

Beyond the H word
Milwaukee, Oct 21, 2006
What's in a Name

I recall some few years ago at a General Conference of the United Methodist Church a bishop from the Philippines saying: homosexuality is not an issue in the Philippines. I had only recently visited the Philippines on behalf of my seminary and I had encountered there a thriving culture on men loving men, of men having sex with one another. Moreover I had also seen the prominent presence of males in the church who seemed to flout standard conventions concerning masculine demeanor. What could the bishop be thinking I wondered.

I was reminded of an odd occasion in California in a conference on Aids education that was directed to the Black church and the pastors of churches maintaining that there was no homosexuality in the Black church; but that there were men there (and women too, who clearly seemed to invite the supposition that they were of the gay family was no less obvious.

In Islamic countries to day there are those who maintain that homosexuality is simply a western phenomenon, ignoring it appears much of both the cultural history of Islamic civilization and the notorious place of Morocco in the itinerary of European men who go looking for sexual adventure or romance.

This list could be almost endlessly extended. The odd conjunction of the denial of indigenous homosexuality and what seems to be a flourishing gay culture.

But perhaps what is happening here is more than a simple denial of the obvious on the part of those who wish to believe that there is no homosexuality in their groups.

Perhaps it is also that the terms we use are not especially helpful in identifying the patterns and practices that are of importance here.

So today I want to lead you through a variety of ways of naming a group of identities, of patterns of relationship and life-styles, of sexual and other associated practices, that may help us come to terms with the astonishing diversity of god's gift of sexuality, and to suggest certain consequences for us that may follow from this diversity.

First the H word itself, or rather two H words: homosexuality and its younger cousin: heterosexuality.

The term homosexuality was created as a quasi medical term in the last third of the 19th century. In this time there was an attempt to create a sort of taxonomy of sexual practices and corresponding identities for the emerging field of psychiatry as a specialty of medicine.

This was all part of a late 19th century concern with what might be termed social hygiene or what Michel Foucault has termed bio-politics. The state makes itself responsible for the moral and social health of the society. Of course this had already meant and increasingly meant the concern for control of plague that always threatens to strike the crowded cities of industrial; capitalism, and which especially takes flight in places where there is no clean water or reliable system of sewage treatment. The working class slums that Frederick Engels described in Manchester England for example.

There is no question but that the most important contribution to the health of any population has been made and is still made by the provision of safe drinking water and adequate sewage systems which together have saved more lives than all the drugs and medicines of the modern era combined.

So it was attractive for the medical profession to extend its reach in terms of hygiene to a consideration of the social and moral conditions that could be claimed to threaten the health of the social body. At the same time the medical profession rescues certain conditions from the criminalizing apparatus of the state to preserve for itself a domain of treatment. Hence the medicalization of many conditions. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the claim that alcoholism is a disease (and so to be dealt with medically) rather than a crime (dealt with by prisons) But this also had to do with the reclassification of various forms of insanity, including some that manifested themselves in violent behavior. This carries over into the

The point of this bit of social history is simply to say that it is in this context that the term ‘homosexuality’ is coined in the last third of the 19th century. For one of the general concerns of social hygiene was sexual behavior. Thus for example the whole concern with prostitution. The term ‘pornography’ originated not to describe titillating depictions of sexual encounters but with the emergence of sociological studies of urban prostitution: for porne was a Greek term often used (as in the NT) to name prostitution: Thus pornography was originally writing about prostitutes, initially the writing that had a scientific intent or character.

(Incidentally this carries over into the disclaimer labels often attached to contemporary pornography that advertises itself as a substitute for more medically risky sexual behaviors, those e that might lead to acquisition of HIV for example); thus porn as good for the health of the social body.

Toward the end of the 19th century there was what is sometimes called a sexual panic about the evils of prostitution; a panic that also expressed itself in rather extreme worries about the dire effects of masturbation on the part of adolescents.

And with the invention of this term we have as well the invention of a new species of human beings. For the identity of this new species is linked to the notions of eugenics and the identification of congenital inclination. This is before the time of the solution to the problem of how to study the genome but genetics was already at work.

Thus the identification of the homosexual often as a woman in a man's body. (At first only males were homosexual)

Now this invention of homosexuality was quite ambivalent. On the one hand it identified homosexuality as a congenital condition in such a way that it was plausible for those who wished to cleanse the social body of polluting contaminants to seek to purge the population of 'homosexuals' This reached its high or low point in the attempt of the Nazi officials in Germany to eliminate not only Jews and gypsies as degenerate elements but also of course "homosexuals"

However there were others who seized upon this medicalization of homosexuality to argue that homosexuality was after all natural and that those who found themselves attracted to members of the same sex should not be regarded as moral deviants since they were only acting in accordance with their nature. This nature was then to be understood as simply an alternative to the more commonly encountered identity that comes now to be called heterosexual

[I should mention that homosexuality was invented around 1860, heterosexual came on the scene a couple of decades later. Thus homosexuality is older than

heterosexuality. And indeed the idea of heterosexuality is dependent on the idea of homosexuality since a heterosexual identity is mostly just whatever is meant by homosexual.

