CHAPTER 1

Why Do We Have to Keep Talking about Sex All the Time?

Serious talk about sexuality is inevitably about society.

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As a Christian ethicist, my short answer to this question of why we must keep talking about sex, sexuality, and sexual ethics is because harm is being done. This harm burdens both individuals and the community, and it causes suffering. Moreover, this harm is caused by injustice. In order to bring healing and hope, we must pursue a broad social justice agenda that embraces a passionate commitment to sexual justice.

To begin with, in cultures strongly influenced by traditional Christian norms about purity, women, and sexuality, as one social theorist has quipped, sex is "presumed guilty until proven innocent."[2] Given this negativity, it is hardly surprising that many people try to avoid this topic altogether, or when they do manage to talk about sex, they often become defensive, reactive, and judgmental. As many people attest, fearful and shaming messages about sex have had all sorts of negative consequences in their lives, but silence about these matters can be just as debilitating if not more so. For this reason, Peggy Brick, a sexuality educator, has dedicated her book to adolescents and young adults this way: "To the young people of this nation who must find their way to sexual health in a world of contradictions—where media scream, 'Always say yes,' where many adults admonish, 'Just say no,' but the majority just say . . . nothing."[3]

That we keep talking matters. But why?

■ Because a cultural crisis is disrupting sexuality and conventional mores

Remaining silent or becoming speechless does little to curb the mindless chatter about sex and sexuality, much less stop the negative messages, because these tend only to escalate during times of disruptive cultural change when moral panics surface about loss of moral certainty, sexual immorality, and the disintegration of family life. Currently, as we witness a worldwide crisis of literally global proportions, we are encountering not only a tumultuous time of rapid change, but more significantly a protracted and very difficult period of structural transformation in which social relations at every level are being altered, from economic arrangements in a globalizing economy to the reordering of power between men and women in the family and throughout the social order. In the midst of this historic restructuring, cultural battles over sexuality, gender, and family are raging everywhere as deeply contested personal and social struggles about the human good, normative patterns for family life, and the legitimacy of cultural authority.

What are the rules for sexual intimacy, and who gets to define and enforce them? These questions are at once highly personal and highly political. As sociologist James Davison Hunter explains, "Cultural conflict is about power—a struggle to achieve or maintain the power to define reality."[4] Therefore, sex and sexuality are far from frivolous or inconsequential matters that only detract attention from the so-called weightier matters of poverty, racism, war, and ecological degradation. Rather, these "intimate matters," far from being sealed off from larger sociocultural dynamics, are embedded in, and reflective of, these more global transformations.

For this reason, at a time when human suffering nearly exceeds our moral imagination's ability to grasp, we must regain moral perspective about our lives-in-relation from the global to the intimate, especially at a time when many people, out of pain and fear, are either turning inward and blaming themselves for their suffering and bewilderment or turning outward to look for enemies and scapegoats who can serve as the culprits for their upset and misery. Attending to sexuality has become morally imperative these days because, as Gayle Rubin puts it, it is at times like this when "people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality." Therefore, she cautions, "sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress."[5]

■ Because the way we talk about sex, sexuality, and sexual ethics can lead to justice or injustice

While it is imperative that we speak, we must exercise great care about what we actually say about these tender matters. Making a compelling case that harm is being done and that the appropriate response is sexual justice requires us to "change the

subject" in two distinctive ways. First, we need to change *what* is being talked about by shifting the topic of conversation away from the misplaced preoccupation with homosexuality and sexual difference and focusing instead on race, gender, sexual, and economic oppression and the pervasive patterns of sexualized violence in this society. Second, we need to change *who* the subject is that is speaking and listened to. What is shaking the foundations is a global power shift as women and LBGT persons of all colors and classes claim the right to be the subjects of their own lives and participants in the renewal of their spiritual traditions. Morally speaking, constructive critique and alternative visions emerge only as persons are no longer silenced or positioned as objects of other people's discourse (as if aliens or merely abstractions) and when, instead, they become self-defining subjects, real persons with whom to enter into dialogue. When the participants at the table change, so does the conversation.

Sexuality is a justice issue. As biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann emphasizes, "In biblical faith the doing of justice is the primary expectation of God."[6] To be sure, justice is multidimensional, but by all accounts sexual or erotic justice is one of the most neglected, trivialized, and even feared dimensions of a comprehensive social justice agenda. Claiming a passion for erotic justice just doesn't sound very Christian, does it? There lies the crux of the problem. It is an understatement to say that faith communities—and here I mean Christian churches—have difficulties dealing with sex. Although much attention continues to be directed toward women's changing roles, nonmarital sex, and the "sin of homosexuality," the reality is that Christians struggle not only with these particular issues but with sexuality as a whole. Massive cultural change, declining denominational influence, and internal dissension do not ease matters.

