Feminist Theo-Ethics: Queering Imagination and Action

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I am delighted to participate in "Imagining a Queer World." My focus is on "Feminist Theo-ethics: Queering Imagination and Action" which I approach in three moves. (1) First, I look at the context and moral framework in which we find ourselves and explain why I think a new approach is necessary. (2) Second, I suggest that we begin to act accordingly by changing the default conversation among us from homosexuality to heterosexism. (3) Finally, I draw out some of the implications for strategic actions for justice that accrue from such a change.

1) Context and moral framework

Feminist theo-ethics begins in a context: globalization, multi-religious, technology/HIV/AIDS, war as a method of empire building. First, our context is increasingly globalized, meaning that fewer and fewer people make more and more decisions for the rest of us. Globalization has its positive points; we would not be here without rapid travel and the Internet.

However, from a Christian liberationist perspective, a preferential option for the marginalized deems that the critical ethical conversation on globalization begins with those who are devastated by its consequences, not those who benefit from it. Ask your neighbors who are out of work or watching their savings dwindle as they pay for health care. Look at the enormous reach of Coca-Cola, Wal-Mart, and McDonald's, the empire of Halliburton, and the ubiquity of Nike to get an idea of globalization. Some of these corporations, and others like them, have budgets larger than those of some developing

countries. Decisions made in their boardrooms have more impact than decisions made in government centers of most developing countries. That virtually all of the world's major corporations are headquartered in this country—with the exception of some Asian communications giants and some European pharmaceutical companies— is reason for those of us who are U.S. citizens to think anew if we are to do justice.

A second dimension of our shared context is the multiplicity of religious traditions that characterizes our spiritual landscape. It simply was not the case for our parents and their parents who lived in this country when it was predominantly Christian. Professor Diana Eck of Harvard University's Pluralism Project has documented in her excellent book, A New Relgious America, the remarkable growth of religious offerings in this country, which now is close to having more Muslims than Presbyterians, soon to have more Muslims than Jews.[i] While for mainline Christian groups this has not been welcome news as their numbers shrink, it is the reality of an immigrant-rich population, which brings its various faiths with it from all over the world.

Ethical conversation that is reliant on religion, as most ethical conversation is even if the specifics of the religious content are sometimes passed over, needs to leave aside the easy assumptions that reigned when it was a predominantly Christian and Jewish conversation. We need to bring what Catholic moral theologian Daniel C. Maguire calls "the renewable moral energy" of religion, many religions, to the table in order to find ways to live justly with our differences.

This is especially challenging for those of us who come from Christianity. We have become used to the hegemony of our assumptions. We have to rethink the language and imagery we use to express our deepest commitments, realizing that it is but one such

expression. Moreover, we need to learn to remain silent and learn from those whose voices are new to the conversation, trusting that our perspectives have been heard and heard again for centuries and now must be placed alongside other equally important religious sources for ethical reflection. This will not come easily to most of us, but it is the reality of our children's future.

A third dimension of our context is the explosion of technology and the parallel development of HIV/AIDS. I link these because I think it is not coincidental that we have increased the rate and quantity of information sharing for those online while a virus that infects the most vulnerable has all but defeated us. I am not suggesting any causal link between the two; that would be absurd, not to mention too easy. I am trying to show that more and faster is not always better, in fact that without a radical socializing of the earth's resources it can be worse.

Among the reasons why HIV/AIDS has spread with such rapidity include air travel, migration in many developing nations from the countryside to the cities where there are better jobs and more sex partners, and women's continued lack of power in most societies, power to say "no" to male partners who do not use condoms. Globalization has meant that most women in developing countries or poor women in the U.S. do not have the economic means to live on their own rather than be dependent on men who may infect them.

Conversely, high tech has not meant an increase in justice as pharmaceutical companies continue to prioritize profits, albeit some for research and development, over cheaper prices for effective drugs. Microsoft's success has not changed the fact that women have primary, and in many instances, exclusive responsibility for childcare. The

rapid rise of the number of women infected promises yet more orphans throughout the developing world and among our own poor. I am not blaming technology for HIV/AIDS. I am simply observing that incredible progress on one front does not guarantee the same on another. This contextual reality reinforces my commitment to a preferential option for those who are marginalized.

A fourth dimension of our shared context is war as a method of empire building. Whether in Afghanistan or Iraq, the Middle East or soon, sadly, perhaps in North Korea and/or Iran, the machinery of war is thriving. Good for the economy some say; necessary to rid the world of terrorists, others intone. But in fact war guarantees that violent deaths and maiming will keep certain powers in place and generate a cycle of violence that does not quit. It is the surest way for the U.S. to keep its economy humming and to secure its empiric reach.