Already we can begin to glimpse how it is possible for people to say: there are no homosexuals here. For this entirely depends on the operative definitions of homosexual and heterosexual.

If homosexual means one who is from birth predisposed to find members of the same sex to be the object of their sexual desire and if moreover this is regarded as an exclusive preference (and hence no preference at all but a fixed and exclusive orientation) then a male who regularly enjoys sex with members of his own sex but also has, for example a wife and children, is not homosexual but (this is the default) heterosexual. Hence there is no homosexuality here., Or one who never has sex with women and moreover who acts in a feminine way (according to whatever norms prevail in his culture might be regarded as ‘homosexual’ unless homosexuality is defined by patterns of specifically sexual behavior. If no one knows whether that person is actually having sex in that way then they may plausibly suppose that :there are no homosexuals here.

I will return to this issue in a bit but for the moment let us return to the newly invented modern homosexual.

The term with its initial identification of females trapped in a male body as an accident of birth mirrored the shape of emergent homosexual cultures in the big cities of Europe: in Berlin and London and in other cities as time went on. These subcultures were marked especially by men adopting forms of what might be termed female impersonation as a signal of belonging: calling one another with female names , wearing parts of female

clothing and so on as a sign of belonging to that group of men who sought other men as partners for sexual encounters and or relationships that were more like friendship among "birds of a feather.

The preeminence of this cultural form really begins to wane in the period following the second world war with multitudes of especially American men returning from war who elected to stay in the cities rather than to return to places like Iowa or even Wisconsin in order to explore new forms of male camaraderie that had taken shape for them in the intense time of warfare in isolated outposts of the world.

Many of these men (and now women as well) found that the stereotypes associated with the homosexual did not adequately characterize their own desire and practice and what would later be called life style. Hence the increasing use of the term gay to embrace a wider range of sexual and cultural styles among those who were drawn to members of their own sex for intimacy, sexual practice or friendship. The term itself had been widely used to describe a certain color or style or even happiness that contrasted with the drab conformity of the Eisenhower years with suburban boxes springing up and men in grey flannel suits bidding adieu in the morning to their wife and 2,3 children for a day in the office.

But it also allowed for the emergence into view of those who did not take simply to feminine stereotypes as the principal way of identifying themselves to themselves or to others. Thus now urban cultures emerge of persons who sought many of the same pleasures both of sex and of companionship: bars and bath houses, clubs and slowly, political movements.

I will return to this gay identity in a moment but first note the curious revival of the category or name of homosexuality in the late 60s.

We are now in the period that is culturally marked as that of the most important social movement in American history: the civil rights movement.

This movement had made a good deal of the argument that persons should not be discriminated against on the basis of a mere biological trait such as skin color: not as MLK famously said the color of your skin but the content of your character. Was what should matter.

The success of this movement in changing the social and legal and political landscape of US society and the enormous moral force of the movement made it a model for any number of movements to transform the social landscape. One has only to recall scenes of the dissolution of the soviet empire with people in Prague of Romania, or East Germany, or Lithuania or Latvia carrying candles and singing we shall overcome to have an idea of how pervasive and extensive has been the paradigm of the civil rights movement as a paradigm for change.

At the same time young people in the us are increasingly vocal in their rejection of the sexual hypocrisy and constraints imposed by their elders, The sexual revolution is in full swing. And there are many involved in Christian youth movements who begin to raise questions about the standardized sexual more of no sex before or outside of marriage. Both male and female joined the chorus as women found themselves newly liberated by the pill from the risks of pregnancy associated with sexual experimentation.

[side note it was precisely the emerging agitation for reconsideration of Christianities sexual prudery in places like Motive magazine that seems to have led the

mainline protestant churches around 1968-9 to virtually abolish youth movements and to attempt to absorb the youth into the regular structures of congregational and denominational life. Seminaries which had been dependent on the Methodist youth Movement or Student movement for young candidates for theological education have never recovered from the abolition of the principal pipeline for candidates for ministry)

From the standpoint of movements for a reconsideration of repressive attitudes toward sexuality the situation of ‘homosexuals’ seems to be an especially attractive place to begin: for here were persons who could not adapt to those sexual mores. They certainly should be granted dispensation... At the time this may have seemed to be a good way to get the discussion of a wider reconsideration of sexual mores going. To a large extent it was to backfire.

At the same time those who sought liberation for emergent gay folk could make use of the idea that God made us that way to argue for civil (and religious rights that had been so recently granted to persons who had been discriminated against on the basis of another biological factor: skin color.

Thus was reborn, at least in certain religious and political circles the “homosexual” who had been disappearing into the emergent “gay” culture.

As thus reborn homosexuality carried with it the sense of biological predisposition although it was now freed of the many of the gender associations of the early homosexual as a male caught in a woman’s body. What was however at stake was the importance for political purposes of insisting upon an irreversible, exclusive, lifelong orientation toward finding sexual satisfaction with members of one’s own “sex”. Thus

although gay is the most often used cultural designation, homosexual is the term of choice for political, including church political struggle.

There are, of course certain dangers involved in the return of a term that has its origin in biology, in medical jargon and so on. The danger is that medicalization leads one to think of cure or at least quarantine.