In trying to gain our bearings in the midst of these swirling dynamics, my wager is that acquiring fresh moral insight about these concerns will depend on three things: first, our facing conflict and working through it rather than evading it; second, our listening to and learning from people who have been hurt, silenced, and rendered invisible by church teaching and practice; and third, speaking up about gender, sexual, and other forms of injustice and calling the community and ourselves to account for reordering relationships so that all may thrive. In this grand project, survivors of sexual and domestic abuse, LBGTQ persons, sexually active divorced and single people, people living with physical and mental disabilities, elders as well as youth, people living with HIV/AIDS, and many others have stories of faith and struggle that can amplify, correct, and revitalize the church's inherited wisdom about sexuality and sexual ethics. If moving forward requires engaging people's lived questions and discovering fresh moral insight, it will also require courageous leadership to foster the kind of hospitality, mutual respect, and safety that will actually enable us, in Nelle Morton's felicitous phrase, "to hear one another into speech."[7]

■ Because sexuality is indispensable to our humanity

Novelist May Sarton in her book *At Seventy* wrote, "This is the best time of my life. I love being old." Someone asked Sarton, "Why is it good being old?" She replied, "Because I am more myself than I have ever been. There is less conflict. I am happier, more balanced, and . . . more powerful. I felt it was an odd word, 'powerful,' " Sarton said, "but I think it's true. I am surer of what my life is all about, have less self-doubt to conquer."[8] If I may paraphrase Sarton, I would say, "This is the best time of my life. I love being gay." I agree with her that in claiming one's self-respect, including one's self-respect as a sexual person, one stands to become happier, more balanced, and, yes, more powerful. Whenever people honor the goodness of their lives, including their sexualities, and whenever they touch that place within them where their passion and spiritual hunger meet, they often discover sources of personal integrity and spiritual empowerment.

Despite all the disquietude about this topic of sex and sexuality, the truth of the matter is that sexuality remains an indispensable component of our humanity. No doubt we humans would be something without our sexualities, but we would surely not be fully recognizable as humans if we could not experience the delight, and sometimes the pain, of living relationally as friends, lovers, and life companions or if we did not feel strong desire for entering into communion with others through tender touching. By sexuality, I mean not only genital sex, but more broadly our embodied capacity for intimate connection. Erotic desire seeks physical, emotional, and spiritual embrace of others, the world, and God, the sacred source of life. By spirituality, I mean our response to the movement of the sacred in our midst. Any spirituality worth having these days will have at its center a desire for justice as communal right-relatedness. Justice making pays attention to how people's well-being is enhanced or diminished by prevailing patterns of social power and vulnerability. The work of justice is an ongoing, never-ending process of remaking community by strengthening relationships and correcting whatever harms people, other earth creatures, and the earth itself.

A progressive Christian framework appreciates how justice, as communally secured respect and care for persons and the earth, is foundational to good loving. Moreover, a just society and a just church will foster the moral freedom of persons, without distinction, to love and be loved and responsibly express their desire for intimate, respectful connection.[9] This is not to say that everyone must be sexually active, genitally speaking, much less married or partnered, to be complete as persons, but it is to recognize that if we deny whole segments of the community the right (and responsibility) to *be* sexual persons and to *do* love in and through their bodies, then we have denied them their full humanity. In other words, we dehumanize persons by oversexualizing or desexualizing them.

Spiritually empowered justice advocates find the courage to say no to apathy, abuse, and injustice, as well as strength to say an equally resounding yes to joy,

creativity, and compassion. That's the good news. The bad news is that so few religious people live comfortably with their bodies or at ease with sexual difference. Fear of sexuality and deep suspicion of the erotic are pervasive in the church. No wonder Christians are often viewed as lifeless and devoid of passion! When people fear sensuous touch and become repressive about sexuality, they risk becoming controlling, rigid, and unfeeling. In the process, they lose touch with what brings joy as well as sorrow to themselves and others and often become disconnected from, and therefore unresponsive to, the world around them. Put humorously, they earn the appellation of "God's frozen people."

