

## **Sexual ethics: pastoral counseling in a context of moral uncertainty**

by Brian McKinlay

---

### **I**

Pastoral conversation at times encounters uncertain moral or ethical issues. The counsellor may discern such an issue as he or she listens to a client's story. Or a client who is struggling with guilt concerning a moral problem may seek counselling. The difficulty increases if the pastoral role is seen as one of prophetically proclaiming the truth in the community. The church is no longer a community of authority, but a voluntary gathering where not everyone wants to be reminded of their moral dilemmas. The pastor is constrained by love and courtesy for the church community.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, issues of sexual morality are used to illustrate the challenge faced by counsellor and counsellee alike in discerning right conduct when there is uncertainty and disagreement in church and society as to what is acceptable. (Of course, by no means do all difficult moral problems encountered in counselling concern sexuality!) Noting the need for ethical foundations to undergird pastoral care, the essay then examines some possible sources, drawing first on the work of Charles Gerkin and secondly on feminist perspectives. The community-based contextual approach offered by these sources suggests a way to develop Christian community norms.

It is important to note that many instances of moral difficulty, guilt and uncertainty that may emerge in counselling have little to do with ethical complexities. 'Moral' problems experienced by a counsellee may well be due to genuine guilt (requiring forgiveness, absolution and healing), inappropriate or neurotic guilt, confused or underdeveloped conscience, or some other difficulty. The present discussion, however, is concerned with situations where moral and ethical debate as such has a genuine bearing on the pastoral situation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thus Stanley Hauerwas says that we need "a recovery of how the pastoral tasks are fundamentally prophetic when they are appreciated as necessary for the upbuilding of a prophetic community." ("The pastor as prophet" in *Christian existence today*. - Durham, NC.: Labyrinth Pr., 1988, pp. 149-167, at p. 152.)

## II

Western religious understanding of sexuality<sup>2</sup> has evolved through the centuries. Paul Ricoeur observed three stages, leading to contemporary holistic understanding of the human person and of sexuality within the total human experience.<sup>3</sup> Sexual expression needs ordering and discipline, but rather than being a distraction to the life of the mind and spirit, it is now understood as contributing to deepest human fulfilment. James Nelson describes the present era in terms of a change in paradigm, in which we now accept sexuality as a contributor to our spirituality, both personally and corporately.<sup>4</sup> From Scripture we understand sexuality as part of our existence as beings created in God's image. It is only in perversions expressed in actual behaviour that there is any connection of sexuality with the Fall.<sup>5</sup>

The challenge in pastoral care, as elsewhere, is to understand what is it that makes our sexual being and conduct godly in character. One response is to reduce 'Christian' norms of sexual conduct to the questions, "What acts are permissible?" and "With whom are they permissible?"<sup>6</sup> The traditional Christian view is among the most stringent of responses to the *with whom* question in particular.

There are many areas of debate. A concern of some, for example, is that traditional act-based morality does not take into account the good often involved in

---

<sup>2</sup> James Nelson offers a helpful definition of 'sexuality'. "It is our way of being in the world as gendered persons, having male or female biological structures and socially internalized self-understandings of those meanings to us. Sexuality means having feelings and attitudes about being 'body-selves'. [...] Above all, sexuality is the desire for intimacy and communion, both emotionally and physically. It is the physiological and psychological grounding of our capacity to love. (James Nelson, *The intimate connection: male sexuality, masculine spirituality*, London: SPCK, 1992, p. 26.)

<sup>3</sup> In the earliest stage, sexuality was incorporated into the believer's total consciousness through myth, ritual and symbol. With the great religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) there was a separation. The sacred was transcendent, untouchable and separate. Sexuality was demythologised and limited to a small, earthly, role - principally procreation within marriage. Its feared power was restrained by discipline. A third era is now emerging in which sexuality is again being united with the experience of the sacred and of the created universe. (See: Paul Ricoeur, "Wonder, eroticism and enigma," in *Sexuality and identity*, Hendrick M. Ruitenbeek (ed.), New York: Dell, 1970, pp. 13ff.)