(on the other hand not easy to see how people can worry about recruitment of the young, since presumably there has to be a strong disposition)

all the anxiety about “cure in terms of rather drastic treatment.

But also the notion on incurable seems necessary in order to fend off certain attempts to reprogram and so on. As well as arguing that its not a choice and thus not morally reprehensible: itself a dangerous argument)

For it leads to potentially alarming attempts to discover a gay gene that could easily become the object of fetal genetic discovery aimed at aborting those fetuses with an undesirable gene: a new wave of that old dream or nightmare of eugenics. And something similar is implicit in the alleged ‘discovery’ of a gay hypothalamus etc. That is the old genetic or congenital argument may lead into a blind alley: a traditionally dangerous place for the vulnerable to find themselves in.

As I have indicated there is an inherent instability involved in the alternation between homosexual and gay as a way of naming those who find themselves to be drawn in desire and delight toward members of what we still call the same sex. The term gay looks not to biology but to culture and not to the mechanical fulfillment of a biological order but to the improvisation of a counter cultural style that certainly may include sexual practices, and a rather wide array of these, but also such things as clothes and

interior decoration and haircuts and institutions like bars and, sometimes bath houses and parades and music and so on. I mentioned sexual practices: so diverse had this become that for a time in certain urban gay bars it was the fashion to designate one's own sexual interest through the color and placement of bandanas producing a bewildering code that required whole pages of a guidebook to decipher.

It is this array of cultural and countercultural styles that has made “gay culture” such a creative and increasingly pervasive part of Western and perhaps especially American culture generally. Many years ago the Australian social anthropologist Altman wrote a book about the Americanization of homosexuality and the homosexualization of America. What he had in mind was the way in which precisely this array of cultural practices reshape the cultural and life styles of people who are perhaps not gay. No sooner is a fashion statement created in a gay subculture than it is adopted as the norm for young males of all or no sexual persuasion. Again: the music, the haircut, the cloths, the body shaping toward lean and hard, and so on. We even now have a term for this: the emergence of what is called the metro sexual.

The point for our purposes is that a certain gay culture comes to be the leading vector for a whole cultural infiltration.

Surely this is something that alarms people in the hinterlands as much as the sexuality itself.

But this is also another reason why people in different cultures can say that there are no homosexuals here, by which they mean no people who adopt the styles associated with American gay culture.

Now this is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain since cultural styles, especially American ones are rapidly spread around the world, as witness McDonalds and Blue jeans, a and rap music.

But, for example, in Mexico which has a great deal of male same sex behavior going on it is easy to think that homosexuality doesn't really exist to the extent to which this is identified with certain cultural styles associated with the gringos.

The stylization of gay cultures goes against the grain of a biologization or medicalization of homosexuality. It is harder to suppose that there is an opera gene than a gay gene for example. With the associations of gayness come a whole range of choices and decisions about styles of life and community ethos as well as the possibility of forms of affirmation of ones sexuality that are less possible if one is simply caught in acting out a biological programmed.

Lesbian.

Now I hope that you are somewhat uncomfortable with the fact that I have seemed to be talking mostly about homosexual or gay males. I certainly am. But that is because the terms themselves homosexual or gay have been largely co-opted by males. In general women who found themselves attracted to other women for this period have had to content themselves with identifying themselves as homosexual or as gay without having a the possibility of claiming for themselves the distinctive features of their own lives, experience and commitments.

Indeed as late as the beginning of the 80s it was not uncommon for women who loved women to find themselves left out of consideration not only by straight culture but also by emergent gay male culture. Indeed this last was especially cruel, especially in mid sized cities where women who we will call lesbians were excluded from or actively harassed in gay clubs. Alas this has not entirely disappeared. For the last few years the Chicago gay pride parade has been preceded on the previous day by a lesbian parade of women who still feel harassed in the predominantly (though not exclusively) male ambiance of marchers and spectators of the now traditional gay pride festivities.

A sea change in this reality was marked to a significant degree by the AIDS crisis of the mid to late 80s. As gay men began to succumb in alarming numbers to what was at one point called the gay disease their primary care takers and advocates turned out to be in significant and impressive numbers, lesbians.

Suddenly it was no longer cool for gay men to speak or act disparagingly toward women generally or toward lesbians in particular. For one especially unattractive feature of gay male culture had been some fairly virulent forms of misogyny and tasteless and aggressive jokes about lesbians. Now their lives depended upon the selfless generosity of their lesbian sisters.

At this time it became clear that women who had been classed as homosexual or gay were not gay in the same way that men were. No longer could the term gay (or homosexual) be used ‘generically to subsume and so also to hide the distinctive character of the lives of and experiences of women who loved women

Thus from the early 90s on it was no longer possible to use gay as a generic. One increasingly had to say lesbian and gay in order to designate the more complex reality that was coming into view.

I say complex because the lives of women who loved women were not simple clones of the lives of men who loved or had sex with men.