■ Because it is time to stop injustices from being sexualized

A fearful people are also likely to project their fear and discomfort about sex and sexuality onto others. In our time the overlapping communities of LBGTQ people, people of color, and people living with disabilities have become the cultural repositories or moral dumping ground for other people's dis-ease about sensuality and the body. People with disabilities are dehumanized whenever they are desexualized as "imperfect bodies" for whom sex and embodied intimacy are considered unseemly. As sociologist Thomas Gerschick explains, "People with less-normative bodies, such as people with disabilities, are engaged in an asymmetrical power relationship with their more-normative bodied counterparts, who have the power to validate their bodies and their identities."[10] He then illustrates this social power dynamic by citing a teenager living with a chronic, body-crippling condition who remarked, "I think [others' conception of what defines a man] is very important because if they don't think of you as one, it is hard to think of yourself as one or it doesn't really matter if you think of yourself as one if no one else does."[11] Our social interactions not only validate our identities (or not), they also provide occasions for approval or sanctioning, depending on our conformity to cultural norms and values. Failure to comply with prevailing codes of normalcy can lead to judgments not only about our (mis) behavior, but also about our "realness" as persons who measure up or not.

Because of white racism, the institutionalized belief in the superiority of one racial group over all others and its right to dominance, black sexuality is subject to relentless stereotyping and projections of white fear onto black bodies. Womanist theologian Delores Williams observes that white culture "considers black frightening, dangerous and/or repulsive—especially when this is the color of human bodies."[12] White fear of and suspicion toward black sexuality give racism an energy and edge, constructed on the degradation of black bodies and on white determination to control them. People of color are caricatured as hypersexual and, therefore, less rational and more prone to be "out of control." As ethicist Miguel De La Torre explains, "Whites [have] projected their own forbidden desires onto darker bodies." This eroticization of race has been used to justify white control and exploitation, including sexual exploitation, of people of color. This cultural construction is, in fact,

"so woven into white America's identity that it has become normalized in the way many whites have been taught by their culture to see bodies of color."[13]

Until people get honest and take responsibility for their own confusions and struggles, non-normative communities will continue to be used as moral scapegoats and disenfranchised as "inferior outsiders," which is historian John Boswell's term for LBGTQ persons, whom he regards as "the most obvious 'outsiders' in the modern West." Socially defined outsiders stand in contrast, on the one hand, to "distinguishable insiders," such as blue-eyed and brown-eyed people or, say, Presbyterians and Lutherans, whose differences are noticeable and noted but whose difference does not render them unequal, nor are they socially disadvantaged or segregated because of it. On the other hand, outsiders are also treated differently from "inferior insiders," whose divergence from the social norm is tolerated even while they are relegated to an inferior social status. Boswell cites the caste system in India as an illustration of "inferior insiders," but also the experience of women as a social group within patriarchal society. As he explains, "Although few would argue that it is 'wrong' to be female, being a woman renders one liable to a lower place in the socioeconomic structure of many Western states." Similarly, within certain religious traditions, women are not excluded from the spiritual life of the community, but they are barred from ordination to religious leadership because they " 'lack' some aspect of the norm of 'maleness' presumed to be requisite for sacerdotal functions."[14]

In contrast to both distinguishable and inferior insiders, socially defined outsiders are "either not tolerated at all (they are killed, or banished, or incarcerated) or are relegated to nonexistence conceptually." Their difference, viewed as pathological and threatening to the normative social order, is regarded as a controlling "master trait" that determines their total personality and conduct and makes them into objects without redeeming qualities, either to pity or to punish. As Boswell argues, "In the case of a 'normal' person, heterosexuality is assumed to be one part of his or her personality," but "in the case of a 'homosexual' person, sexuality is thought to be the primary constituent of his or her (abnormal) personality." In other words, "the controlling influence in the lives of gay people is assumed to be overt, abnormal sexuality," and, therefore, "gay people are not a permitted category."[15] To be perceived as nonheterosexual is to be viewed as both different and wrong, a mistake that should be corrected or eliminated. Moreover, from a religiously fundamentalist or absolutist worldview, sexual intimacy between two men or two women is judged morally objectionable without exception, "regardless of how loving or how committed the relationship in which it takes place."[16]

The vilification of bodies, including disabled bodies, bodies of color, and queer bodies, is a moral scandal of the highest order. To correct this injustice, a first step is to stop trashing LBGTQ and other non-normative people. A second step is to stop asking the wrong questions. For example, the moral problem is not homosexuality, same-sex love, or sexual difference. *The moral problem is sexual injustice and the*

eroticizing of power inequalities to bolster the social privilege of some at the disadvantage of others. In this culture erotic desire is in trouble because sexuality has been conditioned by or, perhaps better said, annexed to sexism, racism, ableism, and other injustices. In a social order marked by male gender supremacy in which men as a social group feel entitled to social power and privilege and women as a social group are socialized to show deference, many men are turned on by female powerlessness and turned off by strong, assertive female partners. Through such skewed eroticism, people accept in their bodies, as well as in their psyches, that sexism feels right and good. When many men have sex, the power and control they feel in the when, the how, and the "to whom" they feel sexual are all matters that confirm—or fail to confirm—their socially constructed, gendered identity as social superiors. Sexuality conditioned by patriarchy eroticizes gender inequities as something that feels good and right, even natural as the "way things are."