Of course there are other dimensions that frame our context. They include "driving while Black," young women unable to get the reproductive health care they need (though South Dakota rejected the abortion ban recently), or young men murdered because they are gay—that is, the structures of injustice including racism, sexism, homohatred. We see that poverty begets itself with one's childhood family economic status still the best predictor of long-term economic well-being. We realize that rich people and poor people are practically different species now, with the pets of the wealthy getting better treatment in their boutiques and hotels than most poor people. Taken together, the context is grossly unfair to most of us before we even enter into any discussion of issues. Thus the way we enter into such discussions needs to be conditioned by this context, not done as if the context were non-existent.

Feminist biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has called these unjust structures "kyriarchy" or interlocking structures of lordship. [ii]She relies on the Greek word for "lord" used so loftily within the Christian tradition to underscore that the "lording over" is the problem. Kyriarchy helps to explain what is not ever a single, individual problem, but always a structured, socialized injustice.

The fact that the word "kyriarchy" has a Christian ecclesial ring to it is not coincidental either. I speak as a Catholic, for sake of ecumenical politeness inviting those from other faith traditions to see how this might apply to their structures as well. I can point to countless example of kyriarchy in my own tradition—the exclusion of women and married men from priesthood, the shameful treatment of lesbian/gay/bisexual and transgender people, the ongoing need to improve ways in which African American and Hispanic Christians shape the normative experiences of church, to name just a few examples. The important point is that given that the very religious traditions that we look to for ethical guidance are themselves fraught with the injustices I described, our task of developing effective ethical methods is more daunting than I first thought.

A look at moral frameworks will illustrate the problem. The role of religion in ethics is complicated by the proliferation of different traditions as well as by the range of views within traditions. For example, there is probably as much difference between Hindu and Islamic views of ethical issues as there is between a progressive and a conservative Catholic perspective. Yet most of us do rely on some strand of our tradition, or if we have none, on a kind of secular humanism that functions equally well.

Usually ethical frameworks are imposed regardless of the issues at hand. Setting your own ethical agenda is a first step in making HOW we do ethics consistent with what

we hope to accomplish. This is "queering" which means bringing insights from those who have been marginalized for transgressing sex/gender boundaries—including those who are lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender and our friends—so as to rethink moral questions. Queering involves more than sexuality—it is deliberately transgressive of the many structures of oppression that reinforce the structures of heterosexist lordship.

Queering is an effort to reshape our context into one that reflects respect, dignity, and the means for all to flourish. My goal is to build communities of ethical concern and action. Thus, engaging and involving "the rest of us" is crucial. After all, who asks the questions shapes how the agenda is framed. We are the ones who do justice. Justice is an imaginative construction because no one of us has ever lived in a just context. With such imaginative work comes the imperative to bring about what we conjure. That is the action component.

I rely on the insights of feminist ethicists who ground our efforts in concrete work for social change. Feminism is a thorough embrace of a justice norm starting with the well-being of women and dependent children who are often left aside, marginalized, trivialized in kyriarchy. In our context, it seems that justice is episodic instead of structural—justice was done, she got what she deserved, he acted justly rather than the mythic "justice for all," or any semblance of an ethical level playing field where kyriarchy reigns. We see the lack of justice more often than its presence. While this is admittedly hard to measure, perhaps like the Supreme Court judge who defined pornography by saying, "I know it when I see it," the most precise definition of justice may be in its fruits when equality and dignity reign.

I use the term "ethics" rather than morality as in "moral theology" since ethics implies a move away from thinking of personal moral choices, what I consider the relatively easy task, toward assuming responsibility for the larger common good, both now and in the future. For example, the discussion-stopping question of whether Suzie should or should not have an abortion is the kind of theo-ethical question that will culminate in a "yes" or "no" answer, akin to the question of whether same-sex love is morally good. These kinds of questions do not, however, address the larger context in which, whether yea or nay, many other relevant ethical matters are at hand. They are, of course, important practical questions if I am Suzie or about to lose a job because I am a lesbian. When we get to the have/don't have an abortion stage, critical ethical work has either been done or, more likely, ignored. Likewise, if we have to ask if same-sex love is good—rather than whether particular relationships are healthy, good, holy, natural, we are operating out of a worldview that is mired in absolutes and wedded to outmoded understandings of the human person. Queering the imagination and action is in order.

Religious feminists generally construe ethical questions in a broad framework, namely, how we live in "right relation" with one another, with the earth, indeed with all of what is called creation given the unjust and unequal context in which we find ourselves. This does not guarantee any specific answer in Suzie's case or in the case of particular lgbtq relationships for that matter. Rather, it is a different way of beginning the ethical task that promises far more than "yes" or "no" for Suzie and her community, for all of us.