<sup>4</sup> Characteristic of the old paradigm are: theologies about human sexuality; sexuality as either incidental to or detrimental to the divine-human relationship; sin as essentially wrong sexual acts, violations of sexual norms; salvation as antithetical to sexuality; and sexuality as incidental to the life of the church. In contrast, the new paradigm proposes: sexual theologies; sexuality as intrinsic to the divine human relationship; sin as alienation from our divinely intended sexuality; salvation as including the recovery of sexual wholeness; and sexuality as fundamental to and pervasive in the life of the church. (Nelson, *Between two gardens ...*, p. 74.)

<sup>5</sup> Ulrich W Mauser, "Creation and human sexuality in the New Testament" in *Biblical ethics and homosexuality: listening to scripture*, Robert L. Brawley (ed.), Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996, pp. 3-16.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Gilbert, "Sexual morality" in *The Oxford companion to philosophy* / edited by Ted Honderich. - Oxford: OUP, 1995, pp. 824-5.

sexual relationships other than marriage.<sup>7</sup> Almost any system of rule-based sexual ethics uses criteria other than love (or the absence of it) to limit one's sexual acts and sexual partners. Though there may be social expedients for such a system, it is difficult to accept a system of law as the best way to characterise conduct as truly Christian. As Nelson notes, "the tendency towards legalism seems stronger in sexual morality than in virtually any other arena of human behaviour".<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary debate within the church concerning sexuality arises partly from an understanding that our rules sometimes depend not on love and faith, but fear. The present debate on the churches' approach to homosexuality is a difficult case in point. Paul Hanigan, in the title of his conservative but scholarly book on the subject, rightly describes homosexuality as "the test case for Christian ethics".<sup>9</sup> It is not necessary to debate the issues here, though I have added a sketching some aspects of the controversy.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, under the catchall heading of "homosexuality" there are a number of distinct issues for Christians. The extensiveness of the literature on a Christian ethical approach to homosexuality is an indication of the degree of debate

---

<sup>7</sup> If the traditional teaching is Christ's command, Philip Turner argues, (in reading 62 in *From Christ to the world ...*, pp. 359-362) then we must say sexual relationships other than in marriage are simply disobedient. Yet, even from a 'traditional' perspective we may recognise that good can be found in a loving, possibly 'committed' relationship outside marriage. Therefore, we should acknowledge that a person moving away from such a relationship for the sake of an obedient conscience might suffer the loss of a much-desired and much needed good (*Ibid.*, p. 362). The expectation of faith is that God comforts, heals and restores, but we should not suppose that all sexual relationships outside traditional marriage are devoid of positive spiritual content and value.

<sup>8</sup> Nelson, *Between two gardens ...*, p. 81. Paul Gilbert suggests that the application of various ethical systems limiting one's choice of sexual partner, "...is a reaction to viewing sex as a potentially disruptive force - disruptive, respectively, to society at large so that exceptionless formal restrictions need to be imposed; to personal relationships, so that sex must be tied to concern for another's welfare; and to the individuals themselves whose integrity as persons is put at risk by it." (Gilbert, *op.cit.*, p. 825.)

<sup>9</sup> James P. Hanigan, *Homosexuality: the test case for Christian ethics*, New York: Paulist Pr., 1988.

<sup>10</sup> What little there is in scripture on this matter on first seems to be negative. But there is scholarly debate on how to interpret the two or three possibly relevant New Testament verses and highly complex exegesis of the New Testament texts has been seen by many to be inconclusive. Reliance on the Levitical prohibition is problematic, for how can we assert an obligation to obey some Levitical texts and not others? The debate shows that it is very difficult to judge this matter on scripture alone. (Cases abound of the use of scripture to justify wrongful oppression.) There is also some attempt to demonstrate the inappropriateness of same-sex relationships by relying on the pattern of the "created order". However, the biological evidence is equivocal in the extreme. Even if it can be argued that same-sex relationships are less than ideal in comparison to marriage, this does not demonstrate sinfulness. Similarly, it is difficult to read tradition, as tradition also has been a source of wrongful oppression, for example, of women. Even a long and well-held tradition can be plainly wrong. It is also important to be clear what is being discussed. The moral questions involved in casual or impersonal same-sex acts are distinct from arguments about the validity of long-term committed and loving same-sex relationships - though a ban on any same-sex genital contact would exclude both.