The hesitation in what I just said indicates a part of what is at stake here. For the women who were the caretakers of dying gay males also had standard form of life that revolved less around sexual practices and more around the development of long term relationships. This was indeed one of the most startling differences that quickly emerged as these two groups came together in the time of emergency. Women seemed less interested in the pursuit of new sexual encounters than the urban gay male, or at least the dominant form of young urban gay male culture. Of course there were women who were into sexual adventure and sexual experimentation. But what was startling was how many preferred the sort of long term stability that for gay men had been associated more with friendship networks (sometimes composed of former lovers and their former lovers) than with the specifically sexual character of specifically sexual relationships. Indeed it had come to seem in segments of gay male culture that sex and friendship could not take place at the same time with the same person. But with lesbians it seemed quite different.

And this difference, in the wake if the Aids crisis so often associated whether fairly or not with what some called promiscuity) came to seem also increasingly attractive to many gay men.

Thus the addition of lesbian to gay was more than the mere addition of another group. It meant the transformation of important elements of gay male culture and so

identity as well. Not only did lesbians offer nursing to those already dying, they offered a life-style that might prevent the ravages of the disease for those not yet infected.

My point is not that gay men were converted en masse to adopt patterns of relationship more common among lesbians, but that the addition of a name also means the transformation of that which is named.

But this has other more surprising results.

First it helps to recall that lesbian identity had been forged or was in the [process of being forged by a new wave of feminist struggle. This wave of struggle itself learned something from black power and liberation movements. Namely the importance of finding one's own voice through affirmation of and identification with one's own people. For women to discover who they might be or become it was necessary to be together with other women, and not simply try to work this out in relation to the men who already had the power to dictate the terms of human liberation and identity. Women had to identify with women in order to discover their own voices, their own identity. One of the slogans indeed was : women need men like a fish needs a bicycle.

Women are not half human, not even “my better half” but whole and entire human beings.

In this context then women loving women, or women who identify with women rather than men indicates the merger of lesbian and feminist identity.

What had perhaps made lesbians threatening to men was that they didn't need men and so their bodies did not urge them to collaborate with their male oppressors.

Now women who sought to find their own voices learned from black power the importance of a certain retreat from the embrace of the oppressor and found the lesbian

identity or at least culture to be a way of speaking about this. This was all the more true since lesbian denotes not in the first place a sexual practice but an affect ional practice.

This is all the more important when certain lesbian feminists begin emphasizing the importance of speaking of the erotic rather than the sexual as a way of distinguishing women's experience from the sexual obsession of men or at least of certain men.

I will come back to the substitution of the erotic for the sexual in a moment, but for now I want to signal another feature of lesbian identity that bears upon the direction of our inquiry.

As I have indicated a good many women were attracted to the lesbian identity whose life experience did not necessarily conform to what might be expected under the term "homosexuality"

For many women who identify themselves as lesbian have had lives as wives and mothers. Thiers is not the experience of gay men who sometimes assert the absolute impossibility of having sex with still less being attracted to women. Now this gay male claim is to a certain extent related to a way of fending off the claims of those in their own families or in the wider society or church who maintain that they should give up their same sex practices and become normal husbands and fathers.

But the claim that an exclusive orientation toward members of the same sex has less plausibility among women than among men. This is not only because women decide that their former relations with men were a mistake or a function of heterosexist if not masculinst domination.

Studies by women of lesbians demonstrate a much greater fluidity in terms of partnership identities than is common among men who identify themselves as gay. Or homosexual. That is women who have adopted a lesbian identity may nonetheless find that they are at least occasionally attracted to men and in some cases enter into longer term sexually expressed relations with men while still maintaining their public identification as lesbian.

Thus adding lesbian to gay to produce gay and lesbian is not just the addition of another population of persons with same sex orientation. It also begins to change the identity of what it means to be gay. What emerges is a greater fluidity not only of sexual history but of potential erotic interest.

Bisexual

Now it is this transformation that makes the introduction of the next term inevitable: the appearance of the “bisexual”

Over the course of the 90’s it became fashionable to add ‘Bisexuality’ to the list of sexualities into which “homosexuality” was pluralized thus leading to g/l/b/t or “Lesbigay” . . . Now the addition of ‘bisexuality’ destabilized the received definitions of ‘homosexuality.’

Prior to the inclusion of this category there was a strong denial of its legitimacy. For example, it was often alleged in the gay community, that so-called bisexuals were persons who were ‘on the way’ to homosexuality from heterosexuality but had not yet completed the transition. That is, it was an unstable and transitional phase on

the way from one identity (heterosexual) to another (homosexual) which latter identity was the truth or goal of the transition. In this case bisexuality would be a phase (just as often homosexuality had been said to be a phase) .

This was the generous interpretation –far more common was the view that bisexuality was a masquerade or deceit that used heterosexuality as a cover for a n unacknowledged ‘homosexuality’ allowing one to retain the benefits of heteronormativity while ‘really’ being gay. To this was sometimes added the supposition that some ‘bisexuals’ were really heterosexuals who enjoyed the occasional walk on the wild side but whose relationship to gay males was essentially one of exploitation.