This shift toward what has traditionally been called social ethics is key to understanding what is at stake in a feminist religious approach. The theo-ethical task

is not simply to answer a question, but to construct the social fabric so that Suzie and others will have multiple options for doing justice. In addition to Suzie's personal situation or my own, the theo-ethical concern includes attention to matters of economics and race, sex education and contraception, socialized medical care and employment, all factors that influence the context in which decisions are taken.

This implies that advocacy is an essential part of ethical reflection, rejecting the notion of some abstract, disinterested starting point. Many religious traditions urge advocacy. Indeed, in a postmodern context, many traditions urge action rather than trying to reach the "truth" about a matter. The task, in my view, is to find ways to live with increasing diversity of opinion, even to the point of contradiction. It is far more challenging than persuading people to agree with me and far more realistic given the plurality of our starting points.

What is distinctly feminist about this approach? Feminist ethical issues are not simply those focused on or having to do with women. A contemporary feminist perspective signals an inclusive, interstructured approach to a range of issues with a preferential option for those who are marginalized. For instance, when dealing with the death penalty, women are often overlooked as both victims and survivors of victims. The majority of those receiving the minimum wage are women, but the issues are for everyone. Likewise, on reproductive health matters, while having primarily to do with women, feminist approaches cannot leave aside male choices and male responsibilities in the same way that women do not want to be ignored. So too, on lgbtq issues, feminist religious approaches to ethics require multi-faceted and richly textured efforts with special attention to their impact on women and dependent

children, not always a hallmark of gay male advocacy. The point is that "feminist" signals this broader agenda so that queering does not get defined narrowly in terms of sexuality as if every queer person were alike or as if the only important issues were sexual.

The roots of the feminist religious priority on justice can be traced to the work of at least three influential scholars. Presbyterian ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison, longtime professor at Union Theological Seminary, begins with the Christian concept of love: "Love is a praxis of being actively engaged in mutual and respectful co-creation of community." [iii] She goes on to say, "Furthermore, love and justice are inextricably related norms that we learn in moral struggle. Christian life involves sustained engagement in the struggle for justice as making right relation, or in some situations, at least ending injustice." [iv] This is why lgbtq questions are so seemingly obvious from a Christian perspective, where love should triumph even over integrity as Harvard scripture scholar Krister Stendahl claimed Paul meant. It is also why the virulent anti-gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/queer polemics are so troubling. Not only do they harm individuals, but they make a mockery of the fundamentals of Christian life.

Carter Heyward, Episcopal priest and professor at Episcopal Divinity School, picked up the threads in her study, Our Passion for Justice, in which she weaves a cogent case for love and justice as twin dimensions of the effort to live in right relation. [v] She insists, "We must begin to see that *love is justice.* Love does not come first, justice later… We do not feel our ways into right-relation with other races, other people…We act our way into feeling." [vi] She places the action in the center,

urging a certain derring-do when it comes to new ethical issues. That is why the leadership of Christian theologians and ministers has played such a key role in the acceptance of same-sex love in the larger society because we have been able to imagine that loving well is more important than the gender constellation of those involved.

Ethicist Emilie Townes, an American Baptist from Yale Divinity School, lays out "womanist justice" in her study of African American activist and reformer Ida B. Wells-Barnett. [vii] She argues, "A womanist social ethics, like that of Wells-Barnett, searches for the possibilities, for justice."[viii] By that she means the empowerment of African American women in all segments of society, including the religious. When cast in lgbtq light, the possibilities for justice are a worthy if seemingly unattainable goal in most religious settings.

These three scholars, and many others whose work has paralleled theirs, make explicit the liberation theology claims for praxis as the starting point for theo-ethical work. They insist that the context is not neutral, but that its very particularity, whether with regard to race, gender, sexuality, economics**,** or nationality, determines how a "preferential option" for those who are marginalized will be articulated. This is the basis of queering anything.

I take this justice norm to be foundational to feminist ethical work from a Catholic perspective as well. It invites widespread participation in urgent struggles for social change, beginning with issues that awaken our passions. Such a method must be **imaginative**, however, since none of us has ever experienced a just context. At best, we have hints and glimpses of what justice might mean. Therefore, we have but

to imagine using the resources of our religious traditions. They provide us with historical examples of people in struggle and even some success stories. They ground us in our beliefs, whether in transcendence or not, and clarify our non-negotiables.