within at least some branches of the church.<sup>11</sup> There is widening division within and between the churches, with hard-fought debates in synods, councils and local congregations. From this, it might be reasonable to conclude that on some questions concerning homosexuality, in the church as a whole, we simply don't know the answers with certainty. If so, three points need to be made.

First, the counsellor, when assisting someone struggling with or coming to terms with homosexuality, for example, cannot rely on a consensus as to what is 'right'. Secondly, it is difficult for the conscientious counsellor in such a situation to resort to ecclesiastical authority, simplistic moral norms, or a literalistic approach to the Bible. Thirdly, the example of homosexuality, and sexual ethics more generally, illustrates the need to examine the normative bases of our pastoral care, particularly in cases where there is ethical debate.

### III

If, as James Nelson asserts,<sup>12</sup> love is the identifying Christian characteristic in matters of sexuality, the challenge is to find content for our understanding of love. This content, he says, is found in Scripture, in the traditions of the Christian community, and in our understanding of God's loving dealings with humankind.<sup>13</sup> "Ethics centred in this kind of love", Nelson argues, "will be neither legalistic nor antinomian".<sup>14</sup>

A number of writers have addressed the challenge of identifying a normative foundation for pastoral care. Don Browning is often cited on the importance of this task.

---

<sup>11</sup> See for example: *Biblical ethics and homosexuality: listening to scripture* / edited by Robert L. Brawley. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996; John Boswell, *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality: gay people in Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century*. - Chicago: Chicago UP., 1980; Peter J. Gomes, *The good book: reading the Bible with mind and heart*. - New York: Avon Books, 1996; James P. Hannigan, *Homosexuality: the test case for Christian sexual ethics*. - New York: Paulist, 1988; Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible really says about homosexuality*. - Alamo Square Press, 1994; *Homosexuality and Christian community* / edited by Choon-Leong Seow. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996; John J. McNeil, *The Church and the homosexual*. - 4th ed. - Beacon Press, 1993; Maurice Shinnick, *This remarkable gift*. - St. Leonard's: Allen and Unwin, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> "If love is the central (albeit not the only) norm for Christian ethics, it is the central meaning of human sexuality and the measuring standard and justification for any particular sex act. Nevertheless, the word is dangerously slippery, and countless dehumanizing acts have been done in the name of love." (Nelson, *Between two gardens* ..., p. 82.)

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 84.

The difficulty with much of pastoral counselling today is that more time is spent discussing the tools of counselling than in the more challenging process of developing the structure of meanings that should constitute a context of counselling<sup>15</sup>

For Browning, the church is called to be a community of moral guidance and formation. "The pastor's role is to help create, maintain and revise the normative value symbols of his society."<sup>16</sup> Browning's thesis is that "care and counselling must once again be related to and grounded in ethics"<sup>17</sup> He argues that ethics and psychology must be restored to a closer relationship. Ethical theology must be not merely confessional, but self-critical. It should be sensitive to the psychological origins of human behaviour. But the practice of psychology must also be guided by ethics. Browning asserts that there is a tendency for ministers to theologise in a few high-level religious generalisations - such as the love of God - and then to apply them to concrete situations while ignoring the detailed intervening theological and ethical reasoning.<sup>18</sup>