As patriarchal dynamics are played out in and through the body, power as sexualized domination or power-as-control becomes naturalized and somatized, as Patricia Hill Collins conjectures, "precisely because it is felt and not conceptualized."[17] Male gender supremacy, white racial supremacy, and ableism are acquired at the feeling, somatic level of our being. Therefore, male gender supremacy is *sensed* rather than only thought about, through actions giving rise to feelings of being a "real man," the person in charge, and the one who's normal and, therefore, entitled to deference from women and other social subordinates. Real men dominate and take pleasure in controlling women, and "normal" women are expected to be sexually submissive and socially compliant. Anyone who visibly deviates from sexism risks being labeled queer and punished for their nonconformity to patriarchal norms. Named accurately, therefore, the moral problematic is a gendered and racialized social order in which sex is utilized as a means to confirm not only our gender and race identities, but more tellingly, our social status as superiors and subordinates. Engaging in the "right" kind of sex with the "right" kind of person becomes proof of our authenticity as "real men" and "real women" with certain social standing and privilege (or lack thereof).

■ Because talking about it makes it more likely we'll redress moral wrong

Why must we talk about these things? In order to redress a moral wrong, the devaluing of women and LBGTQ persons of all colors along with the distortion of sexuality and its misuse to dehumanize and discredit the moral standing of social groups. At the same time, it is true, as theologian John Cobb reports, that in a post-Freudian era "most Christians acknowledge that humans are sexual beings and that the desire for sexual contact with others is natural and inevitable."[18] Nonetheless, Christians among others are deeply divided over whether expression should be limited to heterosexual (and procreative) marriage and how the church should respond to sexually

active single persons, including gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons. Dealing with these and other sexual questions is further complicated by the fact that the dominant Christian tradition has long reflected a fear of and negativity toward sexuality. This negativity has been reinforced over the centuries by two interlocking dualisms, a body-spirit dualism and a male-female dualism. The spiritualistic dualism elevates the superior spirit over the inferior body, which must be disciplined and kept under control. Gender dualism reflects a patriarchal hierarchy of value, status, and power in which good order is understood to require male control of women's lives, bodies, and labor, including their procreative power.[19]

Under the influence of these dualisms, Christianity has given credence to the notion that sex is unclean and should be avoided or at least restricted as a necessary evil. As a contemporary sexologist has observed, "In sum, the Christian Church brought an overlay of sinfulness to almost every aspect of human sexuality. Masturbation, fornication outside marriage, homosexuality, transvestitism, adultery, and in fact almost any aspect of sexual behavior was sinful and ultimately against church law." Even though church authorities may not have been particularly effective in curtailing such activity, Christians have helped "breed a deep feeling of guilt about sexual activity which remains one of the more troubling aspects of the Christian heritage. Though there were modifications of the basic teachings by various Protestant writers, and a general weakening of religious influence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the guilt feelings remain."[20]

Given this Christian sex-negativity, in the process of developing ethically principled speech about sexuality and sexual difference, we will run up against varying degrees of religious ambivalence, if not outright hostility, toward eroticism, as well as a long-standing negative legacy of "managing" this hostility by defaming some persons and groups. If this were not trouble enough, several other factors further impede constructive discourse about these matters. First, we lack a ready language to communicate sexual meanings positively and forthrightly. In this culture, where sex is both feared and fixated upon as both taboo and titillating, "sex talk" falls into certain genres of patterned speech: the highly objectified, clinical jargon of the medical sciences, the whispered disclosures of the confessional, or the breathless utterances of the pornographic. Therefore, as philosopher Mariana Valverde rightly concludes, "talking about sex is not a straightforward matter at all, and this difficulty is not only because of modesty and moral dictates."[21] Moreover, language about sexuality is seldom exempt from ideological taint, including sexism, racism, and heterosexism. Therefore, the categories we typically rely on do not readily express what is most important in our connections with others. For example, the terms *heterosexuality* and *homosexuality* are medicalized categories, but, more telling, these are patriarchal classifications that mystify rather than highlight the qualities of authentic relationship that matter within human intimacy. In a nonpatriarchal society, the gender of the person to whom we are attracted would hardly be of consequence ethically; what would matter, instead, is the character of the relationship itself and whether the

parties are treated with respect and care and experience genuine affirmation of their shared humanity.

