexual violence are rare, exceptional occurrences. But in our society, between 4% and 5% of young girls are the victims of incest by fathers,<sup>36</sup> between one third and one half

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, the Medellin document on peace (by Gustavo Gutierrez) in *Renewing the Earth: Catholic Documents of Peace, Justice, and Liberation*, eds., David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

<sup>32</sup> One of the earliest and best-developed explanations was that of Piet Schoonenberg, *S.J., Man (sic) and Sin*, trans. J. Donceel (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 4-5.

<sup>33</sup> Heterosexism is a characteristic of Western societies, in which law and public policy assume that all persons are naturally heterosexual, and are oriented to marriage and children. These assumptions are reflected in laws and policy about what persons are considered to be the "natural" guardians of the incompetent sick, who has visiting rights in institutions, who are considered heirs for the in-testate, who can file joint income taxes, who can be claimed as dependents, etc. Homophobia, while closely related, is usually understood as fear and hatred of gays and lesbians by individuals and groups of individuals.

<sup>34</sup> Diana Russell, *Rape in Marriage* (Riverside, NJ: Doubleday, 1982).

<sup>35</sup> C. Safran, "What Men Do to Women on the job: A Shocking Look at Sexual Harassment," *Redbook* (November 1976): 148ff (88% victimization rate); L. Ploy and L. Stewart, "The Extent and Effects of the Sexual Harassment of Working Women," *Sociological Focus* 17 (1984): 31-43 (50% victimization rate); A. Grieco, "The Scope and Nature of Sexual Harassment in Nursing," *Journal of Sex Research* 23 (1987): 261-266 (82% victimization rate).

<sup>36</sup> Diana E. H. Russell, *The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 216.

of women are victims of attempted or completed rape<sup>37</sup> and one in nine boys, and one in four girls, are sexually abused.<sup>38</sup>

There can be no doubt that the blindness of sexual ethics texts to sexual violence is rooted in the same original sin that leads to sexual violence itself, namely the patriarchal and misogynist understanding of sex as an inherently dominant/subordinate relation, with women and children assumed to be natural subordinates. Until we enlarge our treatment of sexual sin from individual overt acts to include a critique of social models and institutions which give rise to them, our understanding of sexual sin will remain deficient.

### Social Silence on Sexuality as Original Sin

Recognizing socio-sexual forms of sin as original sin also allows us to see society's treatment of sexuality itself as a form of sexual sin. The overwhelming majority of our society is immensely ignorant about sexuality, and this ignorance victimizes many. Many sexual problems, including sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, and sexual dysfunction are often due to ignorance. Is this ignorance sinful? The popular Christian tendency to recognize as sinful only those acts for which individuals are responsible and to see ignorance as removing responsibility for individual actions—the tendency to focus on subjective rather than objective sin—has blinded us to the sinfulness involved in some types of sexual ignorance. Sexual ignorance in our society is not necessary—the information is known. Yet the October 1989 Kinsey Institute survey, released September 5, 1990, on sexuality in the U.S. found that only 20% of the American public could answer correctly 12 of 18 basic sexual questions on topics such as: when females can become pregnant; how AIDS is contracted; normal penis size; the effects of menopause on sexual desire; and who needs gynecological exams or self-exams of testicles.<sup>39</sup> All the information covered in the survey is basic for making informed decisions regarding both personal sexual health and behavior and for decisions on public policy in sexuality. Unnecessary sexual ignorance is *chosen* in our society—by school systems which fear parental opposition more than student ignorance,<sup>40</sup> by churches which see sexual ignorance as evidence of virtue, and by parents, themselves ignorant, who fear that sexual education may lead their children to sexual attitudes and choices different from their parents'. While 60-80% of American adults favor sex education in general,<sup>41</sup> public school administrators indicate that opposition from the community is the greatest obstacle to effective sex education

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<sup>37</sup> Russell, *Secret Trauma* (38% of the women who had not been victims of child incest had suffered rape or attempted rape as adults, compared to 68% of those who had been victims of child incest); F. Mims and A. Chang, "Unwanted Sexual Experiences of Young Women," *Psychosocial Nursing* 22 (1984): 7-14 (50% were victims of rape or attempted rape); P. DeVast et al., "The Presence of Sexually Stressful Events Among Females in the General Population," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 13 (1984): 59-67 (24% victims of rape or attempted rape); L. Koss et al., "The Scope of Rape: Incidence and Prevalence of Sexual Aggression and Victimization in a National Sample of Higher Education Students," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 55 (1987): 162-170 (15% raped, 25% more victims of unwanted sexual intercourse); S. Feldman-Summer and G. Norris, "Differences Between Rape Victims Who Report and Those Who Do Not Report to a Public Agency," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 14 (1984): 562-573 (50% victims of rape or attempted rape).