It must also be **constructive** since in its absence we must make or build structures of justice, not simply talk about it as an intellectual exercise. Rather, our task is to act in ways that are just and create a just context in the socio-economic and political arenas using our religious traditions as resources. Our sacred texts, our histories and leading figures, our customs and ways of worship all suggest that justice is possible if hard to attain. This of course implies that such a method is grounded in **action**. It involves whole communities in social change and celebration of what that change brings. This is not so much a prescription or an order—you must do this—but an invitation to think about how what we do changes the world and decide what changes we want to make. What better place to start than within and among our faith communities, where the contradictions of injustice are hard to countenance.

2) Shifting the conversation from homosexuality to heterosexism

In the spirit of this imaginative, constructive, and action-oriented approach, let me turn to my proposal that we practice queering by shifting our attention away from homosexuality, about which we have had endless religious discussions, to heterosexism, a fresh way to think about the issues of sexual integrity. I mean this as a strategy and as a discipline since it is quite easy to fall into the trap of rehearsing old arguments in favor of same-sex love and never alter the terms of the debate, a guarantee that such conversations will go on endlessly with few useful results.

While it is of course crucial to understand homosexuality religiously in order to counter any claims that we inhabit any but the holiest of grounds, it is equally important to focus on heterosexism as the underlying problem for many religions. Otherwise we run the risk of defending homosexuality rather than eradicating heterosexism, of reinforcing and reinscribing homosexuality as the fundamental issue. Even our best attempts to defend homosexuality, however unintentionally, buttress the power of those who reject it. The real issues is heterosexism, without which homosexuality would be morally neutral.

I will be specific about heterosexism from a Roman Catholic perspective both for reasons of interfaith politeness and because I know it most intimately in that context. I am hopeful that my remarks will help you to unpack the heterosexism of your own tradition, or, if you are not a religious person, to see it at play in the larger society. You might try queering your own tradition with colleagues over lunch today, thinking about how the shift away from homosexuality to heterosexism would reshape your community's thinking and acting. I admit it requires some imagination, but if we Catholics can do it, there is hope for the UCC, Disciples, MCC, and others!

Countless Catholics and others whose lives are influenced by Catholic teaching have committed the sin of heterosexism perhaps without realizing its name. I am sure this is true for religious people of other stripes as well. Parents who disown/dishonor their same-sex loving children, lawmakers who vote against same-sex marriage, employers and landlords who discriminate in hiring, adoption, and/or housing against lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer people, priests/ministers who teach and counsel against same-sex love, even same-sex loving persons themselves who engage in self-

hatred commit a sin against a Divine who created sexually diverse people and a community that is pledged to love one another.

Catholic ethicist Patricia Beattie Jung and Lutheran liturgy professor Ralph F. Smith, in their groundbreaking book on heterosexism, defined it as "a reasoned system of bias regarding sexual orientation…that denotes prejudice in favor of heterosexual people and connotes prejudice against bisexual and, especially, homosexual people." [ix] This system of privilege accorded to those who love persons of a sex/gender not their own to the detriment of those who love persons of their same sex/gender is deeply woven into the social fabric of laws, customs, ethics, and commerce. In a justice-centered religion like Catholicism, heterosexism, not homosexuality that is condemned by kyriarchal church officials because of it, requires exploration and eradication.[x] I speak as a white Catholic lesbian feminist theologian in the United States, indebted to colleagues around the world who are moving the debate on homosexuality to new anti-heterosexist ground. [xi]

In fact, I was recently part of an exciting scholarly project on this topic that included colleagues looking at heterosexism in Judaism, Confucianism, and Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and of course Christianity (Kelly Brown Douglas looked at it from the perspective of the Black Churches, Marvin Ellison from a white Protestant perspective, and I handled the Catholic case). To a person we agreed that such obvious work simply had not been done in our faith communities. While we knew a great deal about what our traditions thought about homosexuality—most of it negative—we had very little insight into their perspectives on heterosexism.

I am happy to report that the volume of our essays will be published by Pilgrim Press edited by Daniel C. Maguire with a popular volume to follow that I am writing for Fortress Press. Our major effort is to change the default assumptions in the discourse. Instead of asking what is wrong with same-sex behavior that needs defense, we are gradually, and without in any way taking pressure off of those who would discriminate, shifting the focus to heterosexism so as to put those who engage in it on the defensive. We have had to imagine and act to do so.

