

HETEROSEXIST THEOLOGY: Being Above It All

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Heterosexism

Sexism is the foundation of heterosexism. Heterosexist theology is constructed on the assumption that male domination of female lives is compatible with the will of God. The rightness of compulsory heterosexuality is predicated on the belief in a natural order or process that alone is good—so that any deviation from it is sinful. Basing contemporary moral theory on medieval concepts of natural law necessitates projecting an image or fantasy of “good order” onto human social relations—thereby denying altogether the role of human agency in determining moral good.¹

While belief in natural law may not strike us as necessarily heterosexist, in a sexist situation like the praxis of the church the assumption of a natural order is infused with corollary presuppositions about gender and sexuality.² It is in this social praxis, historical and contemporary, that the image of heterosexual marriage emerges as the prototype for the Right—i.e. the

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¹ For constructive moral epistemologies which build on creative insights from natural law tradition, see Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), especially the introduction by Carol S. Robb and pp. 3–21, 115–34, and 235–63; Anthony Battaglia, *Toward a Reformulation of Natural Law* (New York: Seabury, 1981); Daniel C. Maguire, *The Moral Choice* (New York: Doubleday, 1978); Margaret Farley, “New Patterns of Relationship: Beginnings of a Moral Revolution,” in *Woman: New Dimensions*, ed. Walter J. Burghardt (New York: Paulist, 1976); and B. Andolsen, C. Gudorf, and M. Pellauer, eds., *Women's Consciousness, Women's Conscience* (Minneapolis: Winston Press), esp. pp. 211 ff.

² See Samuel Laeuchli, *Power and Sexuality: The Emergence of Canon Law at the Synod of Elvira* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972); Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *On Studying Witchcraft as Women's History* (forthcoming); and the classic, infamous, *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of Witches), by monks Sprenger and Kraemer, for the extent to which Christian assumptions about the natural as moral are steeped in misogyny. See also Harrison on the relation between hatred of women and fear of homosexuality, “Misogyny and Homophobia: The Unexplored Connections,” in *Making the Connections*, pp. 135–51.

Natural and Moral—Relation not only between male and female, but also between Christ and his church. Compulsory heterosexuality safeguards this divinely willed Right Relation. To coerce heterosexual bonding is simply to affirm what is natural. And what is natural reflects the good order of the cosmos, thereby revealing the divine purpose. The Be-ing of God involves being heterosexual.

In the church, individualistic psychology is often drawn on for support in upholding the sanctity of compulsory heterosexual relations. Thus church bodies often commission psychiatrists to make clinical judgments of the "maturity" of individual candidates for the ordained ministry. More often than not, "maturity" is understood by the ecclesiastical authority (and often by the psychiatrist) as synonymous with heterosexual marriage or, at least, with the candidate's willingness to abstain from any sexual activity outside such marriage. On this basis, church authorities frequently will deny that they are against homosexuality per se, but rather will insist that they are opposed to all sexual activity outside of marriage, heterosexual as well as homosexual. To the rejoinder that *homosexual* marriages are not permitted in the church, the typical response is, "Of course not," as if the very notion were unintelligible to Christian sensibilities of what is both natural and moral.³

It should not be surprising that the church would consecrate psychology as its Great High Priest. Psychology, in large part, remains the most highly individualistic of the modern sciences, and liberals have strong investment in the interior life and yearnings of individuals as the locus of sin and grace, problems and transformation.⁴ Moreover, what is psychologically "normal" provides the content for the theologian's understanding of the natural and

³ At least one seminary (The Episcopal Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia) requires all of its students to sign a pledge that they will not engage in sexual activity outside of marriage while they are students at the Seminary. And at least one psychiatrist who screens candidates for ordination in a liberal Episcopal diocese has indicated to those whom he interviews that their sexual behavior is *the* critical factor in his judging their fitness for ordination. While he expresses interest in hearing details of *heterosexual* lives, he makes no secret of his special disdain for gay men and lesbians, who are, in his judgment, "immature" and unfit for ordained ministry.

