

Heterosexism: An Introduction



Patricia Beattie Jung, Ph.D.

About the Author

Patti Jung is Associate Professor of theology at Loyola University Chicago, where she has specialized in Christian sexual ethics and issues fundamental to Roman Catholic moral theology since her arrival in 1995. She is particularly interested in the moral evaluation of pleasure and sexual diversity. She earned her B.A. from Santa Clara University and both her M.A. and Ph.D. in Religion from Vanderbilt University. She is a member of both the undergraduate and graduate theology faculties and regularly offers courses in the Women's Studies program as well. She has served on the board of The Society of Christian Ethics and has been since 1985 a member of the Editorial Board of the Journal of Religious Ethics.

In addition to authoring over two dozen scholarly articles, she co-edited with Thomas A. Shannon *Abortion and Catholicism: The American Debate* (1988). In 1993 she co-authored with Ralph F. Smith, *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge*. With Paul T. Jersild, Dale A. Johnson and Shannon Jung, she co-edited the sixth edition of *Moral Issues and Christian Response* (1998). She co-edited with Mary E. Hunt and Radhika Balakrishna an anthology of original essays on *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religions* (2000). She edited with Joseph A. Coray original, interdisciplinary essays on *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism* (forthcoming from The Liturgical Press). Presently she is co-authoring with Mary E. Hunt a volume tentatively titled *Just Good Sex* for Fortress Press and has been asked by Harcourt Brace to co-edit with Shannon Jung the seventh edition of *Moral Issues and Christian Response*.

She and her husband, Shannon, celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary a few years back with their three sons.

© 2000 by Patricia Beattie Jung

REVISED OCTOBER 2007

For permission to reprint, contact...

Patricia Beattie Jung, Ph.D
Phone: (773) 508-2368
Fax: (773) 508-2386
E-mail: pjung@luc.edu

Integrity is a nonprofit organization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGBT] Episcopalians and our straight friends. For over 30 years, Integrity has been the leading grassroots voice for the full inclusion of LGBT persons in the Episcopal Church and their equal access to its rites.

To join, visit our website or mail us your check (\$75/household, \$45/individual). Contributions to support our ministry are welcome and tax deductible.



620 Park Avenue #311
Rochester, NY 14607-2943
800-462-9498
info@integrityusa.org
www.integrityusa.org

Presentation at Integrity Luncheon,
Episcopal General Convention
Denver, July 10, 2000

I am delighted to be here. I have been asked to describe heterosexism and highlight some of the ethical challenges it poses—all in about twenty minutes. So I best get to it. As your handout indicates, I begin with a working definition.

I. HETEROSEXISM is a reasoned system of differential behaviors and practices, both personal and social, developed in response to sexual diversity, which results in preferential treatment for most heterosexual people and in the prejudicial treatment of all others. It has many hidden costs.

A. By reasoned I mean that it is intelligible. I do NOT mean that it is intelligent. My point here is to distinguish it from homophobia, that is, from negative, visceral responses to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (hereafter LGBT) people.

The relationship between homophobia and heterosexism is actually quite complex; though hatred and fear often accompany, and are certainly reinforced by, heterosexism, they are NOT always the driving forces behind it. Many people of good will believe at least some forms of such discrimination are not only justified, but morally required.

B. By defining heterosexism as a system of social behaviors and practices I want to emphasize that this is not simply a personal attitude, or an academic matter. Heterosexism pervades our culture and shapes a wide range of social phenomenon and public policies.

It is simply a matter of fact that in the United States we differentiate on the basis of sexual identity both in the Church and the wider society. We give preferential treatment in a variety of ways to most heterosexual people, and treat all others prejudicially. Let me give you a few examples of how some people are privileged by such policies.

In our culture, heterosexual people are given access through marriage to a variety of benefits: to spousal immigration rights, to the proxy privileges automatically attributed to "the next of kin" in regard to medical decisions and funeral arrangements, to many economic benefits (both direct and transferred) from social security, Medicare, veterans and other pension plans, and to the spousal benefits associated with life and health insurance policies.

In contrast, in most places gay couples can not automatically file joint tax returns or acquire joint home, auto or health insurance policies. Likewise, most receive neither the protection nor the privileges afforded heterosexual people by the host of laws governing adoption, foster care, custody, domestic abuse, divorce, child support, estate and/or inheritance claims.

Similarly, discrimination on the basis of sexuality is widespread in public accommodations and housing, and on the job, especially in teaching, coaching, military and pastoral careers. Not only leadership in, but even membership in, many civic clubs like the Boy Scouts is a privilege for which only heterosexual people are eligible.