<sup>38</sup> Margaret Heckler, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, Spring 1985 *Report on Child Sexual Abuse* (1 in 4 girls, 1 in 9 boys sexually abused); Russell, *Secret Trauma* (28% of girls under 14 sexually abused); Gail Wyatt, "The Sexual Abuse of Afro-American and White Women in Childhood," *Child Abuse and Neglect. The International Journal* 9 (1985): 507-519 (36% of girls under 14 sexually abused).

<sup>39</sup> October 1989 survey reported September 6, 1990, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, A6, "Misconceptions About Sex Abound, Survey Shows."

<sup>40</sup> Krista Ramsey, "Ohio Lacks Required Sex Curricula," *Cincinnati Enquirer*; Sunday, January 19, 1992, A1. In this investigative story, Douglas Kirby, director of research for California-based Educational Training and Research Inc., describes the typical U.S. sex education program as an "organ recital" method. In junior high there are several days spent on learning the names and functions of various biological parts, a few classes on body changes at puberty, and brief discussions on STDs and contraception. In most districts, high school sex education consists of a half-year health course in which only 12 - 18 hours (two to three weeks) are related to sexuality, and those deal with reproduction only. Most states have no state law requiring sex education. Kentucky in 1990 *repealed* its law requiring all districts to teach some sex education.

<sup>41</sup> P. S. Reichelt, "Public Policy and Public Opinion Toward Sex Education and Birth Control for Teenagers," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 16 (1986): 95-106; E. R. Mahoney, "Sex Education in the Public Schools: A Discriminant Analysis of Characteristics of Pro- and Anti-Individuals," *Journal of Sex Research* 15 (1979): 264-275.

programs.<sup>42</sup> How is this so? While active opposition to sex education in general is limited to a small group of conservative Americans often linked to conservative churches, the majority of parents are concerned about whose values will be taught in sex education programs. Some would prefer no sex education if the values to be taught are not those of the parents. Reflecting this agreement about the need for sex education and the fear of criticism, 75% of large urban school districts in the U.S. do have sex education programs, but only one in ten, for example, includes treatment of fertility, pregnancy, and contraception before the high school level,<sup>43</sup> despite the rising levels of pregnancy among grade school and junior high girls.<sup>44</sup>

Many people disagree that our society is silent about sex. They insist that sex is glorified and depicted in movies, television, billboards, magazines, and newspapers. And it is. Sexual activity is celebrated as the human activity necessary to personal development, the only reliable source of intimacy, as the highest, most satisfying pleasure available (outside illegal drugs). But despite this distorted celebration of sexual activity, society does little to promote the goal of mutual pleasure in sexuality; nor does society promote the goals of bonding and intimacy, which typically are associated only with sex. Just as important, our society fails to help persons understand under what circumstances sexual relationships (and not just sexual activity) can fulfill even broader human needs and desires, such as the desire for identity, community, and purpose. Romantic exaltation of sex is not sexual information—it is a destructive evasion of the need to critically evaluate meaning in sexuality. Such evaluation requires adequate information.

There is a social silence around sex—a silence that encourages, among other problems, sexual dysfunction. Sexual dysfunction refers to difficulties people experience in responding to sexual stimulation and experiencing orgasm. Sexual dysfunction affects between a third and a half of all persons to varying degrees.<sup>45</sup> And the majority of all dysfunctions are rooted in ignorance. Anorgasmia, the absence of orgasm, affects about a quarter of all women.<sup>46</sup> Though it has a number of causes, most anorgasmia can be easily cured either by simply explaining to women that orgasm is both natural and normal for women as well as for men, or by additionally describing to women and their sexual partners some common techniques for female arousal.<sup>47</sup> Both anorgasmia and painful intercourse are often the result of ignorance of the process of sexual arousal in females, especially the roles of the clitoris and vaginal lubrication in female arousal.