The presupposition of all these perspectives was that there are ‘really’ only two sexual identities –gay and straight and that one or the other of these is the truth of those who were called or called themselves ‘bi-sexual.’ One can understand this: gay identity is one which many have resisted before adopting; many gay males have been sexually exploited or abused by ‘heterosexual’ predators and so on. However, there is something also quite odd about this a priori rejection of ‘bi-sexuality.’ For most of the strategies for the historical and anthropological legitimization of homosexuality are actually ‘bisexual.’ First, the Kinsey Report says only something like 2.6 % of males were ‘exclusively’ homosexual in practice. An additional 1.3% were significantly so for a period of time (). Another 6 % had some same-sex experience. This is the origin of the much cited “one-in-ten” are ‘gay’ assertion. Secondly, Freud’s earlier reflection on sexuality posited a primary polymorphous sexuality that then (as it becomes genital) is bi-sexual which then is abridged to either hetero or homosexuality i.e. bisexuality is truth. Thirdly, appropriation of historical figures as antecedents of gay identity: in many

perhaps most of these cases the persons involved expressed sexual desire and are presumed to be sexually active with both male and female. Fourth, appropriations of anthropological data—e.g. New Guinea where older males donate semen to younger males to make them ‘grow.’ But both cohorts of males are expected to engage in heterosexual practice.

The anomaly is that bisexual desire and practice is hijacked to legitimate homosexual desire and practice which in turn denies the legitimacy of bi-sexuality. In any case persons whose practice or desire permits relationships either with ‘their own’ or ‘the opposite’ sex can scarcely claim that they are unable to seek sexual fulfillment in persons of the opposite sex. Heterosexuality is possible, so is homosexuality, what they do is an ‘option’ or choice. What is not possible is the alibi of DNA. This need not be terrifying for it means that sexual practice is placed where it may belong: in the sphere of responsible freedom. The sphere not of “creation” but of “vocation.” But here we run into the other legitimating strategy—that of heteronormative monogamy.

Let me begin with the normalizing strategy of the Bible study for which I served as a consultant. It affirms homosexuality and in doing so affirms that it is not legitimizing promiscuity (fornication) or adultery. Rather it is affirming one supposes—life long exclusive relationships . . .

Now what is bisexuality? I have been astonished to discover that many churchy people imagine that a bisexual is one who practices heterosexual normativity but admits to ‘feelings’ for persons of the same sex. Presumably the converse might also be the case – one who is in a same-sex relationship but admits to ‘feelings’ for a person of the ‘opposite sex.’ Hence when I maintain that a practicing bi-sexual is a person who must

have more than one partner (that is one of each ‘sex’) I am met with utter disbelief. Note the word practicing. Note that a person is ‘stigmatized’ at least in religious discourse, not for having homosexual feelings but for ‘practicing.’ That is, what is involved in the question of accepting ‘homosexuals’ is the question not of feelings but of practice. Yet when it comes to bisexuality practice is ruled out in favor of feelings.

Or bisexuals are O.K. so long as they are not “practicing.” But that is precisely the position of the religious right about gays and lesbians. They are O.K. as long as they are not practicing. Given definitions of monogamy bisexuals must be a)bigamists b) adulterers c) promiscuous. One of my friends is a woman who is in relationship with another woman who is married. Both women are involved in the struggle against the restrictions on homosexuality in their respective denominations. But both are keenly aware that even if their denominations accept ‘homosexuality’ they will continue to be stigmatized as adulteresses. The only way to escape this would be for the married woman to be divorced. But if she continued after this to relate to her now former husband—she would be promiscuous or adulteress. Of if there were an attempt to celebrate the holy union of the two women without repudiating the ‘holy union’ of the man and woman—we would have bigamy. (Incidentally, one of the best known illustrations of this dilemma is the case of Patricia Ireland, the president of NOW

The whole situation is simply impossible to reconcile with the normalizing rhetoric for the acceptance of “homosexuality.” Bisexuality simply escapes and throws into question those strategies. Of course the strategies are self-falsifying in any case. For they require gay males and lesbians to pretend or aspire to conform so far as possible to heteronormative monogamy. But this means that all sexual relations other than those

contained within a life long exclusive commitment are to be denied, repressed, or marginalized. But these relations do not comprise the exception to the rule for gay males and lesbians. Rather sexual relations outside such life long exclusive containers may constitute a substantial majority of sexual relations for the overwhelming majority of gays and lesbians. That is, normalizing rhetoric requires gays and lesbians to repudiate as illegitimate most of their sexual experience and practice. The price for acceptance is denial, hiding, pretence. That is precisely the same price required for gays and lesbians to ‘pass’ as straight.

As a gay male I can be accepted in a conservative context if I repudiate as aberrational all same sex practice. In a liberal context I can be accepted if I repudiate as aberrational all same sex practice that is not exclusively monogamous. For most gay males the domain of repudiated sexuality is precisely the same in both cases, for while some gay males are in life long exclusive relationships—most are not. The questions raised by practicing bi-sexuals about the normalizing rhetoric that privileges monogamous relationships are questions of importance also for gay males and lesbians (and perhaps also for heterosexuals too.)

But can we abandon the norm of life long exclusive monogamy? Where does this norm come from? Its historical origin appears to be the view of the woman as the inalienable property of the man. Thus a woman is an adulteress if she gives herself to another man. And a man is an adulterer only if he has sex with the woman who is the property of another man. Only much later it is supposed that the man is an adulterer if he has sex with a woman in addition to his wife.