My method for handling heterosexism is not to revisit the many excellent Catholic/Christian biblical, theological, and ethical treatments of same-sex love that are persuasive in their pro-lgbtq arguments even if they do not deal explicitly with heterosexism. [xii] To do so would simply reinscribe homosexuality as the primary theo-ethical concern. After all, homosexuality is a phenomenon that, absent heterosexism, is no more ethically interesting or relevant than heterosexuality. It is a descriptive category that is morally neutral. Shifting the focus from homosexuality to heterosexism, what others have called "reframing the issue," results in new insights that can transform Catholicism and contribute to other religions' efforts to transform themselves.[xiii]

A compelling reason for taking this approach is because debate in Catholic circles, perhaps in yours as well, on the morality of homosexuality has resulted in a complete impasse and a lot of damage. Those who consider homosexuality a sin and those who consider it healthy, good, natural, and holy simply disagree. Kyriarchal church teaching favors the former. The *sensus fidelium*, the sense of the faithful, or what most people believe, is moving in the other direction. Joseph

Cardinal Ratzinger, in his capacity as the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was the theological proponent of the most heterosexist teachings and policies. [xiv] In his new incarnation as Pope Benedict XVI he has additional powers of persuasion and enforcement that he is not shy about using.

Official Catholic teaching is silent on the sin of heterosexism despite its heavy prohibitions against homosexuality. Given that the Vatican is now debating the no-brainer whether condoms can licitly be used by married people one of whom has HIV/AIDS, I am not optimistic that they will come quickly to the question of heterosexism. Getting them there is part of the action required by this work.

Likewise, when the U.S. Catholic bishops meet in the fall of 2006 in Baltimore they will vote on a new proposed document, "Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care." It is a microcosm of what is wrong with framing the issue in terms of homosexuality. Let me simply name a few of the most glaring problems with the title page alone and spare you the fuller exegesis of the document.

a. First, the document comes from the top down with no consultation with lgbtq people except perhaps the closeted gay priests who participated in its development; a feminist theo-ethical approach privileges those most deeply affected by an issue, listening to their experiences and including them in the shaping of solutions.

b. Second, it is a mode of ministry TO—not ministry WITH, which is simply an outmoded notion of ministry; a feminist pastoral approach involves accompanying people, ministering within, not from outside a community.

c. Third, it is predicated on a mistaken focus on "persons with a homosexual inclination" rather than on how the community can face and deal with its heterosexism. Imagine a similar document on "ministry to persons with a heterosexual inclination." It is simply unthinkably absurd. But a document on eradicating heterosexism, by bishops who have been schooled in it, would be a welcome resource.

d. The guidelines do not challenge much less change Vatican teaching on homosexuality, but repeat the old tired phrases about it being objectively morally disordered. Social scientific data as well as biological research have rendered obsolete the basis for such statements. Feminist theo-ethics is firmly based in the social and physical sciences, prioritizing intellect over doctrine.

e. There are some timid little niceties about the need to baptize our babies IF there is a reasonable expectation that the parents will raise the child Catholic, this after making clear that good Catholics refrain from broadcasting their sexual orientation. So it can be interpreted to mean if one is "out," her/his children cannot be baptized. This is remarkable, as if anyone could decide not to baptize a baby because of the parents' sexual integrity. I would argue that baptism is a gift of God, not a decision of a bishop. Even so, for the bishops to offer baptism to our children while they mount expensive anti-same-sex marriage efforts in many states strikes me as just a tad disingenuous. I have suggested through the National Religious Leadership Roundtable of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force that the best way to handle the document would be for the bishops to engage with Catholic theologians on these issues.

This kind of heterosexist work has its parallels in many Christian denominations, notably the Methodists and Episcopalians where the lines are drawn

around ordination and leadership. Thanks to the Institute for Religion and Democracy and other right-wing groups these internal religious struggles are exacerbated by boundless financial and personnel resources that result in painful fissures in the denominations. I was heartened last summer when I read that 75 Methodist clergy members signed a letter outing themselves in support of the Reverend Beth Stroud who was eventually defrocked for being an honest lesbian. It was only later and with deep sadness that I realized that heterosexism is so virulent in the Methodist denomination that the names of the signers, rather than being at the end of the letter for all to see, were instead notarized and on file with a lawyer. They could not be disclosed for fear of repercussions. It is not for me to criticize my Methodist colleagues, and it is not for anyone to demand that another person take a life/career/job-altering stand. But I must note with deep regret that heterosexism reigns such that these folk must be publicly perceived to be heterosexual in 2006 in order to minister.

Likewise in the Anglican communion where the investiture of the 26th presiding bishop in the United States, the Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori, the first woman in the post, raised anew the concerns in that communion about women and same-sex love. She is publicly in favor of both! The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, was oddly absent from the ceremony though he sent warm greetings. I don't think I read too much into it to say that it is tricky to be publicly in favor of someone who is publicly in favor, if you know what I mean. The Anglican community is in serious jeopardy of split as many of its churches in

developing countries as well as about 10% of its churches here in the U.S. are scandalized to the point of schism over same-sex love.