In a series of books,<sup>19</sup> Charles Gerkin proposes a 'hermeneutical' model of pastoral counselling - one based on the mutual interpretation of their life stories by counsellor and counsellee, within the context of Christian community life. His proposals are worth examining as an example of the use of *praxis* to arrive at norms of value in the counselling environment. In *Prophetic pastoral practice* (1991) Gerkin looks for 'normative metaphors' to support pastoral care within the community of faith. Fragmentation of cultural values in Western industrial societies, "presents the necessity of gaining clarity concerning the normative vision that is to guide ... ministry to persons."<sup>20</sup> How shall we decide, Gerkin asks, the sort of people we will help those under our care to become?<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Don S. Browning, *The moral context of pastoral care*. - Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976, p.109.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>17</sup> Don Browning, "The estrangement of care from ethics" in *Religious ethics and pastoral care*. - Philadelphia, Fortress, 1983. - pp.18-30, at p.18.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>19</sup> Charles V. Gerkin, *The living human document: re-visioning pastoral counselling in a hermeneutical mode*. Nashville: Abingdon press, 1984; \_\_\_\_, *Widening with the horizons: pastoral responses to a fragmented society*. - Philadelphia: Westminster press, 1986; \_\_\_\_, *Prophetic pastoral practice: a Christian vision of life together*. - Nashville: Abingdon press, 1991.

<sup>20</sup> Gerkin, *Prophetic pastoral practice* ..., p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Idem.*

For Gerkin, "the interpretation and reinterpretation of a tradition such as the Biblical and Christian tradition is a continuous, living, dynamic process."<sup>22</sup> He is aware of, "oppression that has resulted from the dominant traditional norms"<sup>23</sup> and is sympathetic to feminist hermeneutics.<sup>24</sup>

Gerkin draws on *praxis* as resource for norms by proposing 'narrative sources of the commonsense of what is fitting'. He proposes that,

... when seen from a hermeneutical perspective, the central purpose of ministry practice is best fulfilled in assisting individuals, families, and communities in the transformation of life by means of the transformation and reinterpretation of their core stories. Such transformations, if they are to be seen as taking place within the ongoing Christian community and its tradition, should rightly be grounded in dialogical interaction with the primary images and themes of the Biblical and Christian story ... .<sup>25</sup>

Gerkin refers to Gadamer's aesthetic understanding of the function of wise judgement, which brings,

... a certain normative perspective to its dialogue with common sense. It is a way of assessing the particular at hand by its relationship to the whole of things and the good of the whole community. It thus involves a certain wisdom in terms of what is fitting for the welfare of both individual and community.<sup>26</sup>

In Scripture, Gerkin asserts, it is God's presence that is the organising metaphor. The questions we should ask ourselves are, "What is God seeking to bring about?" and, "Are there any signs of God's presence?" The community will be held together by a common vocation and a common sense of covenantal vision. Gerkin describes shared vocation as a 'normative metaphor for pastoral work' in a pluralist cultural environment.<sup>27</sup>

Gerkin's work illustrates the possibility of interaction between theological 'theory' and *praxis*, based in Christian community, as a way to arrive at norms of value for a specifically Christian counselling environment. He is not antinomian, but his approach can be criticised for not offering definite guidance in the face of specific questions in matters such as sexual ethics. Gerkin himself comments that,

since the model I am attempting to bring before my readers is one dependent on the functioning of intuitive imagination, it will in all probability never reduce itself to

---

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> Gerkin refers (*Ibid.*, pp. 44-45), for example, to Phyllis Trible's reinterpretation of scriptural stories about women in her *Texts of terror: literary-feminist readings of Biblical narratives*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1984).

<sup>25</sup> Gerkin, *Prophetic pastoral practice ...*, p. 58.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 143ff.

anything like a step-by-step methodology that can simply be applied to all situations.<sup>28</sup> Gerkin refers to Walter Brueggemann's *The prophetic imagination*<sup>29</sup> to confirm his assertion that to exercise prophetic imagination is to sustain a continuing dialogue between contemporary life and the tradition.<sup>30</sup> A specific response based in community may be difficult to identify and apply in practice. Nevertheless it is the life of the community that will establish fundamental norms of acceptance, care, openness and love.