To repeat: adultery as a violation of monogamy is a violation of the property rights of a husband. Both promiscuity and prostitution (the terms are in many languages, synonymous) refer to those who engage in sexual relations that escape the property nexus. Thus a man who has sex with a woman who does not belong to another man is promiscuous. A woman who does not belong to a man but has sex with a man is ‘promiscuous’ or a prostitute.

What is definitive in all cases is the existence or not of a property relationship obtaining between a man and a woman in which normally and historically it is the man who owns the wife. Indeed one may even say that the origin of “private property” is precisely this ownership of the woman by the man. For ownership means here the exclusive right to make use of. Thus long before there was private ownership of land there was private ownership of women. We should note that whenever radical Christians have denied the absoluteness of private property (following on Acts 2:11) they have been “accused” of abolishing marriage and so of promiscuity or of having women in common or what have you.

Now the idea that males should have total property rights over women as daughters or wives is the essence and heart of “patriarchy.” Exclusive permanent monogamy is the concrete material expression of patriarchy. Of course, we have modified patriarchy in two ways: no more than one woman at a time (monogamy) thereby giving all males access to property rights to a woman, no stealing of other men’s sexual property (rape/adultery) and more recently perhaps the claim that the woman also has exclusive property rights to the male (ideally monogamy works both ways).

What is not doubted is the proprietary relationship itself relative to sex. I ‘own’ my partner in that I have exclusive access to that person’s sexuality: at least sexual practice. But if we suspend this notion of private ownership of another person’s sexual practice, what follows?

Transgendered

We then come to where in a certain way we began, the question of the T word: transgenedered. For recall that the invention of modern homosexuality was characterized by the notion of a female in a male body: that is by the question of displaced or replaced gender.

And this is also an important part not only of the emergence of homosexuality but also of what gets called gay liberation. For the beginning of the public character of gay culture and identity may be dated with Stonewall whose anniversary is celebrated by gay pride parades all over the country and indeed the world. But stone wall was occasioned by the refusal of transvestite young males, many of them prostitutes to accept police harassment any more. And the fact that most were not white gave them also closed links to the power of the various rights movements that emphasized pride and a refusal to allow oneself to be out down any more, especially by white police. That the gatherings interrupted by police harassment were in morning at the death of Judy garland of wizard of Oz fame only adds to the poignancy of this origin of the modern gay rights movement.

Of course it is one of the ironies of that movement in its later years, that it has generally marginalized not only young male hustlers or prostitutes and often enough marginalized black and puerto rican brothers of those first brave young progenitors of the movement, but it is also the case that many “mainline descendants of stonewall are especially uncomfortable with transvestite, trans-sexual and other elements of the transgendered “community if I can put it in that rather dubious way.

There are many reasons for gay men and even for some lesbians to be especially uncomfortable with transgenedered folk. Many women for example regard female impersonation by otherwise male actors to be a form of caricaturing WOMEN AND SO AN EXPRESSION OF AN ALL TOO FAMILIAR MISOGYNY.. It isn’t that female impersonators hate women generally of course but given the location of much female impersonation in gay institutions until recently characterized by a less than welcoming attitude toward women and especially even lesbians, the suspicion is understandable.

And gay males have often spent some considerable energy to come out from under the stereotype of the older homosexual classification that made the women in men’s bodies in order to claim their own masculine styles and tastes.

Whatever the reasons people who are in one way or another “trans” have had an especially hard time in gay and also lesbian culture, nearly as hard as in the “straight culture itself.

Why should this be so? First I did say one way or another trans for this term actually points to a number of different phenomena. Thus for example here we find the

make who simply likes to wear women's clothes. This male may be in all other respects a "normal" heterosexual husband, and father. He just likes to wear "pretty" clothes.

Then the female impersonators who not only perform on stage but also take the performance to the street as it were, passing as a member of the "opposite sex">

This has sometimes, in periods of high gender anxiety been rather dangerous. There have been severe consequences in modern times, for example for women who passed as men, even who wore men's clothing. That time seems to be passed, at least for the moment.

Then there are a growing number of folk who seek to go beyond the temporary masquerade in order to seek biological enhancement of the transformation. Among these are those who are more often called simply transsexual that is those who move from one bio-sexual identity into another, often involving surgical procedures that together with hormone treatments aim to recover the true "sex" or gender of one who senses that they have somehow been misplaced. Thus persons who have been raised as women but strongly sense that this is a mistake and seek surgical correction. And similarly those who have been raised as men but become convinced that this is a mistake the correction of which is the only road TO INTEGRITY BOTH OF BODY AND OF MIND.

Now transgendering of whatever degree SERVES TO DESTABILIZE MANY OF OUR MOST TREASURED CATEGORIES. And to leave us in genuine perplexity about what we could possibly mean by terms like: same sex or opposite sex, and indeed even heterosexual or homosexual, or our sense of the stability of biological givens of any kind.