Male impotence is also tremendously aggravated by ignorance. Most initial male impotence is entirely normal—that is, a result of tiredness, depression, problems within the sexual relationship, or minor health problems. Such impotence is temporary, often lasting only hours or days. But in a society which implies that men should always be ready for sex, lack of erection is a failure of masculinity, and temporary impotence raises anxiety, sometimes in both partners; this anxiety then puts such pressure on the male to achieve erection that impotence may become a repeated occurrence, each incident increasing anxiety.

The most common male sexual dysfunction, premature ejaculation,<sup>48</sup> occasionally affects as many as one half of men, and regularly affects one quarter of them.<sup>49</sup> There is general agreement that one important cause of premature ejaculation is the climate, often characterized by fear and secrecy, in which most adolescent male sexual activity occurs. That is, both the masturbatory experiences of boys and the early coital experiences of many young men

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<sup>42</sup> P. Scales and D. Kirby, "Perceived Barriers to Sex Education: A Survey of Professionals," *Journal of Sex Research* 19 (1983): 309-326.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> F. Sonenstein and K. Pittman, "The Availability of Sex Education in Large City School Districts," *Family Planning Perspectives* 16 (1984): 1, 19-25.

<sup>45</sup> S. Spencer and A. Zeiss, in "Sex Roles and Sexual Dysfunctions in College Students" (*Journal of Sex Research* 23 [1987]: 338-347), showed only 13% of university students report sexual dysfunctions. But other statistics indicate the problem is greater: C. A. Darling and J. K. Davidson in "Enhancing Relationships: Understanding the Feminine Mystique of Pretending Orgasm" (*Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* 12 [1986]: 182-196), report that 66% of women and 33% of men report faking orgasm; Crooks and Baur report premature ejaculation rates among university students at 50% occasionally, and another 25% regularly (*Our Sexuality*, 159); the table of J. Ende et al. (1984) in Crooks and Baur, *Our Sexuality*, 553, shows 25% of women report anorgasmia during routine sexual histories by physicians.

<sup>46</sup> J. Ende et al., 1984, table in Crooks and Baur, *Our Sexuality*, 553.

<sup>47</sup> J. Annon, *The Behavioral Treatment of Sexual Problems*, vol. 1 (Honolulu: Enabling Systems, 1974).

<sup>48</sup> Kaplan, *The New Sex Therapy*, 289; Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, 95-96.

<sup>49</sup> Crooks and Baur, *Our Sexuality*, 556.

occur in a climate which leads young men to learn to ejaculate quickly, for fear of discovery. This haste can become habitual over the years, and makes learning ejaculatory control difficult in later relationships.<sup>50</sup>

Sexual dysfunction is not a minor problem in sexual relationships such as marriage. Shared sexual activity in marriage functions not only as a symbol of love, but can also recreate and deepen love through its affirmation, celebration, and sharing of love.<sup>51</sup> The inability to fully share oneself or to receive the physical gift of the other often strains relationships and can distance the lovers by calling into question the existence of mutual love. It can be the cause of a great deal of suffering, much of which is unnecessary.

Sexual dysfunction is only one part of the unnecessary sexual suffering caused by continued social ignorance of sexuality. Much of our sex education for children is too little, too late. In mistaken attempts to protect the innocence of children from contamination by information about sex, we ensure that the majority of children, who in our society receive no sex information from parents,<sup>52</sup> risk reaching menarche, nocturnal emissions, or other signs of puberty without any understanding of the changes through which their bodies are moving.<sup>53</sup> As of 1990, only 22 states and the District of Columbia mandate any teaching of sexuality in the public schools.<sup>54</sup> However, researchers at the Alan Guttmacher Institute concluded that only three states—New Jersey, New York, and Wisconsin—and the District of Columbia have what can be construed as an adequate program on sex education and AIDS education.<sup>55</sup>