⁴ For attention to interiorized spirituality as a moral problem, see Dorothee Sölle (with Shirley Cloyes), *To Work and to Love: A Theology of Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), as well as other pieces by Sölle. This same theme is explored in the Amanecida Collective's *Revolutionary Forgiveness: Feminist Reflections on Nicaragua* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986), as well as throughout the growing corpus of liberation theologies. See, for example, Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 4 vols., trans. Donald Walsh (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976-82); Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983), and Phillip Berryman, *The Religious Roots of Rebellion: Christians in Central American Revolution* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984). In her essay, "While Love is Unfashionable: An Exploration of Black Spirituality and Sexuality," in *Women's Consciousness, Women's Conscience*, Toinette M. Eugene examines connections between justice, sexuality, and spirituality in Black experience.

moral. What is specifically lacking is a *critical* analysis of the ways in which unjust power relations between men and women shape the lens through which we view the natural/moral order. Liberal proponents of natural law fail to enter into serious engagement with those whose lives are marginalized by its truth-claims.

My thesis in this essay is that liberal Christianity is morally bankrupt in relation to women and all homosexual persons. In fact, the liberal church damages these people because, as a theo-political ideology, liberalism is not only set against collective advocacy as a primary mode of Christian witness: it is also contemptuous of the particular claims of feminists and all openly gay/lesbian people. In what follows I attempt to illustrate why.

Specifically I shall contend that Paul Tillich, as a paradigmatic modern liberal, presents an amoral, individualistic God-Man as constitutive of Being itself. Moreover, the contemporary liberal church, as represented by the praxis of mainline denominations, operates on the same nonrelational and irresponsible assumptions about divine and human life. Most important, the individual's experience of *normative* Christian life is steeped historically in heterosexism.

God above God

Hannah Tillich, Paul's widow, tells of a conversation between "the old woman and the old man":

"Why do you always remain on the borderline?" asked the old woman. "Why can't you decide between Yin and Yang, between the mountains and the deep blue sea? . . ."

"Why should I decide?" retorted the old man nastily. "I don't know where I belong. Besides, indecision allows for freedom."⁵

Paul Tillich went beyond the romantic reductionism of natural law into a more complex theological reasoning which took some account of the ambiguities of human existence. Still, Tillich's theology suffered from problems classic to liberal philosophy. First, he did not have an adequate understanding of the social, relational basis of either human or divine Being. "Being" is constitutive of the inner life of the individual agent. Second, for this reason, Tillich did not see the *theological* significance of the material, embodied, and economic grounds of human being. His specific focus was on the ability of the well-educated Euroamerican male to cope spiritually within the "structures of existence." His concept of God, a logical companion piece to his anthropology, floats free of the contingencies of relationality, physicality, and material need—and, thus, as Alison Jaggar would suggest, from our actual "ground of being."⁶

⁵ Hannah Tillich, *From Time to Time* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), p. 15. I am grateful to Tom F. Driver for reminding me how vividly Hannah Tillich writes of her husband's liberal disposition.

⁶ See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2, esp. 155–58.

Tillich recognizes his own "estrangement" as constitutive of his "existence." He notes a problem with the extent to which Christian theologians traditionally have rendered estrangement—or sin—as rooted in "concupiscence," defined narrowly as sexual desire. Of the church's "ambiguous" attitude toward sex, Tillich writes, "The church has never been able to deal adequately with this central ethical and religious problem."⁷

Interestingly, Tillich seems puzzled by this lingering "devaluation of sex" in Christian tradition. He evidently fails to notice a connection in Christian history between the devaluation of sex and the devaluation of women. This failure itself reflects the bias in Tillich's perspective on the meaning of estrangement, creation, existence, and essence. In other words, his world view—grounded in his experience and articulated in his theology—reveals much about the "actualized creation and estranged existence" of a white male German academic failing to acknowledge (or perhaps even to notice) that the limits of his theological epistemology are set not only by his "finitude" as "man" but more particularly by his experience as one white German male.

Writing on behalf of all men (and I leave intact the linguistic ambiguity of Tillich's theology), Tillich subsumes the conditions of human existence under a series of ontological polarities. Every man lives in tension between the angst of his existence and the divine essence from which he has fallen into this alienated situation. Tillich's fundamental image of human life reflects the [his] experience of existing between death/dying and life/living. While Tillich's academic concern is not, basically, a moral one, and while he does not reduce death to evil or life to good, his theology suggests that human existence is synonymous with a moral struggle against Nonbeing and that, in the struggle, justice is actualized as a moral good. Still, this existential process is located in the life of the individual man.⁸ As Norene M. Carter has demonstrated, since Tillich fails to present alienation as a social, material condition, his ontology does not address responsibly the moral issues involved in human alienation from other humans, the rest of creation, or the Creator.⁹ For human angst originates not in the individual's psychospiritual ontology but rather in the historical structures of alienated social relations which render each person victor or vanquished in a myriad of relational configurations which are beyond her or his individual capacity to alter.