Lets see how this works. There is a well known scholar of the glbt movement known to me and my colleagues at CTS. He is both a very nice men and a very good writer and effective activist. But he was known to some of my colleagues when they were in graduate school as a woman scholar. In the course of time and with considerable medical assistance he has become a male. But his sexual preference is other males. Now is he homosexual? Or “really” because of initial gender and biological configuration is she really heterosexual? That is really a woman who loves males (who happen to be in some sense ‘gay’)

Or another example a person born and raised male who has gender r reassignment surgery and becomes a woman yet whose community of preference is what we would term lesbian. Is this a man finding a way to have sexual access to women, especially women who have no need of a man as one says? Or is this a lesbian who has come home to her now true identity. The moment of truth comes with the discomfort around who gets to us the woman’s restroom for example.

Now these are real live cases and many more permutations might be mentioned the former female now married to a woman and so on. What I am pointing to is the way in which the growing presence of out transgendered people is bringing into question what it might mean to be hetero or homosexual as well as what it might mean to be male or female.

The psychic cost that must be paid by those who those live out a challenge to such deep seated categories is often extremely high. It is really no laughing matter at all. It is a very difficult and dangerous road that these folk have trod and their courage while great sometimes falters in the face of the kinds of antagonism and fear that their bringing into

question of these categories arouses in those of us who do not find it necessary in our own lives to take such steps.

Queer

We have been looking at a story of diversity and destabilization. The classification of some people as homosexual and others as heterosexual served to stabilize sexual desire and practice within a binary that was to a certain extent reassuring. If one was not heterosexual then one must be homosexual whatever that currently meant: it gave one a stable identity to assume and a culture and outfitted one with a biological defense of one's own identity even if that could be turned against one in efforts to stamp out biological degeneracy as it was sometimes though if. Conversely if one did not conform to whatever images were prevalent about homosexuals then one had to be heterosexual even if one's sexual inclinations and practices brought one into relations of intimacy with persons of the "same sex"

But as we have seen this secure framework has been largely undone as homosexual becomes gay, as gay becomes gay and lesbian, as gay and lesbian becomes gay and lesbian and bisexual, and as this becomes as we now say lgbt.

How to make sense of this diversity? How to find a way to say what is at stake in a struggle to make the world, the society the church more friendly to people who do not conform to the heterosexual norm, but whose non-conformity takes so many differing shapes?

It is in part as a response to this sort of question that many have increasingly appropriated the term “queer” that had been a term of abuse hurled at so many folk who deviated from social norms, especially those of the school yard.

To be queer is to be in some way deviant. Or as Jonathan Dollimore said to be a sexual dissident. A dissident that is from the social conventions of sexual identity and performance within the confines of what has been called heteronormativity. Or conventional marriage and family values.

Thus we may see that the term emphasizes both dissidence and diversity.

But this diversity is more than simply the adding together of lesbian and gay and bisexual and transgendered in order to sum everything up as queer.

One of the ways this term may function is to question the race and class bias that has often been a part of the discussion of gay and lesbian (and also bisexual) sexual practices and relational and cultural patterns. From the beginning of our discussion we have noticed that persons of non-white cultures and sub-cultures may plausibly deny that homosexuality (and any of its substitutes) is a significant factor in their cultures. This is because of the way in which homosexual or lesbian or gay or even bisexual “identity” has been so strongly biased toward the white urban middle class as that which constitutes the core reference of these terms.

Thus African American males who are married yet who seek some regular sexual partnership with other African American males may not find the associations of bisexuality at all inclusive of what is called being on the down-low. Or Mexican men who have sex with younger male associates in addition to their marriages will not recognize

themselves in the depiction of the homosexual as one with an exclusive preference, or in the depiction of the gay male with a distinctive urban American culture.

The fact is that the categories that we have spoken about have all been developed with urban white folk with disposable income. The terms have a definite race and class bias.

One of my colleagues at CTS Laurel Schneider has been at work on this issue which can be brought into focus by the question: what race is your sex? And this opens up a whole range of related questions: what class is your sexual preference? What sex (or gender) is your race? These and like questions help to open up a range of issues that we, especially us white middle class people simply ignore.

And then we are puzzled about why it is that those who are implicitly excluded from consideration don't join us in our well intentioned campaigns to approve at least certain limited forms of inclusion into the life of society and church.

An early wake up call in this direction was the resistance feminists found among African American women to join them in their crusade for gender equality. It was because feminists were white middle class women who had no clue about the sorts of struggles that African American or working class or poor sisters had to take on, struggles that made many of the concerns of feminists seem to be the preoccupation of the leisure class. Fortunately some progress has been made on this front over the last decades, although African American and Hispanic women among others still are put off by being treated as honorary whites.

My point is that much the same set of issues confront the struggles for inclusion of alternate sexualities in the church and society.

Above all what is faced here is the tendency in church and society to speak only to the concerns of that minority of GLBT folk who want to appear as much as possible like middle class heterosexuals. The group of middle class white lesbians who are in stable long term relationships that are suitable contexts for the raising of children for example. Or the even smaller group of gay men who conform to the norms of being honorary straight people.