If there were no consequences to the current impasse, I would ignore it and let the consensus develop in favor of sexual diversity in its own time, as seems to be happening. However, Christianity and especially Roman Catholicism cause untold spiritual and psychological damage to its billion plus members throughout the world and others by promoting heteronormativity. It is, however unintentionally, complicit in the gay-bashing violence that occurs in cultures where same-sex love and lovers are despised. The Vatican influences public policy in many countries to make heterosexuality the only legitimate sexual practice, to prevent same-sex couples from accessing the legal rights of marriage, and, in some places, to criminalize consenting sexual behavior between adult persons of the same sex. The stakes are simply too high to ignore the theo-political dimensions of heterosexist religious institutions.

The old argument, as framed by church officials, is whether homosexuality is morally acceptable or not. This framing puts the onus on those who love to defend their love, an odd and unjust demand in a religious tradition that teaches love as its highest value. It also allows those who reject social scientific and theological data to ignore it since what is problematized is an abstraction, "homosexuality," rather than the concrete reality of human beings loving and expressing their love regardless of the sexual constellation of the lovers. At issue is not the morality of anyone's sexual orientation. Focus there obscures the fact that heterosexism harms all persons regardless of sexual orientation and prevents many people from

achieving what I think of imaginatively as "sexual integrity."[xv] Only after heterosexism has been dismantled can we revisit the question of homosexuality with any objectivity. Hopefully, at that point it will not be necessary to do so since the irrelevance of sexual preference for any moral debate will be obvious.

Heterosexism is rooted in an outdated anthropology that claims sexual complementarity between males and females as natural law. It is easiest to see on the macro or structural level such as in the opposition to same-sex marriage.
It is doubtful that Christians will come to consensus on the morality of same-sex love anytime soon. But while polls do not make theology, it is simply impossible to ignore that just as we have changed our views on slavery, the place of women, and the role of science, so, too, many have changed their views on homosexuality. As a society many of us are morally mature enough to recognize that same-sex relationships, like mixed-sex ones, come in all sorts of packages. The ethical focus is on the quality of the love, not the quantity of each gender involved. As a pragmatic matter, I think it is useful to find points of contact in an effort to limit the damage the kyriarchy does, especially to young people.

Changing the conversation from the morality of homosexuality to the sin of heterosexism is an effort to move from a non-conversation about homosexuality where agreement eludes us, to a productive conversation on eradicating heterosexism, where I think widespread agreement is a real possibility. It begins with the common acknowledgement that there are many lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer (henceforth lgbtq) people. In fact, there are many more than most people know.

Same-sex marriage has been the political lightening rod. But it is my observation that same-sex adoption is the next front in this cultural clash. Just as the religious right has added end-of-life issues (the Terry Shiavo case stands out) to abortion, so too have they added adoption to marriage in an effort to push back recent gains. The Vatican leads the way per usual. In the document against same-sex marriage (*Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons*) in a section on adoption: "Allowing children to be adopted by persons living in such unions would actually mean doing violence to these children, in the sense that their condition of dependency would be used to place them in an environment that is not conducive to their full development. This is gravely immoral...." (Paragraph 7). This statement demonstrates the pernicious intent and destructive impact of Catholic heterosexism.

Have the people who wrote and approved such a statement ever been up in the night with a sick child or held one of the hundreds of thousands of children who are orphaned because of sexist population policies or the HIV/AIDS pandemic? Many lesbian and gay families include such children, welcoming them with love and affection, reasoning that a child's life with one parent or two parents of the same sex is far better than languishing in an institution or, worse, dying from neglect.

The implementation of this policy is clear in the scandalous, may I say sinful case of Catholic Charities in Boston. It is licensed by the state to provide adoption services. In the past twenty years it placed 720 children in permanent homes. Thirteen of those children, less than two percent, went to same-sex families. Conservative Catholics who

monitor such matters have obviously been unhappy for years, preferring that children be shuttled through foster care or kept in institutions, which all studies show is their worst fate, rather than live in a loving home with parents of the same sex. That squeaky wheel obviously got enough grease so that in late 2005 the Apostolic Nuncio, the Vatican's top diplomat in the U.S., sent a letter to Archbishop Sean O'Malley telling him that such practices were not in compliance with church teaching and should be stopped. The Archdioceses of Denver and San Francisco are facing similar challenges. Three months later the deed was done. Catholic Charities in Boston would not disobey church law by facilitating same-sex adoptions, nor would they risk legal sanctions for disobeying the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' laws by discriminating against same-sex couples. Their solution was to do no adoptions whatsoever, a move calculated to maintain their funding base (adoptions made up less than 4% of their budget) to engage in other social service work. Governor Mitt Romney, feathering his nest for a presidential bid, considered an executive order to exempt Catholic Charities from complying with the law, but that went nowhere. Legislative strategies to do the same were not pursued because the votes are not there. Short term legal help from the powerful Boston firm Ropes and Gray produced no creative solutions. Catholic Charities, fearful of Vatican reprisals, cut their losses all around. Their plan is to phase out of the adoption business in an orderly way.