In addition to the struggle to find appropriate language, a second difficulty involves developing an adequate methodological framework for critical inquiry about sex and sexuality. At present, there are two distinctive approaches. Essentialism, in defining sex as natural and unchanging, emphasizes "what comes naturally" and the biological imperatives that supposedly determine the "normal" course of things. Accordingly, both nature and nature's Divinity have been blamed for such oppressive notions as women's subordination, the presumption that procreative sex alone is healthy and sound, and the pathologizing of same-sex eroticism. In contrast, social constructionism contends that sexuality is more complex, more fluid, and more amenable to cultural molding than essentialists admit. This historical-cultural approach emphasizes that humans develop their sexualities and sexual identities only within institutions and systems, never independently of society or history. Therefore, sexuality's purpose and meaning cannot be grasped by biology alone. A historical, contextualized method is needed to analyze sexuality within social power relations.

This alternative approach argues, to begin with, that sexuality is not a static thing, but rather a dynamic process, constantly being reshaped and reassigned value and meaning in the midst of conflicting social interests. Moreover, sexuality has a history, some of which is oppressive. Because sexuality is political and cultural and not only personal, a *social* ethic is needed to examine how social structures and belief systems affect sexualities for good or ill. Finally, transformations have occurred in social practice and in the meanings attached to sex, gender, and social power, but such shifts require social as well as personal struggle and are not accomplished at will. Theologian John Cobb cites, for example, the rethinking of divorce and remarriage to illustrate the dramatic character of such transformations within Protestant Christianity. "Protestants are becoming so accustomed to this acceptance of divorce and remarriage as the best response in many circumstances," Cobb points out, "that they might forget how drastic a change this is from past Christian teaching." Since Protestants often rely on biblical guidance on moral issues, this more open stance regarding divorce is "particularly noteworthy since it is the acceptance of a practice that is rejected explicitly in the Bible." In fact, Cobb underscores, "it is Jesus himself who opposed divorce!"[22] The fact that a reversal on divorce has taken place demonstrates how a religious tradition may be dynamically subject to revision and renewal.

■ Because the crisis of sexuality lies in the dominant social order and its ideology of sexualized power and control

That said, it is also true that, by and large, faith communities have failed to grasp the scope and depth of the cultural crisis in sexuality. In this culture, the kind of sex scripted as normative is racist patriarchal sex. Eroticism is often about having

someone under your control or feeling safe by being placed under another's power. Power as control is erotically charged. Compliance to authority becomes titillating. Above all, a patriarchal ethic grants permission only for those erotic exchanges in private that uphold the social hierarchies of male gender supremacy and white racial dominance. No wonder erotic desire is in trouble!

These insights about the cultural construction of sexuality within patriarchal social relations should help us properly locate the crisis of sexuality. The crisis lies not, first and foremost, in LBGTQ and other marginalized communities, but rather in the dominant social order and its ideology of sexualized power and control. More specifically, the cultural crisis is a crisis within heterosexuality and, more pointedly, within male heterosexuality with its patriarchal macho ethos and distorted power dynamics that encourage men to "lord it over" women and other, less powerful men. In the dominant culture, sex is imagined as an unequal social exchange between a social superior and a social inferior. It ceases to be about love or the sharing of mutual pleasure between willing partners. Sex becomes instrumentalized as a control dynamic between a powerful subject and "his" submissive object.

Unfortunately, the traditional Christian sexual ethic is implicated in this mess because it has legitimated an ethic of male entitlement over women and female bodies. A patriarchal sex ethic has traditionally differentiated "good" from "bad" sex by the particular use that men make of women.[23] Good sex is when a man uses a woman for procreation. Bad sex is when a man uses a woman only for pleasure. The patriarchal religious imagination fails altogether to envision sex as mutually desired, pleasurable touch between peers who are sexual subjects, one to the other. Patriarchy doesn't get it. If it did, it wouldn't be patriarchy.