Heterosexism in its most extreme expression denies many people the right to a "safe haven" other than their "closet." Central to this notion of a "safe haven" is the reasonable expectation of, and public protection for, one's physical safety. According to the Department of Justice, gay people are the most common victims of hate crimes in the U.S.. Studies reveal that lesbians experience three times, and gay men four times, as much criminal violence as their straight counterparts. If LGBT people want to live with the same measure of relative safety from verbal abuse and violent attack enjoyed by most heterosexual people, they must pay a high price: either they must live sexually

inauthentic lives by closeting themselves in other-sex relationships; or they must refrain from disclosing their true sexual identity and from celebrating, or even acknowledging, those whom they love.

Some think closets are no big deal. So let me just review a few facts about "closets." Plainly, they make good hiding places, and the protection they offer may ensure survival in a crisis. But they isolate as well shelter, leaving the closeted vulnerable to twin terrors: to the ever present threat of discovery, and ironically, to the threat of never ever being discovered, and consequently never really being known.

What I want emphasize is the fact that "closeting" is not merely a personal choice; it is a socially constructed habit. If many men and women choose to wrestle with their sexual identity in mute agony, it is because in our culture they are trained to keep silent, while others are trained to turn a deaf ear to them.

In this country, those who insist on "acting up"—on being "queer"—forfeit their opportunity to exist in relative safety. It is crucial that the extent of such violence not be underestimated. The recent murders of Matthew Shepherd, Billy Jack Gaither, and Pvt. Barry Winchell represent merely the tip of a still expanding iceberg. According to FBI Bias Crimes statistics, hate crimes against gay people doubled between 1990 and 1998.

Most (but not all) Christian heterosexists deplore "gay bashing." But what must be wrestled with is the fact that many who engage in these crimes justify their attacks with the very same arguments—indeed, survivors report they use the very same words—that the Church uses to promote other, admittedly less violent, forms of discriminatory treatment.

C. Heterosexism is accompanied by many hidden costs. These are just a few examples of its negative consequences.

Fear of being LGBT contributes to the confusion many youth experience about their authentic sexual identity. It fosters in some of them deep self-loathing and self-destructive behaviors. Psychologists verify that these teens are at greater risk for substance abuse, depression and suicide. Indeed, some studies suggest that gay teens are three times more likely than their heterosexual peers to attempt suicide. What precisely lies behind this is not yet clear, though a 1999 study of older gay men may prove suggestive. This study concluded that rejection by their family, and other negative social responses to their sexual identity, accounted for the increased tendency on the part of these men to attempt suicide.

When a LGBT person "comes out" to his or her family and friends, their responses—if forged by heterosexism—often break relationships. Research suggests that many of the kids on our streets either ran away as a result of the response they received at home when they "came out," or they were "thrown away" by their parents.

Let's be clear about the costs of heterosexism for straight people as well. Fear of being misperceived as LGBT inhibits many expressions of intimacy between heterosexual friends of the same sex, especially among men. Heterosexism reinforces sexist stereotypes and rigid standards of gender conformity. Perhaps most distressing, because it mistargets our efforts to protect them, heterosexism leaves all our children vulnerable to sexual predators.

Precisely how these negative consequences are interpreted varies. Some view them as evidence of the fact that heterosexism breaks down, rather than builds up, community. Others see them simply as part of the "the price to be paid" for policies that will serve the common good in the long run. Much depends upon whether such discrimination is deemed justifiable as a matter of principle or not.

So let's turn now to those ethical arguments.

II. The Ethical Challenges

A. An important question to be addressed in almost any debate is: who carries the burden of proof? Let me explain why in this case the proponents of heterosexism carry the burden of proof.

I need not linger over the fact that many see efforts to dismantle heterosexism at best as misguided, and at worst as a moral outrage. Some, Christians among them, explicitly endorse several expressions of heterosexism, arguing that it is good, at least in some instances, to discriminate against LGBT people.

Now, what the Church needs to be very clear about is who carries the burden of proof here. Because all people are made in the image of God, all people have the same basic dignity and worth as children of God. Jesus Christ died for all. PERIOD. Respect for our fundamental equality before God does not require that we treat one another identically in every instance; we can and must at times discriminate. BUT it does mean—and has always meant—that any differential treatment—whether preferential or prejudicial—bears the burden of proof.

This means that discrimination on the basis of sexuality must be justified. And because heterosexism so powerfully privileges some, and so blatantly and seriously discriminates against others, this particular pattern of differential treatment must have a very compelling moral foundation. This is why many gathered here are convinced the current debate in the Church has been largely misplaced. The moral problem is not with "homosexuality." The problem is heterosexism.

