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Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge: Changing Awareness, Changing Attitudes

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Changing Awareness, Changing Attitudes

By Patrick Hornbeck

In recent decades, secular and religious advocates for social justice have examined the dynamics of systemic oppression. Rather than describing racism and sexism in terms of individual acts of bigotry, intolerance, and violence, scholars have studied more deeply how society and its institutions privilege, often latently, some persons, identities, and ways of living over others. This mode of analysis, known in theological circles as "structural sin" or "social sin," has evoked compelling new insights about race, class, gender, disability, and sexuality.

Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph F. Smith's book *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge* (1993) marked an important moment in Christian theological engagement with the sexual other, that is, with the persons, identities, and practices often designated LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer). Jung and Smith argued that interwoven beliefs in society and in religious institutions perpetuate the view that "heterosexuality is *the* normative form of human sexuality," and they demonstrated that these networks confer a range of benefits on heterosexuals and heterosexual couples at the expense of non-heterosexuals. Heterosexism stretches far beyond the views that any individual might possess, and thus to dismantle heterosexism requires deep, often painful changes in social structures as well as individual attitudes. Indeed, the summons to overcome heterosexism is applicable to a wide range of American institutions: federal, state, and local governments; hospitals, schools, universities, and churches.

For those who work in Jesuit colleges and universities, issues concerning sexual diversity are now more salient than ever. Six of the 28 U.S. Jesuit institutions of higher education now host centers that take diversity in gender and sexuality as a primary concern. At least 21 sponsor student, staff, or faculty organizations for LGBTQ persons and their allies; 15 organize events to mark Coming Out Day, the Day of Silence in remembrance of the victims of homophobic bullying, or the graduation of LGBTQ students. Simultaneously, however, these initiatives have often been critiqued from outside as signs that our institutions has lost their way with regard to their Catholic identity. And the U.S. Catholic bishops have opposed civil marriage for same-sex couples as a key plank in their religious, social, and political agenda.

Official Catholic teaching on homosexuality (formal church documents speak of "homosexual persons" and "homosexuality" rather than gays and lesbians, and there are few, if any, such documents, that discuss bisexual or transgendered persons) is complex and contested. It affirms that homosexual persons "must be accepted with

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respect, compassion, and sensitivity." Violence "in speech or in action" against such persons "is deplorable," and "[e]very sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided." Yet at the same time, the church describes as disordered not only same-sex sexual activity but also "the particular inclination of the homosexual person," what we might call sexual orientation. Because of this condition of "objective disorder," "[s]uch persons…find themselves in a situation that gravely hinders them from relating correctly to men and women." For this reason, in 2005 a Vatican congregation prohibited the admission of openly gay men to the priesthood and to religious orders, although some studies have estimated the percentage of gay men in the Catholic priesthood at 30 percent or higher. The church's official position, then, is not so much a matter of "love the sinner, hate the sin" as it is that gay men and lesbians, by virtue of their sexual orientation, undergo "a trial" and can be incapable of fully human affectivity.

The Catholic theologian Gerard Jacobitz has pointed out that this position stands in tension with the church's teachings on "the intrinsic and unconditional dignity of the person, and…the essential reliability of human reason informed by practical experience." Other scholars in a variety of Christian denominations have produced historically sensitive readings of the biblical texts once thought to condemn same-sex partnerships and sexual activity. They have sought to understand the ethics of human sexuality by tending to questions of justice between persons rather than by applying an exclusively act-based morality, and they have sought the counsel of scientific studies on human sexuality. On the whole, Catholics are more accepting of homosexuality than are the members of every other Christian denomination in the U.S., and clear majorities of U.S. Catholics favor civil marriage for same-sex couples, employment protections for LGBTQ persons, and the adoption of children by gays and lesbians.

Where does the interplay of all these conflicting forces leave Jesuit colleges and universities? It seems that Jesuit institutions could be called heterosexist by Jung and Smith's definition. For instance, housing policies presume that students are heterosexual and cisgendered (i.e., their gender identity matches up with their assigned biological sex) and, thus, should be roomed with members of the same rather than the opposite gender. Instructors unconsciously cause LGBTQ students to feel excluded when the terms and examples they use in class assume the heterosexuality of all their students. Where institutions grant benefits to the same-sex partners of employees, they often do so under euphemisms like "legally domiciled adults." Some institutions do not grant such benefits at all. Institutional leaders may not consider the implicit and explicit ways that policies, statements, and campus traditions can relegate LGBTQ individuals to second-class status.

However, Jesuit institutions of higher education are by no means uniquely heterosexist. Many other religiously affiliated colleges and universities—not to mention a great many public institutions—observe all the policies described above. Although the religious identity of Jesuit colleges and universities may contribute to heterosexism, it would be unfair, not to mention counterproductive, to scapegoat an institution's Catholicism for all its shortcomings in this regard.

Instead, a characteristically Jesuit way of proceeding may enable us to overcome heterosexism in our institutions. Ignatius of Loyola, in writing the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and in dealing with the diverse group that he and the other early Jesuits gathered together, urged that those in authority come to know deeply the strengths, weaknesses, aspirations, doubts, and dispositions of their colleagues, in order that they might be able to tailor their decisions to what would be best for each individual and for God's greater glory. Rather than prescribing a uniform set of solutions to the problem of heterosexism, we might examine which elements of living and learning on each of our particular campuses promote and which elements hinder the full human flourishing of LGBTQ persons. In addition, we can ask: In what ways can fundamental Catholic and Ignatian commitments to the dignity of the human person, to the primacy of conscience, to the search for God in all facets of creation, and to the promotion of social and ecclesial justice inform our response?

These questions are not easily answered, nor are their answers easily put into practice. For the short term, Jesuit institutions must continue to inhabit the tensions between official church teachings, the conscientious statements and actions of their ecclesial defenders, the equally conscientious work of theologians who have reached different conclusions, and the rapidly shifting attitudes of Americans in general and college students in particular. All agree that what's unacceptable is the persistence of episodes of homophobic bullying, violence, and suicide. As more of our institutions courageously face up to how they have participated in the systematic privileging of heterosexuality, space will open up to engage in deeper reflection on what it means to be human, what it means to love with one's whole person, and what it means to witness to the all-encompassing love that Christians call God. ■