If we are to move beyond racist patriarchal morality, we must break with this eroticized power-and-control paradigm. The hopeful message in this regard, as Valverde contends, is that "our bodies and our lives are not hopelessly determined by patriarchal oppression—but neither are they capable of complete individual autonomy. . . . The exercise of power, in the sexual as well as in the political realm, always generates some acquiescence and some resistance on the part of those who are the objects of that exercise. The point is to maximize the resistance and minimize the acquiescence, while being aware of the powers over us."[24] Therefore, we must find creative ways to enter into genuine solidarity with women, LBGTQ people of all colors, and survivors of sexual and domestic abuse, all of whom are rising up in resistance to erotic injustice in this culture. But here's the rub. Most people associated with institutionalized religion have been taught to fear difference. Therefore, they avoid flesh-and-blood contact with people "not like them," especially with respect to sexuality. However, when people lack real-life connection with those harmed by the prevailing sex/gender, class, and racial systems, they fail to comprehend the real world. They also have trouble discerning injustice in their own lives. Because many middle-strata white people are woefully out of touch with their own pain, they are sadly in no position to perceive the pain of others. Confused about the cultural crisis

around them, they become frightened, susceptible to ideological manipulation, and increasingly dangerous to themselves and others.

The way forward is narrow and demanding. It requires a lifelong commitment to listen to, and learn from, those on the margins. It further requires a willingness to join them in rebuilding the kind of community in which no one is excluded and no one devalued. As one component of that larger movement of community reformation, the feminist, LBGTQ, anti-racism, and anti-abuse movements are calling for a reordering of human sexual relations toward erotic justice. Each of these broad-based, grassroots movements is founded on solidarity, lived out as concrete accountability to those actively resisting oppression. From these movements, fresh moral wisdom is emerging about ethics and eroticism. An ethical eroticism, at odds with racist patriarchal norms and values, aims at enhancing the safety, respect, pleasure, and freedom of persons, especially those who are most vulnerable. It is, at one and the same time, strongly anti-abuse and strongly sex-positive.

Fortunately, the task before faith communities is never simply to repeat the Christian past and apply it, but rather to critique the distortions within the faith tradition and help transform it in more life-enhancing directions. Despite the difficulties of "talking sex," there is urgency about speaking about sexual injustice because so many people are being harmed and because the Christian tradition is implicated in this harm. As Catholic ethicist Christine Gudorf argues, churches must "risk abandoning a familiar but unworkable sexual ethic," and her historical analogy is the challenge to the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa when it was confronted with its complicity in white racism and was called on to repent and renounce its teachings and practice with respect to apartheid. "The same kind of renunciation of traditional [Christian] teaching in sexuality, followed by repentance," Gudorf proposes, "is necessary on the part of all Christian churches today in response to the suffering and victimization it has long supported and legitimated."[25] Otherwise stated, a theological ethic constructed on the basis of gender and sexual injustice is not a noble tradition to defend, but rather a legacy to critique and transform.

My own Protestant Reformed theological tradition taught me that justice making is central to the life of faith, but this tradition runs into problems whenever it splits off the personal and relational aspects of life from the social-structural and political. When that happens, justice is reserved for public matters relating to political and economic power. Love is reserved for "private" concerns among intimates. This split renders sexuality, reproduction, the care of children, and women's lives less important than the supposedly "really" serious issues of politics and empire-building among powerful, propertied men. Even Christian liberalism has failed to recognize family and sexuality as matters of justice as well as love. It has left unquestioned the power hierarchies of husbands over wives and parents over children. It has not adequately addressed the abuse of power among intimates. Theological liberalism minimizes or ignores oppression in the so-called private sphere and fails to recognize how power, conflict, and injustice exist in the bedroom. Therefore, the Reformed tradition is

being challenged to enlarge its theological vision and relocate matters of justice for women, people of color, and LBGTQ persons from the margin to the center.

Granted, the reframing of sexuality as a justice concern requires a conceptual and political shift. "It is not easy to think about [sexuality], marriage, and the family in terms of justice," Susan Moller Okin acknowledges, in part because "we do not readily associate justice with intimacy" and in part because the romanticizing of family life has allowed us to sidestep power, abuse, exploitation, and oppression among intimates. However, Okin argues, "in the real world, justice is a virtue of fundamental importance for families [and friendships], as for other basic social institutions." Justice in intimate relationships and in family life involves a fair distribution of material goods, but also of intangible goods, such as respect and care. In addition, family life is a primary developmental context for forming human identity and for deepening sociability. "If justice cannot at least begin to be learned from our day-to-day experience within [intimate relationships], it seems futile to expect that it can be developed anywhere else. Without [just friendships], just families, [and just marriages]," Okin asks, "how can we expect to have a just society?"[26]

■ Because our expanding scientific knowledge demands we change the conversation

To be candid, the impetus for reforming Christian sexual ethics has come not from inside the tradition, but from two outside sources: first, from the social and natural sciences with their fresh insights about human diversity and psycho-sexual development and, second, from social justice movements and the moral wisdom emerging especially from the feminist, LBGTQ, and anti-racism movements, but also the disability rights movement, the anti-violence movement among survivors of sexual and domestic abuse, and the ecological movement with its nondualistic framework and holistic appreciation of relational systems.