B. While clearly a matter of social justice, this debate is also about sexual ethics. Foundational to heterosexism is the belief that heterosexuality is THE norm for human sexuality. Let's look closely at this keystone.

All who support heterosexism believe that there is something wrong with—something imperfect, defective, diseased or evil about—LGBT desires and activities. Correlatively, heterosexuality is believed to be THE exclusive, or at least THE morally ideal, form of good sex. This is the conviction that is challenged by people like me who seek to dismantle heterosexism.

Many are confused about this. Opposition to heterosexism is not a conspiracy to undermine heterosexual relationships, nor an effort to recruit from the bisexual portion of the population those who might "waiver." It does not entail the endorsement of an "anything goes" sexual ethic. I know from my work in the classroom, however, that many people hold such mistaken ideas to be true. So it is important to be painstakingly precise at this point. Arguments against heterosexism are NOT arguments against heterosexuality in general, nor against heterosexual marriage and family life in particular. These are great goods which the Church should continue to celebrate.

Many Christians who seek to dismantle heterosexism are fundamentally very conservative. We believe that good sex should serve the common good. It should open people up to the concerns and needs of others while simultaneously nurturing a proper self-concern. It should contribute in various ways to the rearing of a responsible future citizenry. It should school lovers in many virtues, such as forgiveness and hospitality, and be a sign in the world of God's love for all creation.

What IS rejected by those of us who believe heterosexism is sin is the claim that ONLY heterosexual people can embody this conservative sexual agenda. The Creator's design for sexuality is NOT believed to be monochromatic. God, we contend, delights in human sexual diversity.

C. If you reflect on the relationship between these first two points, it becomes clear that without its keystone (B), heterosexism fails to meet the burden of proof (A). (I've been working with Jesuits too long!) Let me explain.

Its key premise—that heterosexual sex is the ONLY form of good sex—rests on a set of interrelated convictions. With the first of these convictions—that God delights in the faithful, loving communion of persons—most who oppose heterosexism have no argument. But the two further claims—that such a love can be enjoyed only by people who are open to procreation and whose genders are complementary—most who oppose heterosexism find deeply problematic.

It is important to note that nowadays these traditional teachings about the moral significance of procreativity and gender complementarity are only applied with any rigor to LGBT people. They are rarely even discussed apart from this debate. But it is even more important to examine these two norms on the level of principle. This emphasis on procreativity and gender complementarity simply doesn't make much sense to people any more. There are at least three good reasons for this.

First, the conviction that openness to procreation is essential to good sex does not take adequate account of EITHER the emotional, social and spiritual dimensions of interpersonal relationships, OR of female sexual and reproductive physiology. Second, the assertion that rigid gender complementarity is essential to good sex simply begs the question posed by the experiences of many faithful couples, queer and straight alike, whose lifestyles in a variety of ways challenge the validity of traditional gender roles.

Third, biblical scholars today are deeply divided about whether the scriptures support such views. The meaning for today of texts traditionally cited as "against all LGBT" relationships, or in support of the claim that ONLY heterosexual relationships please God, are hotly contested, with reasonable arguments marshaled on both sides.

What even this cursory review of the ethical arguments shows is that heterosexism lacks the clear, compelling rationale, which any and all discriminatory behavior needs to be just. It simply does not meet the burden of proof. Respect for human dignity and our fundamental equality therefore requires that heterosexism be dismantled.

D. One last point: not only is heterosexism unjust, but it violates the clear biblical mandate to order our sexual lives in a way that serves our communal life together. Let me explain why I believe fidelity to the Bible invites us to dismantle heterosexism.

It is true that the meaning for today of many particular texts dealing with same-sex desires and activities, and with cross-dressing, are much contested. But it is also true that there is a considerable consensus among biblical theologians about the overall message of the New Testament about sex. Any sexual lifestyle associated in the ancient world with immoral expressions of power was judged evil. Correspondingly, whatever proved edifying for the community (including dismantling that very traditional requirement of circumcision) was judged good.

In our cultural context, fidelity to the Bible does not require that we necessarily replicate the particular judgments of the first century. We have not done so in regard to divorce, (or eating strangled meat.) But we must condemn in analogous ways whatever in our contemporary context expresses abusive power relationships, including unjust forms of discrimination. Taking the Bible seriously requires that we put every sexual practice to the same test: does it prove edifying or not? When put to this test, heterosexism proves to be neither personally sanctifying, nor to serve our life together. Dismantling it will enhance our witness to the solidarity and concern for the common good prioritized by God and by our ancestors in the faith.