When my colleagues and I have presented grade school sex education programs, there are always one or two girls who cry with relief that their bleeding is "only" menarche, and not some fatal disease they were afraid to mention to anyone. Some, already sexually active, have mistaken ideas about the conditions under which one can become pregnant: for example, that one can only become pregnant from intercourse during menstruation, or never the first time, or not if one's partner withdraws, or not if one douches afterward. There are always a few boys relieved to have nocturnal emission explained to them, some of whom have been punished by ignorant mothers who assumed they had been masturbating in bed. Many young people do not understand the changes in their bodies during puberty, due both to lack of adequate information and to failure to make the information which is provided both clearly relevant and understandable. Those who are exposed to sex education in schools often find that it is excessively clinical, not designed to center on the questions and problems children and adolescents have about sex, aimed at whites rather than non-whites, and especially at white females,<sup>56</sup> and presented by teachers who are loath to lead open discussion due both to personal discomfort with sex and to fear of parental backlash if the students take information and questions home. There are small boys whose genital growth is years ahead of the rest of their body, who worry that they will always be out of proportion, or the reverse, boys whose weight and height double, but whose secondary sexual characteristics are late. We allow them to fret, as we do those girls who are very early or especially late to menarche and breast growth. There is hardly an area touching sexuality where our society provides adequate information, and that includes childbirth and all areas of parenting. We often hear of ignorance and fear about pregnancy and childbirth among *teen* mothers, but our society does not include instruction in pregnancy and childbirth in the information we consider necessary for adult life in our society. Most childbirth classes which are available are designed for those already knowledgeable enough to be desirous of specific forms of natural (non-anesthetized) childbirth. The general assumption that childbirth and child-rearing are instinctive in women not only supports the absence of childbirth information in most sex education classes but also disinclines many pregnant women from pursuing the instruction which is available. It is impossible to avoid concluding that in our society sexual information is obtained largely by chance. Children of sexually ignorant or silent parents, in school systems

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Gallagher et al., *Embodied in Love: Sacramental Spirituality and Sexual Intimacy* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 32-35.

<sup>52</sup> G. Fox, "The Family's Role in Adolescent Sexual Behavior," in T. Ooms, ed., *Teenage Pregnancy in a Family Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981); G. Sanders and R. Mullis, "Family Influences on Sexual Attitudes and Knowledge as Reported by College Students," *Adolescence* 23 (1988), 837-846.

<sup>53</sup> James T. Sears, "Dilemmas and Possibilities of Sexuality Education: Reproducing the Body Politic," in *Sexuality and the Curriculum: The Politics and Practices of Sexuality Education*, James T. Sears, ed. (New York: Columbia Teachers College Press, 1992), 10; A. Kenney, S. Guardado, and L. Brown, "Sex Education in the Schools: What States and Large School Districts Are Doing," *Family Planning Perspectives* 21 (1989): 2:59.

<sup>54</sup> D. Haffner, *Sex Education 2000: A Call to Action* (New York: SIECUS, 1990).

<sup>55</sup> See Kenney et al., "Sex Education and AIDS Education," *Family Planning Perspectives* 21 (1989): 2:61.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

with poor or nonexistent sex education programs, without the health resources of the middle class, will grow up to have sexually ignorant children like themselves.

Is this sin? That depends, in part, on how we understand sin and how we understand sexuality. If sexuality truly is a part of the creation that God pronounced good, if all creation, including sexuality, offers the possibility of mediating God to us, and if shared human touch, genital expressions of love and commitment, and the birthing and rearing of children all can demonstrate the same self-disclosing gift of self which we worship in our God, then brokenness in sexual relations implies some brokenness in our relationship with God—a classical definition of sin.

We cannot assume that where there is sin there will also be an individual sinner, a person who consciously chooses to break with God. We could, of course, call such phenomena as poor socialization around sexuality "evil" and not "sin." We often do this in situations where we recognize disvalue but cannot point to individual sinners. The problem is that this category of disvalue for which there are no identifiable sinners tends to be understood as natural and non-moral. Floods, earthquakes, and epidemics cause suffering, have victims, and are easily characterized as evil. Often, in order to achieve some greater good, we choose to endure or to inflict on another some smaller suffering, but we do not understand ourselves as sinners. The problem with adding deficient sexual socialization to this category of physical or pre-moral evils is that such socialization is neither beyond human control nor is there proportionate reason for enduring it. What greater good does social silence about sexuality achieve? All human activity which causes unnecessary suffering without producing any greater good should be understood as sinful.