The inclusion of the Q word on our menu of terms then helps us to bring into question some of the ways our alleged efforts at “inclusion” wind up being instruments of renewed exclusion; being ways we continue to want to be around people who are only our own mirror image. Thus we forget that for the Author of Ephesians the dramatic sign of the transformation of the world was the coming together of those who are near and those who were far off: the inclusion of the different as different, male and female, Jew and Greek, slave and free.

Vocation (7100)

One of the effects of the move from homosexuality to gay and then gay and lesbian, and then to include bisexuality and transgendered and finally to move toward queer is to bring into question the rather simple and perhaps simplistic binary opposition between gay and straight, Homosexual and heterosexual and thus to bring into question the very idea of sexual orientation and preference even sex and gender as biologically determined on the one hand or as simply a choice as in which brand of soap or cereal to choose.

Are we then left with simple a bewildering multiplicity and sheer relativism? How can we as the community of faith respond to this ever changing and kaleideoscopic reality?

One of the phrases that occurs in the advertisement of this conference is that of receiving sexual givenness. I suppose this means to affirm that our sexuality together with its diversity should be taken as the good gift of God which is to be welcomed and celebrated. Even by itself this would mark a sea change in the way too many churches for too long have regarded sexuality with grave suspicion as the very treacherous domain of sin. To welcome and celebrate sexuality of any kind, let alone of multiple kinds would itself be a welcome change and as I have said in the previous lecture it would enable us to get on with the very important work of combating the sort of thing the bible really identifies as sin: the arrogance and avarice of the powerful, the violation, impoverishment and denigration of the vulnerable.

This would be most welcome. But we can I believe go further. When I was a graduate student at the University of Tübingen I attended the remarkable lectures of Ernst Kasemann on 1 Corinthians and I recall one of the chief points he made in his reading of this wonderful text from the apostle to the outsiders; that is to the pagan gentiles.

One of Paul's favorite terms is gift, a term closely related to the word for grace and often interchangeable with it. But when Paul speaks of the multitude of gifts that the spirit of god gives to the community of faith he does so in relation to concrete tasks and responsibilities: teaching and preaching, distribution of food and resources to the poor, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues all of these and many more are understood as gifts that have the good, the well being of community in view. The term

that best expresses this is the term “vocation”. And we in our tradition link gifts and graces with the question of vocation. Thus we may suppose that one who whether by nature or by training has the gift of expressing themselves clearly or of giving wise counsel and so on may because of these gifts have a vocation for what is called ordained ministry.

Now this is too much of a restriction since Paul supposes that every member of the community has gifts and that this means that all have what might be called ministerial vocation, but that these gifts and so these vocations differ from one another in important ways.

Now I propose that we use this wonderful concept as a way of addressing the diversity of sexualities that we have been considering.

Put simply, I think it makes a world of difference whether I speak of my sexual orientation or my sexual vocation. That is my sexuality as both a gift and a task.

To be sure there are aspects of everyone’s sexuality and gender that they have not consciously chosen. Whether we attribute this to genes or to childhood socialization or to a number of other factors these multiple orientations may not have been the object of conscious choice. But perhaps in this very diversity we may recognize the hand of God at work, the God who took delight in the diversity of the creation that came into being through the divine word and spirit and that is declared to be good and very good.

But this may also mean that our bit of this diversity is precisely as a gift also a task and indeed a vocation a calling to consider how my sexuality and gender may have a role to play in the constitution of a more welcoming, a more merciful and a more just social and ecclesial reality.

Thus in sexual orientation or preference I am not just acting out of a mechanical biological program but rather am to discern ways in which God is calling me to offer this gift to others in ways that enhance the vitality and vibrancy of God's good creation.

Thus for example gay males may have a vocation to help straight men escape from the confines of a narrowly constructed masculinity that is always fearful of itself. Or may offer to women the possibility of a model of friendship with a male friend who is not suspected of wanting them only for their body.

Similarly lesbians may offer, as we have seen, to gay males the possibility of re-imaging their own patterns of sexual relating or to bring together friendship and desire. Or lesbians may offer to straight men the possibility of developing friendship with women not always subverted by the question of sexual desire. Or offer to "straight" women the possibility of thinking of themselves as not bound to be the possession of a male and so to be able to freely choose, if they wish or have that vocation, to be in intimate companionship with men. Or perhaps bisexual women and men may offer to others the possibility of imaging faithfulness in ways other than sheer exclusivity and the ownership of another's sexuality but rather a model of a more open friendship within which the erotic and even the sexual find a place.

Or the transgendered person may offer to those who are not conscious of s desire to change their gender identity the possibility of escaping straightjackets of gender conformity and exploring ways in which gender may be differently performed.

That is my sexuality is not only a gift to be privately owned (for then it is not a gift but a possession) Rather sexuality and gender are vocations to be deployed in relation to others in ways that enrich the vitality of the wider community. Not only the married

but also the single, not only the child-rearing but also those who are more like professional uncles and aunts all have a vocation in which the good gifts of God are shared out and then truly shared.

For any of this to be possible the community of faith must truly be a place where all are welcome.

Of course it need scarcely be said that this is not saying “anything goes” but rather that we are called to be in relation to one another also in our sexuality and to make of this domain of our lives a call to enact the coming of God’s reign of justice and generosity and joy. (8260)