#### IV

Feminist theology is an important source of approaches towards ethical foundations for pastoral care in an age of moral uncertainty. In common with other liberationist perspectives, it places experience and *praxis* at the centre of theological development. As we have noted in Gerkin's work, the challenge is to *interpret* experience, believing that the Word of God and the life of the spirit are incarnate in the experience of all Christians. Most feminist Christians do not abandon the Bible as a source of norms. However writers such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza<sup>31</sup> and Margaret Farley<sup>32</sup> offer a liberationist perspective on its interpretation and use. (Such a view may be compared with that of S. Pattison, who argues that the Bible is largely silent on pastoral care and the use made of it confused.<sup>33</sup>)

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1978.

<sup>30</sup> Gerkin, *Prophetic pastoral practice* ..., p. 70.

<sup>31</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*In memory of her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins*. - New York: Crossroads, 1983) refuses to relinquish the Bible to those who assert its patriarchal aspects to be normatively Christian. She uses four hermeneutical principles of which the best known is a hermeneutic of *suspicion* that recognises patriarchy and androcentrism in many texts. (The other principles are a hermeneutic of *proclamation* that assesses which texts are suitable for liturgical (and ethical) use, a hermeneutic of *remembrance*, that searches out women's history, to reconstruct the heritage of today; and a hermeneutic of *creative actualization* that helps women reclaim (biblical) history by the use of historical imagination and through ritual and art.) Fiorenza applies these principles to biblical studies, but they are also useful in other disciplines, such as theological ethics.

<sup>32</sup> Margaret Farley also debates whether certain minimal standards can be set over-against the Biblical text. "My concern here is precisely for the kind of conviction so basic to a person's understanding that contradictory witness cannot be believed without doing violence to one's self. ... The minimal claim I want to make ... is that included in feminist consciousness are some fundamental convictions so basic and so important that contradictory assertions cannot be accepted by feminists without violence being done to their very understandings and valuations. These convictions serve as a kind of negative test for revelation in knowledge." (Margaret A Farley, "Feminist consciousness and the interpretation of scripture", in *From Christ to the world: introductory readings in Christian ethics* / Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy and Alen Verhey, eds. - Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, pp.51-57, at p.52.)

<sup>33</sup> Pattison argues that exacting historical and critical Biblical scholarship has made it difficult to integrate Biblical knowledge with pastoral concerns and Christian life in general. It has undermined the idea that the Bible contains a unique deposit of divine revelation, with special qualities based on its inspired origins. ("The

Being human is not simply one's created nature - it is also the *experience* of being human. Thus, in feminist theology, the starting point and perspective is often women's experience - unique individual experiences, or women's experience in community. As theology, it also refers to specifically Christian experience - women's special contribution to Christian life, and their experience of exclusion from much that is church.

Margaret Farley effectively encapsulates the program of feminist theology under three themes: (1) relational patterns among human persons, (2) human embodiment, and (3) human assessment of the meaning and value of the world of 'nature'.<sup>34</sup> Each has a bearing on ethics. Similarly, Carol Gilligan, who in her research<sup>35</sup> listens to women and girls talking about moral issues, identifies differences between women's ethical conversation and the abstract language of traditional Western moral discourse.

As we listen more carefully to the moral voice that speaks about interdependence and the problems of detachment, of voice articulated more frequently by women, different ways of thinking about power emerge as well as different ways of understanding violence to others and to self.<sup>36</sup>

Gilligan's work left her with the crucial questions, "In whose terms do we speak?" and "Who is to define the terms of the discussion?"