Within a critical reflection on contemporary sexual ethics we also need to reject as sinful procreationism, the understanding that the primary or exclusive purpose of sexual activity is procreation. As we shall see in the following chapter, procreationism has been, despite popular opinion to the contrary, embedded in our society's basic understandings of sexuality; it is not at all an exclusively Catholic phenomenon. Because procreationism focuses moral attention on the ability of a sexual act to procreate, rather than on the dignity and welfare of the actor(s) or the relational context in which the sexual act occurs, cultural procreationism in the West has supported a kind of moral blindness to issues of sexual coercion, coital pain, and particularly conjugal domination and violence.<sup>57</sup>

### **Sexualizing Theology**

In the area of sexuality, the churches have a long-term task of developing a sexual theology, which is considerably more than the theology of sexuality that Norman Pittenger began demanding two decades ago.<sup>58</sup> That task involves a sexualizing of Christian theology itself: We must not only discern God's intentions for human sexuality but we must also integrate our sexual experience into our broader human experience, which is our principal resource for discerning who God is and how God works in our world.

We cannot begin now with sexualizing theology in the churches, for theology is always done out of experience, and the sexual experience of many, if not most, Christians is still not only repressed but incorporates a variety of destructive beliefs and practices. Generalized acceptance of dominant/subordinate relations between men and women in much of the world, for example, results in popular masculinizing of the Godhead, just as negative attitudes toward sexual activity historically resulted in insistence on the virgin birth of Jesus and, in Catholicism, on the perpetual virginity of Mary and her immaculate conception, as well as in widespread social veneration of the hymen.

The initial task in the churches is to concentrate on sexual ethics. The churches need to point out both the contradictions within traditional Christian sexual ethics and the unacceptable messages we convey about our God in the sexual rules and attitudes we attribute to that God. Furthermore, the churches need to help people to draw on their own personal and communal experiences in making choices concerning revelation and sexuality. Only after that task is somewhat advanced can we begin to expect that the Christian community, as a whole, can both continue the social transformation of sexual relationships and theologize from their lived sexual lives.

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<sup>57</sup> See the Quebec Conference of Bishops, Social Affairs Committee, "Heritage of Violence: A Pastoral Reflection on Conjugal Violence," translated by Antoinette Kinlough (Montreal: L'Assemblée des évêques du Québec, 1989), sections 3.1.2, 3.4.3, and 3.4.5, which incorporates a critique of the understanding of women as made for motherhood, and therefore as objects to be used, of less worth and dignity than men.

<sup>58</sup> Norman Pittenger, *Making Sexuality Human* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 9.

This is, of course, not the way most of us were taught to understand the interaction between theology and ethics. We learned that theology comes first, and that ethics is deduced from theology. There are two problems with such a deductive approach to ethics: 1) it assumes what has not always been the case in Christianity—that the theology from which ethics is deduced was itself constructed out of reflection of the whole community on their lived experience of God, , and 2) it ignores the fact that since ethics is more closely linked to practice, than is theology, that ethics is likely to follow changed practice more quickly than does theology. If the Christian community can free itself from captivity to its theological and ethical tradition and experience more egalitarian, intimate marriages, more humane sex roles in society, the validation of sexual pleasure, the ability to choose parenthood for the sake of loving children, and the appreciation—neither oppression nor mere tolerance—of gays and lesbians both for their distinctive individual gifts and for the insights their experience and perspective shed on humankind and God, then the people of God may discover that sexualizing theology radically revises many central Christian doctrines, often in ways that none of us now perceive.