In relation to expanding scientific knowledge, at its best the Christian tradition has encouraged openness to new empirical knowledge, demonstrated a nondefensive engagement with changing cultural patterns, shown adaptability to new conditions, and emphasized human freedom, creativity, and responsibility for promoting personal and communal well-being and the care of the earth. Scientific and medical developments, such as effective and inexpensive contraceptives, medically safe and legalized abortion, and the emergence of assisted reproductive technologies, have greatly affected sexual practices. So, too, have health concerns around sexually transmitted disease, including HIV/AIDS, the rise in nonmarital births among Euro-American and other women, and greater public awareness of pervasive patterns of domestic abuse and child sexual abuse. Moreover, by the mid-1960s, the marital family of two adults with dependent children, the post–World War II cultural icon, became no longer statistically normative.

Of particular significance has been the broad scientific study of sexuality, which has had a significant influence on modern discourse about sex and sexual diversity, in part through the exploration of sex differences between men and women; in part through the cataloguing of varieties of sexual orientations and practices, including homosexuality, bisexuality, transsexuality, and intersexuality; and in part through the promotion of sexual research, sexual health, and sexual therapy. In many respects religionists welcome such developments in the science of sexuality. The natural sciences, by authorizing the body and, in particular, sexuality as legitimate objects for investigation, intervention, and treatment, have encouraged the development of sexology and related disciplines and thereby expanded knowledge about, and public awareness of, a range of topics that might otherwise be shrouded in moralisms, secrecy, and shame.

Science has been particularly helpful in dispelling myths and correcting misinformation that have caused untold grief and suffering. It matters to individual and community health whether syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, are seen primarily as diseases or punishment for sin, whether masturbation is thought to cause insanity, whether women are regarded as insatiable in sexual desire, as merely passive, or as self-directing moral agents, and whether homosexuality is judged a pathological or benign variation. It is also important to recognize the limits of biomedical science as, for example, in its treatment of aggressive sex offenders (only modest results), its inability to redirect sexual orientation (not effective in the long term), and its uncertainty about the causes of sexual desire among humans, including heterosexual erotic attraction.

At the same time, the science of sexuality is not exempt from ideological distortion and therefore must be critically assessed. Scientific explorations of human sexuality are historically situated and therefore dependent on the intelligibility of reigning scientific paradigms that help organize complex data and create a plausibility structure of meaning and interpretation. Even a brief review of the history of sexology indicates that socially constructed paradigms about human sexuality are themselves subject to critique, emendation, and even replacement if a competing paradigm emerges that gains the loyalty of a critical mass of adherents.

With regard to the biology of sex, prior to the eighteenth century, the reigning paradigm about the human body held a one-sex view. Men and women were thought to share a common physique even as women's bodies were regarded as less developed versions of men's bodies.The vagina was observed to be an inverted penis, the two more similar than dissimilar in form and function. Subsequent to the eighteenth century, this paradigm was replaced by a modernist paradigm of the two-sex body, which emphasizes that men and women possess highly differentiated bodies and are, therefore, to be regarded as more dissimilar than similar to one another. The power of this schema on the social imagination is reflected in popular discourse that speaks of men and women as "opposites" though supposedly complementary in nature.[27]

This modernist paradigm is currently being called into question by biologists and medical researchers, as well as by feminist, queer, and other social theorists, for fostering a binary theory of sexual identity that posits two and only two sexes (male and female) and represents them as opposites. Sexual dimorphism assumes that biological sex, viewed essentially in terms of reproductive function, determines not only psychological identity (genderized identity of femininity or masculinity), but also a person's preferred social role and, importantly, object of sexual desire. This paradigm naturalizes reproductive heterosexuality and presumes that if human sexual development proceeds on track, then a "normal" adult person will be sexually attracted to an adult of the "opposite" sex. Paradoxically, this naturalized pattern of human sexual development is also regarded as precarious, especially for males. Because successful development of a functioning heterosexual male cannot be guaranteed (homosexuality is considered sexual deviance resulting from, or at least correlated with, gender confusion and nonconformity), medical science and psychological theories have sought to account for, and provide medical interventions in response to, perceived abnormalities, including nonheterosexual erotic attraction, transsexuality, and other gender-identity "disorders."