Valerie DeMarinis also argues that feminist theology provides a unique resource through a *praxis* methodology. It seeks to investigate carefully the core of beliefs, symbols, assumptions, and categories of meaning-making. Theory is prototype rather than archetype - it must be open to critical questioning and change.<sup>37</sup> A feminist hermeneutic can create a worldview "that understands and nurtures the relational and

---

Bible and pastoral care" in *A critique of pastoral care*. - London: SCM, 1988, pp.106-133, 201-202.) Pattison assembles a number of points to challenge the authoritativeness of the Bible. Pattison goes on to discuss various approaches to the use of the Bible in the theory of pastoral care - fundamentalist, tokenist, suggestive, informative and thematic. Pattison praises the informative approach used in Donald Capps' work, *Biblical approaches to pastoral counselling* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), but criticises Capp's failure to discuss the nature and status of the Bible, his usage of which, Pattison argues, leads to its being implicitly ascribed unquestionable authority. Pattison's response to the thematic approach exemplified by the work of William Oglesby (*Biblical themes for pastoral care*. - Nashville: Abingdon, 1980) is similar.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret A. Farley, "Feminist theology and bioethics" *in* *Feminist theology: a reader* / edited by Ann Loades. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990, pp.238-254, at p.240.

<sup>35</sup> Carol Gilligan, "A different voice in moral decisions", *in* *From Christ to the world: introductory readings in Christian ethics* / Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy and Alen Verhey, eds. - Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, pp.172-176.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.176.

<sup>37</sup> Valerie M. DeMarinis, *Critical caring: a feminist model for pastoral psychology*. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr, 1993, p.18.

religious instincts."<sup>38</sup> Some worldviews do not recognize or nurture human growth and instincts, but rather work against them.<sup>39</sup> Though not negating the use of pastoral counseling, feminist reconstruction of pastoral theology seeks to use sacrament, prayer, sermon, and community life as sources for healing and community. Restoration of pastoral activity from a feminist perspective encompasses not only individual care, but a diverse and complex set of pastoral practices.<sup>40</sup>

Hierarchical imposition of moral authority and norms is problematic in the postmodern era. The contemporary tradition of non-directive counseling has aimed more towards achievement of personal ethical sensibility and autonomy than conformity to external moral codes. As a result, Elaine Graham concludes that, "contemporary pastoral care finds itself with an impoverished vocabulary of moral discernment - in relation to the individual and the collective."<sup>41</sup>

The response of feminists (and others) to moral and ethical uncertainty has been twofold. The *first* response has been to focus on the social and political dimensions of moral decisions, for a personalized approach obscures social and economic factors impeding our growth to full personhood.<sup>42</sup> A liberationist perspective brings impoverishment and oppression into critical focus. Pastoral care is encouraged to promote strategies of social change and political intervention.<sup>43</sup>

A *second*, closely related, strategy in the face of moral uncertainty is to draw on critically evaluated practice as a source of ethics and norms. Elaine Graham argues that identity and knowledge, grounded in practice, bring into focus methods that are self-reflecting, yet still maintain ethical and political integrity - despite an absence of transcendent truth-claims.<sup>44</sup> Critical self-understanding and practical wisdom are

---

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34-5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.48

<sup>41</sup> Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming practice: pastoral theology in an age of uncertainty*, - London: Mowbray, 1996. p. 50.

<sup>42</sup> A tension arises within feminist thinking between a desire for social change and community action and the importance of personal freedom to develop one's life and spirituality. The freedom to develop an inner sense of self, based on one's own desires and understanding, has been an achievement of feminism valuable to both women and men. Therefore, feminism is itself challenged to avoid stereotypes. There is no 'right way' to be free," says Maureen Slattery, "There are only many ways, as many as there are female hearts and souls." (Maureen Slattery - "Women and the new spiritual consciousness" *Pastoral sciences* 17:121-144, 1998, at p. 141.)

<sup>43</sup> Graham, *op.cit.*, pp. 51, 136.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

formed within a network of relationships, values and practices from which meaning is constructed and acted on.<sup>45</sup> This emphasis on experience, Graham says, "may be understood as a plea for all theological discourse to recognize itself as *situated*, or as theologians more usually term it, *contextual*."<sup>46</sup> Feminist theology seeks to exemplify liberating practices and ways of thinking of benefit to pastoral ministry.