Such a move goes far beyond the need to revive casuistry in order to revitalize ethics, as proposed by Jonsen and Toulmin,<sup>59</sup> for it is not our ability to deal with exceptional cases which is currently at stake in sexuality, but the basic principles and paradigms of the Christian sexual tradition. Jonsen and Toulmin suggest that case studies can multiply the exceptions to inherited moral theological principles, maxims, and paradigms so as to call into question those very principles, maxims, and paradigms. There can be little doubt that since the 1960s American Christians have been engaged in just such casuistry, and academic, ecclesiastical, and popular literature has been filled with case studies which collectively called into question the traditional sexual teachings of the Christian churches. Some of these challenged teachings include sexual complementarity, procreation as a primary purpose of sex, the covenant model of marriage, the two-in-one-flesh image, Christian love as limitless self-sacrifice, and the dualistic vision of human virtue as the victory of the rational soul over the desires of the corrupted body. For Catholic Christians, two additional teachings challenged are the venereal pleasure principle, and the teaching that all sexual sins are grave sins. All of these teachings are now resisted by many American Christians on the basis of reflection on experience. Barring drastic reinterpretation, these teachings will eventually end in the theological dust bin. This is not to say that these teachings were never valuable insights, that they were never revelatory.

It is only to say that, given the socioeconomic and political structures of contemporary life in the Western developed world, such teachings no longer appear to contribute to the justice, health, and well-being of human society. It is becoming clear that within these circumstances the experience of true sexual intimacy offers great insights into God's love, one of which is that divine love is much better imaged by the Trinity than by the biblical covenant between Israel and Yahweh. The covenant is better viewed as a primitive understanding of how God's love operates, a model which was dependent upon human experience with feudal lords and vassals in the ancient Near East. Certainly it makes no sense to explain that marital love is like the love between the members of the Trinity—self-disclosing love between equals whose intimacy overflows onto the whole of creation—and also like the exclusive dominant/subordinate covenant of Yahweh and Israel. Within biblical history, the Israelites came to understand that their relationship with Yahweh had outgrown the contractual *quid pro quo* structure of covenant. This is one reason why the bride/groom analogy for the covenant developed: to open covenant to greater possibilities for intimacy. Surely thousands of years later we could do better than covenant to explain our most intimate human relationships.

James Nelson has effectively argued that taking human sexuality seriously will allow us to appreciate the Incarnation in fuller, more meaningful terms, and also to grapple more adequately with the significance of resurrection for human lives.<sup>60</sup> I expect that there is no area of Christian theology which will not be somehow affected. We are coming to understand that *all* of the ways that we respond to God's free gift of love and salvation are responses of our embodied sexual selves—whether they are prayer, community worship, feeding the hungry, or cherishing our children. This developing understanding in turn sheds greater light on Jesus' linkage of the two great commands, to love God and to love our neighbor. The demise, in our thought, of the disembodied, nonsexual, spiritual soul-self (as opposed to a physical, temporal self) and of the exclusive right of the spiritual self to commune with God will give new dignity and worth to all aspects of corporal life, including sexuality.

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<sup>59</sup> Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), Chapters 16ff.

<sup>60</sup> Nelson, *Intimate Connection*, Chapter Four and 105-111; Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, Chapters Two and Twelve.

As Christians transform sexual understanding and practice we may discover that one of our deepest Christian problems is our understanding of self. Jesus' command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves does not shed any new light on how we are to love ourselves, much less on how we are to understand ourselves. It assumes that we already know. But how should we understand the self? To look at texts on Christian marriage today is to find many contradictory treatments of self within the same text, all of them proclaimed as Christian. This is not only a semantic issue. For example, Gallagher, Maloney, Rousseau, and Wilczak in their *Embodied in Love* make the following claims about marital love: 1) it is giving oneself to the spouse; 2) it is abandoning and emptying oneself; 3) it is sharing oneself with the spouse; and 4) it is developing a mature individual self.<sup>61</sup> These are not merely different phrases for the same thing. They imply radically different, even contradictory things. These authors are not singular in their inability to decide whether the self is positive or negative, whether the self should be obliterated and replaced or developed and cherished, or whether the self should be given away or only disclosed to those we love. When our tradition speaks of self it is not clear whether the self is truly us or only some false front which makes us seem different and unique from other selves. I believe that ambiguous Christian attitudes towards the body—and the desires that we commonly associate with the body—are one important source for this ambivalence. Ambivalence regarding the self must create some ambivalence in discerning how that self should relate to God and neighbor. Such a re-grounding of Christian sexual ethics as is currently under way will require a great deal of creativity as well as courage. Paradigm shifts, unfortunately, are not easy or comfortable, and those who promote them are all too often persecuted.

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<sup>61</sup> Gallagher et al., *Embodied in Love*, Chapter One (and throughout).