To those who cannot accept the traditional God of theism, Tillich offers

⁷ ST, 2:52.

⁸ See ST, 1:182–86 on "freedom and destiny"; and 1:255–56 and 2:29ff on "the Fall." Also *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952) and *Love, Power and Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954).

⁹ Norene M. Carter, a feminist ethicist who lives and works in the Boston area, discusses Marx's and Tillich's different understandings of alienation in an unpublished essay she wrote for Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's and Carter Heyward's class on *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics*, Episcopal Divinity School, spring semester, 1985.

the image of a "God above God" who is eternally beyond the structures of existence.¹⁰ It is from this God above God that we have fallen into alienated existence. And it is with this God that we can reunite in New Being, through participation and transformation by Christ, the Essential God-Man.¹¹ In refusing to confuse essence with existence, God with man—even in Christ—Tillich misleads us, drawing us away from realizing the part we may play in the drama of salvation.

Tillich does not deny the importance of human "acceptance" of the New Being.¹² He also does not, however, stress the role of human agency in salvation. This is probably because he does not recognize the corporate character of being—either human or divine—and thus, is stuck both epistemologically and soteriologically in his perception that "man" (the individual white male) must be "grasped" by an ontological force (Being, or the Christ) outside himself, before he can participate in the drama of salvation. Ironically, while Tillich is attempting to present a theology that cuts through the individualism of human existence, he fails to grasp the power of human subjectivity when "humanity" is understood as an *essentially corporate reality*:

The objective reality of the New Being precedes subjective participation in it Regeneration [and conversion], understood in this way, have little in common with the attempt to create emotional reactions in appealing to an individual in his subjectivity.¹³

Tillich draws us beyond the structures of our existence—however dehumanizing, and oppressive—toward an "essence" that should not be confused with our daily human experiences of love and work, pain and struggle, confusion and play. But does it suffice to suggest that our alienation originates in our fall from God, in the spiritual malaise of individual men and women? It may be small comfort to imagine that the solution to our predicament is to bear up courageously on the basis of whatever mental gymnastics enable us to leap high enough or probe deep enough to be grasped by New Being.

Despite his insistence that it is entirely at the initiative of the "divine Spirit" that "man" is "grasped" by the "New Being," the bulk of Tillich's work reflects his efforts to seek, find, and be open to the "essential God-man."¹⁴ Again, the problem is that Tillich did not acknowledge the collective, relational, sensual and embodied ground on which he stood with others, a "ground of being" on which justice-making has more to do with

¹⁰ Tillich discusses "God above God" in *The Courage to Be*.

¹¹ See ST, 2, esp. part 2.B:118–24.

¹² ST, 2, esp. 2.E:165–79.

¹³ ST, 2:177.

¹⁴ ST, 2:178.

one's acceptance of social, relational responsibility than with one's actualization of "as many potentialities as possible without losing oneself in disruption and chaos."¹⁵

Tillich takes little account of the social, political, historical character of each individual, thus little account of the limits of the individual's spiritual aspirations. Neither Tillich nor other liberal Christians comprehend deeply creative power—at once human and divine—as historically and ontologically embodied among us, transacted between and among ourselves daily as co-creative agents upon whom the Power of Love in history depends. The liberal deity may, in some anthropomorphic sense, "love" us, but it is likely to tax our understandings of what actual loving involves, because a God above God (or an Essential God-Man) remains eternally unaffected by the clamor and clutter of human struggle, including the passions, problems, and confusions of human sexuality.

On the surface, Tillich's theology has nothing to do with sexism, heterosexism, racism, or any other "ism." That is precisely the point of liberal philosophy. God is simply above the fray. This, more than any other, is the grievance of Latin American, Afro-American, Asian American, and feminist liberation theologians against the "objectivity" espoused by liberal theological scholars. This "objectivity" presupposes the subject's ability to manufacture a critical distance between himself and his object of study (such as "God") in order to produce a theology free of bias or ideology.