In contrast, a postmodern paradigm has emerged that emphasizes human sexuality as polymorphous, both more complex and more diversified than conventional categories allow. This alternative paradigm challenges the dichotomous gender assumptions at the core of the reigning paradigm and argues that the biological distinctions between male and female have been overdrawn, are matters of degree, not kind, and are not always clear-cut; that the various indicators (chromosomal, hormonal, anatomical, psychological, social) employed to differentiate sexual identity are sometimes ambiguous and, even when clear, do not necessarily cohere in a single developmental pattern; that social roles and erotic attractions are diverse and not predictable by sex/gender (psychology does not follow biology lock-step); and that the distinctions between normality and deviance (perversion) are cultural and moral judgments, not scientific.[28] Religious traditions, already under pressure to reconsider teachings about gender and sexual orientation, are being further challenged insofar as their foundational stories and moral codes presuppose a strict sexual dimorphism (Gen 1:27, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them") that can no longer be taken for granted as empirically accurate.[29]

■ Because social justice movements prod us to change our entrenched views

The second impetus for rethinking sexuality among progressive religionists is the global feminist and LBGTQ movements. Their advocacy on behalf of gender and sexual justice for persons of all colors has precipitated a shift toward a justice-centered theological approach that seeks not to control but rather to empower women and

men alike to live more freely in their bodies and more compassionately in their relationships and communities. *Religious feminists insist on mutuality between coequals as the normative relational expectation*. In doing so, they have sparked a quiet and not-so-quiet revolution in the bedroom and throughout the social order. What is shaking the foundations even further is a power shift as nonheterosexual people claim their right to be the subjects of their own lives. Fresh insight emerges as sexually minoritized people are no longer positioned as abstract objects of other people's discourse, but rather become self-defining subjects with whom to engage in dialogue.

From their vantage point, LBGTQ religionists argue that it is sexual injustice rather than sexual diversity that is dividing religious communities and causing enormous personal and societal suffering. One aspect of the challenge launched by survivors of sex/gender oppression is claiming an appropriate sense of pride by securing a positive sense of self-regard as nonheterosexual persons. Members of various faith communities have joined the Open and Affirming, Welcoming Congregation, More Light, and Reconciling Congregation movements to critique sexual exclusivism; challenge discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual difference, and family patterns; and affirm that same-gender loving persons can also model a fully human way to live and love as sexual-spiritual persons.

Progressive religionists seek to actualize three interrelated components of sexual justice: a strong affirmation of the goodness of sensuality and embodiment; a genuine honoring of sexual difference, including respect for sexual minorities; and attentiveness to both pleasure and pain, including the personal and political dimensions of sexual oppression and exploitation. A progressive Christian social ethic of sexuality aims not at controlling persons and inhibiting erotic power, but rather at empowering each person to claim the goodness of his or her own body and be equipped to understand and direct its use. At the same time, each person has a responsibility to respect the bodily integrity and self-direction of others. In sum, progressives argue that the central norm for intimate relationships is justice-love, understood as mutual respect, commitment, and care and a fair sharing of power, for gay and nongay, marital and nonmarital relationships alike.

In urging the development of a justice-centered discourse about sex and sexuality, progressive Christians make a wager that religious traditions remain open to renewal and their own transformation. Protestant theologian Robert McAfee Brown puts the matter succinctly: "A shift of perspective is not unfamiliar in Christian history; it is called conversion."[30] When such a shift takes place, its signs will likely include the following: increased candor about the tradition's complicity in sexual injustice; a readiness to embrace the body as a privileged site for encountering the sacred in the midst of everyday life; a determination to investigate how "sexism, heterosexism, racism, ethnocentrism, and classism [function] not as separate categories, but as a single unifying framework designed to privilege one group over all others"[31]; deepening respect for women's full moral standing and their empowerment in their families, faith communities, and social and economic institutions; a greater

willingness by men to be held accountable for sharing power equitably and engaging with women as allies and partners in leadership; and the lifting up of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons as exemplary models of living and loving humanly. A final, most welcome sign will be when the Christian and other religious traditions no longer fixate on the "sin of sex," but rather commit to challenging gender and sexual injustice, along with race and class oppression, as their fervent spiritual calling.

Becoming passionately engaged in this justice agenda for personal and social renewal gives us good reason to keep talking, as well as plenty to talk about.