Adoption is not a casual decision regardless of sexual orientation. Same-sex couples go into it with their eyes open about the prejudice and discrimination they and their child may face. Remarkably, they do it anyway. Once the child is in the parents' arms, on their insurance, and under their care for life the incidentals melt away. The big issue is how to parent to the best of one's ability, how to love and care for this child who has unique

needs and a right to be cherished. No one said it would be easy; homohatred just makes it that much harder. And still, adoptive parents never look back. We are too busy, not just with soccer and swimming, school and scouts, orthodontics and college funds. We're too busy rolling Easter eggs on the White House lawn and loving our kids to the best of our fallible human abilities.

Same-sex families, like same-sex couples, need not justify our love. All the beautiful smiling holiday pictures and claims at normalcy will not change hard hearts and narrow minds. But Catholic Charities, Archdiocese of Boston is morally obliged to justify or, better, to change its wrong decision because it does harm to children. Their claim "that we have encountered a dilemma we cannot resolve… cannot reconcile the teaching of the Church, which guides our work, and the statutes and regulations of the Commonwealth" rings hollow in the face of children waiting for permanent homes and qualified adults wanting to adopt them.

That is precisely the sin here—that the well-being of children is played off against the well-being of people who are poor, ill, old, or otherwise in need of communal care that Catholic Charities in Boston has provided for decades. This is why feminist theo-ethical analysis is so crucial, so as to queer the issue without losing the big picture. No Christian theology of sexuality, however conservative, trumps the demands of justice and the works of mercy. I use the Catholic case so as not to offend beyond my own community. I am sure there are other example of equally egregious actions.

Ethicist Christine Gudorf contributes to a new theology of sexuality by clarifying the "postmodern shift from human sexual dimorphism to human sexual polymorphism." [xvi] A careful look at the biology is enough to indicate that human

beings are created in a rich variety of ways for which a dimorphic paradigm is simply inadequate. Moreover, sex is not simply biological and gender socially constructed. Rather, as Gudorf observes, "both sex and gender are socially constructed categories; both sex and gender must be interpreted" (p. 876).

The assumptions that there are only two sexes and two genders, that we know what it means to be a man or a woman, and, consequently, what it means to be a lesbian woman or a gay man can no longer be taken for granted. In concrete terms, "polymorphous sexuality means that we may be attracted to a person only to find out that the person does not have a body sexed in the way we thought, or may have a body sexed the way we thought but not the sexual identity we thought would accompany that body, or may have a body sexed the way we thought and the sexual identity we thought would accompany it but not be interested in the sexual acts we are interested in" (p. 887). There is simply no Christian theology adequate to respond to this new reality. The old heterosexist model is clearly inadequate. We all begin afresh imagining and bringing it about together, queering by imagining and acting.

The personal damage of heterosexism is widespread and stunning as a few examples demonstrate. A young lesbian woman saw the contradictions of her faith when she confronted her mother, a well educated mental health professional, on why her mother had not presented same-sex love to her on a parallel with heterosexuality in her formative years. A revered minister sold thousands of books on healing as a wounded person without publicly disclosing a major source of his own wounds, heterosexism. A Catholic nun with a woman lover counseled many

people on relational issues without feeling safe enough to share her own. In addition to the tragedy for the individuals involved, these cases and legions like them signify a loss of integrity for the whole community. Ted Haggard's recent fall from grace is simply another sad case of heterosexism causing untold damage to his wife, his children, his congregation, and ultimately, to himself. What a pity.

On the macro level, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and many other church groups lobby hard against same-sex marriage and now adoption in national and local settings. They help keep the more than 1138 federal rights that accrue to married couples from those in same-sex partnerships.[xvii] The Vatican does the same at the international level, putting pressure on governments like Spain (to no avail) to keep marriage heterosexist. One wonders why in the face of so many international problems including war, racism, ecocide, and poverty a religious organization would spend its symbolic capital on sexuality if it were not the lynchpin in its hierarchically dualistic world view. Paired with the sexism that always accompanies it, heterosexism plays a key role in kyriarchal thinking both to discriminate against lgbtq people and to prevent especially women from exercising moral and spiritual agency. From there it is a small step to war, empire, and death as coming from the same top-down, over against models where the same Othering goes on.