Postmodernism, by focusing on the social location of theory and acknowledging the plurality of human existence, tends to limit us to local systems of belief and values. Attempts to create a foundation for ethics encounter the essential feminist / post-structuralist critique that such developments of ethical norms are but constructs of power and language.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, not all feminists have abandoned the search for a common ethic. Many would agree with Christine Neuger,<sup>48</sup> in claiming a status of politics and advocacy for feminist thought and seeking a set of agreed principles so that ministry *praxis* can be developed.<sup>49</sup>

Though there may be difficulties in constructing a generalized ethic, feminist Christians have made strong and effective contributions to ethical reform in issues of pastoral concern. In discussing sexual ethics, for example, feminist writer Lisa Cahill moves away from narrowly defined, act-centred, definitions of morality and emphasizes the positive function in community building served by biblical teachings on sex.<sup>50</sup> Feminists also draw attention to sins easily hidden by an acceptance of the heterosexual, marital and procreative norms.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194 (original emphasis).

<sup>47</sup> Thus, for example, Elizabeth Cady rejects an abstract unified subject and questions how normative judgements (theological or otherwise) can be made - in each case we are governed by limitations of time and place. (Elizabeth Linell Cady, "Identity, feminist theory, and theology" in *Horizons in feminist theology: identity, tradition and norms* / edited by Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997, pp. 17-32.)

<sup>48</sup> *Arts of ministry: feminist-womanist approaches* / Christie Cozad Neuger, ed. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr, 1996, pp. 4-5.

<sup>49</sup> Linda Hogan, for example, examines other authors' ideas for a non-relativist ethic and posits the legitimacy of a common morality. Suggested sources for such an ethic are (1) shared human nature, (2) non-relative virtues, and (3) abstract principles. (Linda Hogan, "Boundaries and knowledge: feminist ethics in search of sure foundations", in *Bodies, lives, voices: gender in theology* / edited by Kathleen O'Grady, Ann L. Gilroy and Janette Gray. - Sheffield: Academic Pr., 1998, pp. 24-39.)

<sup>50</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Sexual ethics: a feminist Biblical perspective", *Interpretation* 49(1):5-16, January, 1995.

<sup>51</sup> "Consider, for example, domestic violence; sexual abuse; marital rape; callousness of men to the daily burdens of their wives; wives' and mothers' emotional manipulation of husbands and children; sexual objectification or coercion by men or women; neglect and abuse of children; narcissism of family members in their relations to one another; narcissism of families in relation to those outside their family, church, or

## V

Feminist pastoral theology and the work of Charles Gerkin have suggested some contextual approaches to the discovery of Christian norms, based in the experiences of the community of faith. Values are discovered through the life of the community of faith, informed by Scripture and guided by the Spirit.

Homosexuality has been mentioned as a contested and difficult example of the search for Christian norms to undergird the pastoral care and counselling. If the approaches that we have been discussing have any credibility, they lead to the conclusion that the search for Christian values concerning homosexuality, for example, should begin in the lives of Christian homosexual people - particularly as those lives are lived out in the community of faith. James Empereur provides an excellent illustration of how this might work out in practice, in his book *Spiritual direction and the gay person*, (though a detailed summary of the book is beyond the scope of this essay). Empereur begins with the crucial premise that sexuality and spirituality need not be at odds with each other.

The gay man cannot be content to wait for the tradition to tell him how to think and feel about God but rather he needs to ask himself how he is actually experiencing God and how his experience can contribute to the overall understanding of the God reality today. Most importantly, he needs to *trust* his experience of God.<sup>52</sup>

I would add that the Christian pastoral counsellor (or spiritual director) also needs to learn to trust the homosexual person's understandings of his or her experience of God no less or more than any other person's experience would be trusted. As with any person, the counsellor may assist the homosexual person towards a healthy and sensitive conscience. The challenge then is to trust the Spirit of God, in the life of the community, to direct the conscience.