A more perceptive hermeneutic suggests, however, that Tillich's theology, his portrait of God, has *everything* to do with holding traditional power arrangements in place. For his God above God is finally indifferent to the details of how we live together on the earth. The Prince of Wales and the prisoner on death row, the murdered gay activist Harvey Milk and his murderer Dan White, have the same ontological constitution and live under the same conditions of existence. Their salvation histories involve, essentially, the same angst. A liberal disposition fails to notice its own moral bankruptcy.

Unlike the traditional GodFather, whose anthropomorphic antagonism toward uppity women and wanton sexual behavior is well documented in Christian history, the liberal God of self-consciousness, human potential, and science controls women and homosexual people not because he is hostile to us (God forbid!), but rather because he is neutral in relation to us. Liberal morality is a basically individualistic realm, in which the subject determines right from wrong. In Friedrich Schleiermacher's words,

In the sinful nature the bad exists only correlatively with the good, and no moment is occupied exclusively by sin. . . . Insofar as the consciousness of our sin is a true element of our being, *and sin*

¹⁵ *Love, Power and Justice*, p. 70.

therefore a reality, it is ordained by God as that which makes redemption necessary. (italics mine)¹⁶

Not only are good and evil, grace and sin, necessary correlates in the work of redemption in liberal Protestantism, but the reality of sin is predicated upon our noticing it! And we are first and finally moral monads, accountable to the pangs of our own *God-consciousness*, not to a God whose justice may be calling us to account *regardless* of how we feel about it or what we think.

To believe that we can discern our own ethics, choose from many options, and act on the basis of individual "conscience" is, in effect, to admit defeat in the struggle against the structures of our alienation. It is to give *explicit* assent to the immoral proposition that whether one rapes or not, pays taxes or not, drops the bomb or not are decisions that only the responsible individual or individuals can make. It is furthermore to give implicit assent to the dualistic assumption that such matters, in historical fact, are none of God's business. In the realm of God, the opinions of a Jerry Falwell and a John McNeill are of equal consequence—none at all. For the liberal deity has turned over to us the realm of human affairs. What we do, each of us, about racism, sexism, heterosexism or any other human problem is our business.

To their peril, many women as well as male homosexual Christians draw upon the moral neutrality of Christian liberalism in arguing for their right to live and let live.¹⁷ This is finally a self-defeating argument, for the problems of injustice cannot be solved by appeals to "freedom" as a value-free "right."¹⁸ From a moral perspective, freedom is not value-free; it is the power of personal agency in the context of *just* social relations—that is, relations in which the positive value of all persons has been established as a given. Of course, it is indeed logical that, pleading for "neutrality" and "freedom" in matters of morality, liberal Christians should have no reason to believe that God cares whether people are feminists, lesbians, or gay men. It would seem truer to its own ethical heritage if the liberal church were to say to its members who do not conform to traditional gender roles or sexual practices: "God doesn't care whether you are gay or straight, or whether you are a feminist or an adherent to traditional gender roles. God wants you to be true to yourself and faithful in relation to God and God's people." But this is not what most liberal churches have said.

¹⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, English trans. of 2nd German ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), pp. 332, 335.

¹⁷ This is the position of many gay advocacy groups in religion. Alternatives to this theology are being given voice by such gay/lesbian activists as David Fernbach, *The Spiral Path: A Gay Contribution to Human Survival* (Boston: Alyson, 1981), Mary E. Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness: Toward a Feminist Theology of Friendship* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), and Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

¹⁸ See James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously*, ed. Max L. Stackhouse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), esp. pp. 1–88, and Harrison, pp. 81–190, for interpretations of "freedom" and "rights" on the normative basis of justice.