Heterosexual people are damaged by heterosexism as well. The pressure to partner with someone of a different sex has led to many a short marriage. One can speculate that it has occasioned many a missed love as well. Those who are taught that heterosexual nuptial imagery best describes the relationship between Jesus and

the church are impoverished spiritually and disenfranchised intellectually. All of these are preventable failures of religious imagination, preventable by eradicating the heterosexist bias that undergirds them.

3. Implications for action

Eradicating heterosexism will have many positive impacts. The gains for lesbian/ gay/ bisexual/ transgender/queer people are obvious as we stand to live and love on a level moral playing field for the first time in human history. Some lives may even be saved as hate crimes decrease for lack of theological support.

Just as undoing racism has been helpful to white people, and undoing sexism has given men more freedom, heterosexual people will gain as well. They can question the strictures on love that they received, perhaps noticing some love missed along the way. They can leave aside a distorted sense of self that heterosexism confers, something that can be a barrier to authentic human connections. They can affirm their love, more confident than ever that it is good because it is not mandatory.

As heterosexism is dismantled, I predict that Christianity will move into the 21st century with increased intellectual and moral integrity. While there will not be immediate agreement across the board on homosexuality, at least we will be debating the right issue, heterosexism. Removing the moral focus from homosexuality will mean an implicit "normalization" of same-sex relationships, an opportunity to reflect on how ordinary most of them are. The tired old polarizations will go by the wayside.

This kind of queering means pulling out one strong plank from the pyramid of kyriarchy. Perhaps it will be enough to topple the rest of it. At the very least we will put a strong dent in a system that oppresses. And we will build alliances with people who are capable of undoing the rest and who are committed to building a society that reflects the values of our tradition, namely, love and justice. It is not a dream, but the work of our generation of those who follow in the tradition of Wisdom-Sophia. I hope you will join me in attempting it.

NOTES

[i] Diana Eck A New Religious America*:*How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation. San Francisco: Harper San Francsico, 2001.

[ii] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza coined the term "kyriarchy" to describe interstructured forms of lordship that are oppressive. The Catholic all-male hierarchy is quintessentially kyriarchal. See But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992, pp. 117, 123.

[iii] Beverly Wildung Harrison, Our Right to Choose, Beacon press, 1983, p. 115.

[iv] Harrison, Ibid., p. 115.

[v] Carter Heyward, Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation. New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984. See especially Chapter 11.

[vi] Heyward, Ibid., pp. 85-86.

[vii] Emilie M. Townes, Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope, Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993.

[viii] Townes, Ibid., p. 212.

[ix] Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph F. Smith, Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993, p. 13.

[x] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza coined the term "kyriarchy" to describe interstructured forms of lordship that are oppressive. The Catholic all-male hierarchy is quintessentially kyriarchal. See But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992, pp. 117, 123.

[xi] I am grateful to colleagues in the "Heterosexism Project" of the Religious Consultation for Population, Reproductive Health, and Ethics, especially Judith Plaskow and Marvin Ellison for helpful suggestions on this essay. I am also grateful to Diann L. Neu for her careful reading.

[xii] Among the most useful treatments of homosexuality in Catholic literature are: John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of

the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; Bernadette J. Brooten, Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996; Robert Goss, Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993; Mark D. Jordan, The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000; John McNeill, The Church and the Homosexual, Boston: Beacon Press, 1976. For scriptural arguments see also Daniel Helminiak, What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality, San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1994. An excellent contemporary resource that includes both theology and scripture is an anthology edited by Patricia Beattie Jung with Joseph Andrew Coray, Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001.

[xiii] George Lakoff has popularized this approach in Don't Think of An Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishers, 2004. However, this is what feminist theologians have been doing for decades in the refusal to respond to cultural givens and in the construction of new paradigms. One classic example is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins. NY: Crossroad, 1983.

[xiv] Among the most damaging documents that were published while Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger was Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith are *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, October 1, 1986 and *Some Considerations Concerning the Catholic Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons*, July 23, 1992.

[xv] See Mary E. Hunt, "Sexual Integrity" in WATERwheel, Vol. 7, No. 3, Fall 1994, pages 1-2.

[xvi] Christine E. Gudorf, "The Erosion of Sexual Dimorphism: Challenges to Religion and Religious Ethics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion 6* (2001), pp. 863-891.

[xvii] The Human Rights Campaign published the Defense of Marriage Act: An Update to Prior Report, General Accounting Office, Washington, D.C. 2004, "An update to the 1997 GAO report (1,049 Federal Benefits for Married Couples) found that 120 new statutory provisions involving marital status were enacted since the last report, and 31 were repealed or amended to remove marital status as a factor. The new total is 1,138."
http://www.hrc.org/Template.cfm?Section=Home&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=16980, accessed August 11, 2005.