Indeed, *trust* would seem to be at the heart of this discussion. As a community of faith we will continue to discover what is right, our normative values, as we together learn to rightly and prophetically apply the word of God while trusting in the direction of the Spirit in the community and each individual.

## SOURCES

---

community; consumerism; drugs and alcoholism; sloth toward the commitment it takes to sustain a marriage and be responsible parents; and the irresponsible divorce." (*Ibid.*, p. 14.)

- Arts of ministry: feminist-womanist approaches* / Christie Cozad Neuger, ed. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr, 1996.
- Browning, Don S., "The estrangement of care from ethics" in *Religious ethics and pastoral care*. - Philadelphia, Fortress, 1983, pp.18-30.
- Browning, Don S., *The moral context of pastoral care*. - Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976.
- Cady, Elizabeth Linell. - "Identity, feminist theory, and theology." in *Horizons in feminist theology: identity, tradition and norms* / edited by Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997, pp.17-32.
- Cahill, Lisa Sowle, "Sexual ethics: a feminist Biblical perspective", *Interpretation* 49(1):5-16, January, 1995.
- DeMarinis, Valerie M., *Critical caring: a feminist model for pastoral psychology*. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr, 1993.
- Empereur, James L., *Spiritual direction and the gay person*. - London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1998.
- Farley, Margaret A., "Feminist consciousness and the interpretation of scripture", in *From Christ to the world: introductory readings in Christian ethics* / Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy and Alen Verhey, eds. - Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, pp.51-57 (reprinted from *Feminist interpretation of the Bible* / Letty M. Russell, ed. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1985).
- Farley, Margaret A., "Feminist theology and bioethics" in *Feminist theology: a reader* / edited by Ann Loades. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990, pp.238-254 (reprinted from *Theology and bioethics: exploring the foundations and frontiers* / Earl S. Shelp, ed. - Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985).
- Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler, *In memory of her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins*. - New York: Crossroads, 1983.
- From Christ to the world: introductory readings in Christian ethics* / edited by Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas. D, Kennedy and Allen Vergey. - Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.
- Gerkin, Charles V., *Prophetic pastoral practice: a Christian vision of life together*. - Nashville: Abingdon press, 1991.
- Gilbert, Paul, "Sexual morality" in *The Oxford companion to philosophy*, Ted Honderich, editor, Oxford: OUP, 1995, pp.824-5.
- Graham, Elaine L., *Transforming practice: pastoral theology in an age of uncertainty*. - London: Mowbray, 1996.
- Hanigan, James P., *Homosexuality: the test case for Christian ethics*. -New York: Paulist Pr., 1988.
- Hauerwas, Stanley, "The pastor as prophet" in *Christian existence today*. - Durham, NC.: Labyrinth Pr., 1988, pp. 149-167.
- Hogan, Linda, "Boundaries and knowledge: feminist ethics in search of sure foundations", in *Bodies, lives, voices: gender in theology* / edited by Kathleen O'Grady, Ann L. Gilroy and Janette Gray. - Sheffield: Academic Pr., 1998, pp. 24-39.

---

<sup>52</sup> James L. Empereur, *Spiritual direction and the gay person*. - London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1998, p. 4 (emphasis original).

Mauser, Ulrich W., "Creation and human sexuality in the New Testament" in *Biblical ethics and homosexuality: listening to scripture* / Robert L. Brawley (ed.). - Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996, pp. 3-16.

Nelson, James B., *Between two gardens: reflections on sexuality and religious experience*. - Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1983.

Nelson, James B., *The intimate connection: male sexuality, masculine spirituality*, London: SPCK, 1992.

Pattison, S., "The Bible and pastoral care" in *A critique of pastoral care*. - London: SCM, 1988, pp.106-133, 201-202.

Ricoeur, Paul, "Wonder, eroticism and enigma," in *Sexuality and identity*, Hendrick M. Ruitenbeek (ed.), New York: Dell, 1970, pp. 13ff.

Slattery, Maureen. "Women and the new spiritual consciousness" *Pastoral sciences* 17:121-144, 1998.