Sacred Contempt

In one sense, the implications of theological liberalism for gay men, lesbians and feminists are identical with those for all women, racial/ethnic minority peoples, the poor and others whose oppression should be of more immediate moral concern to church leaders than the spiritual pilgrimages of individuals. There is another sense, however, in which gender and sexual injustice occupy a special place at the hallowed table of Christian fellowship. Sexism and heterosexism receive a particular "blessing" from the liberal philosophical tradition's *trivialization* of the female gender and human sexuality as embodied, material, "lower" phenomena. The "normative dualism" of Christian liberalism has been shaped by sexism and sealed in heterosexism.¹⁹ I need not elaborate here examples from the works of Christian Fathers who have located created, spiritual power in the hypothetically disembodied male mind.²⁰ Thus, today, while the material concerns of *men* of color and poor *men* can be subsumed *idealistically* into the liberal vision of a nonracist, nonclassist world, women and openly homosexual persons *embody and represent* the specific material phenomena which, in Christian idealism, came early to its full expression in the contributions of Augustine. From the standpoint of Christian idealism, then, to press seriously for women's liberation or for the affirmation of gay and lesbian sexual activity is to fly in the face of the idealistic tradition itself, in which femaleness and sexual activity are, *de facto*, ungodly and thus singularly undeserving of the justice that constitutes the liberal vision of the divinely ordained world.²¹ Thus does liberal Christianity embody its own contradiction between its

¹⁹ See Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), esp. pp. 27–50 and 173–206.

²⁰ Important resources for grasping the extent of misogyny—and women's courage and creativity—in Christian tradition include Kari Børreson, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Women in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981); Rosemary R. Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin, *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979); Elizabeth A. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends: Essays and Translations* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). See Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles, eds., *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) for similar themes within and beyond Jewish and Christian religions.

²¹ It is interesting to me that, in Thomist theology (in which the spiritual is the *supernatural* and the "male principle" is in its image), femaleness is cast as "natural." But in modern liberalism's equation of the natural with divine process, the construct of female "nature" (receptive, passive) is set as different from that male "nature" which is normative for a fully human life. Femaleness is, thus, "unnatural" in liberal theology as are sexual

ideal of one, inclusive world and its sacred contempt for femaleness and sexual passion.²²

While many liberal churches appear to have attended to the problem of sexism, they fail utterly to take heterosexism seriously and thus, in fact, fail to do justice to any women's lives, whether lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, genitally active, genitally inactive, or celibate. It is important to note that the liberal churches have always displayed some measure of tolerance toward those women and those homosexual people whose *public* presence has been strictly in conformity with patriarchal social relations.²³ Passive, self-deprecating women, and men and women who have kept their homosexual activities "closeted" from public knowledge have been well received on the whole throughout Christian history. I would even conjecture that such women and men have comprised the larger part of the church. Women and homosexual people pose no practical problem to the church unless they *publicly challenge* the church's sexism and heterosexism. This is exactly what is happening today. Many feminists, gay men, and lesbians have begun to "come out" of concealment and put themselves visibly on the ecclesial line as representative of those women and men who, throughout Christian history and the ecumenical church today, have seen that the liberal Christian emperor has no clothes—no sense of the misogynist, erotophobic, and oppressive character of his realm.

Thus, it is true that from the standpoint of advanced patriarchal capitalist social relations, the liberal deity has begun to incorporate, superficially, the "rights" of women and of racial/ethnic minorities and the poor into his divine agenda, as *idealistic* moral claims which need not disrupt the harmony of life as it is meant to be lived in the realm of God. However, the feminist and gay/lesbian demand (not request) that women and homosexual persons be affirmed (not tolerated) poses a challenge not only to the good ordering of liberal social relations, but also a threat to the essence of liberal religion. For

acts which run contrary to human (and divine) "nature." Whether "natural" (beneath the super-natural God-man) or "unnatural" (beneath the natural God-man), women are objects rather than subjects of moral agency in Christian history. Liberalism thus has changed nothing with regard to classical Christianity's sacred contempt for women. Homosexual men, of course, have a very different history. As long as they have been "discreet," they have maintained heterosexist benefits of male privilege and domination. *Openly gay men*—not closeted homosexuals—receive scorn and contempt in Christian history.

²² For help in understanding the politics of this dynamic, see Zillah R. Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (New York and London: Longman, 1981), Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), and Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*.

²³ John Boswell explores this in *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

the liberal deity is, above all, a noncontroversial gentleman—the antithesis of much that is embodied by feminists and by openly gay and lesbian people who dare to challenge the moral deficit of liberal Christianity. At stake this time, from a feminist liberation perspective, are not the bodies of witches and faggots, but the nature and destiny of God.