

tion might far outweigh the benefits. So even if one cannot intrinsically justify heterosexism, a concern for the consequences of dismantling it may justify its retention. In this chapter we explore threats, imagined and real, generated by the invitation to treat homosexual and bisexual men and women as our sexual equals. By doing so we also point to the hidden costs of heterosexism. We conclude that none of the fears associated with reform justify heterosexism, while its costs clearly indicate the need to abolish it.

DISCERNING TRUE AND FALSE THREATS

A typical example of the kinds of fears linked with acceptance of homosexuality follows:

No society, even one with a healthy birthrate, can allow itself to indulge for long in the illusion that homosexual relationships are as valid, normal and natural as heterosexual relationships, or that they are an acceptable alternative to marriage.

... It would tend to undermine the family structure further ... so destabilizing society and weakening its ability to renew itself from generation to generation. It would encourage confusion of sexual identity among the young and those vulnerable for psychological and social reasons.¹

The perceived threats named here, although capable of inducing real fear, cannot withstand careful scrutiny: (1) undermining the family; (2) destabilizing society; (3) weakening procreativity; (4) confusing youth; and (5) preying on the vulnerable. They are imaginary consequences created by an unexamined heterosexist bias.

The professional literature produced by heterosexual as well as gay and lesbian scholars in recent decades has exposed the fallacies in such assertions.² It has also provided a wealth of new data that enriches dialogue about these issues (family, youth, procreation, etc.). Unfortunately the perceived threats persist, blocking both Church and society from a broader and fuller vision of human sexuality. They inhibit us from incorporating in Christian theology the good and fruitful insights of the human sciences. Although they are the consequence of heterosexism, these threats simultaneously serve to foster it.

Undermining the Family

The fear that social acceptance or support of gay and lesbian relationships will destroy the family rests on specific assumptions about what constitutes a human family. Most people recognize that such assumptions vary from culture to culture. Within a given culture, however, relatively stable patterns of human relationships enable us to discern how the people within it understand and structure family life.

The traditional definitions of a nuclear family (wife, husband, children) and an extended family (wife, husband, children, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc.), although still used, no longer describe adequately the breadth of contemporary North American cultural experience. Single-parent families, blended families, domestic partners, POSSLQs (the U.S. Census Bureau's acronym for "persons of the opposite sex sharing living quarters"), and multiple-family households indicate the rich variety of family structures that are both prevalent and widely accepted. Traditional versions of the nuclear family, where the father works outside the home and the mother does domestic chores and rears the children, constitute only 7-9 percent of all families currently and did not really emerge until the rise of modern industrial societies.

For many people this variety poses a problem because they believe it threatens the rearing of children, which they define as the primary task of family units. How will the next generation be affected by this bewildering array of family structures? Children need parents, at least a mother and a father—so the argument goes. Only in such an ideal setting can a child be exposed to the traditional models of gender identity necessary for healthy maturation. Recent efforts on the part of the gay community and its advocates to legalize at least some expressions of homosexuality are perceived as threats to this ideal. In his pastoral letter on homosexuality, San Francisco Archbishop John Quinn writes: "A normalization of homosexuality could too easily foster and make more public homosexual behavior with the result of eroding the meaning of family. Both from the religious point of view as well as for the good of society itself, marriage and the family are realities that must be protected." Such statements feed into our culture's deep-seated fears of gay people, at best give birth to legislative proposals like the Family Protection Act, and at worst provoke gay bashing.⁴

What is at stake in this debate? For heterosexuals three related issues lie behind the perceived threat to the family that gay and les-

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bian couples present: (1) the loving relationship of a child-free gay or lesbian couple challenges the notion that only the rearing of children can create a caring, loving, hospitable home; (2) the loving relationship of a gay or lesbian couple if successful in providing parenting challenges the already fragile role of father and mother for heterosexual couples; and (3) the loving relationship of a gay or lesbian couple challenges definitions of adequate parenting.

Evidence from heterosexual relationships helps to answer the first concern. A marriage without children challenges the notion that people can create a hospitable home only when the selfless love required by child rearing schools them in such love. Obviously, some child-free heterosexual couples are selfish and inhospitable. Similarly, child-free gay or lesbian couples can manifest a comparable mix of loving, hospitable households and self-centered, inhospitable ones. Nothing in the same-sex facets of the relationship guarantees success or failure in this regard, just as nothing in the heterosexual facets of male-female couples does. Given the present evidence of child abuse, to presume that the mere presence of children will school people in selfless love is both naive and dangerous.

The second, more subtle concern arises as part of the complex issue of gender roles and the diverse views about them in different ethnic communities. Because we are confused about what it means to be a father or mother in contemporary culture, the addition of gay and lesbian couples to this mix seems to heterosexuals to make a bad situation worse. The issue may be whether the present confusion is in fact bad. The experiences gay and lesbian parents provide may clarify rather than confuse the transitional state in which the family finds itself. We suggest that this new witness will challenge the fragility of the traditional, ideal roles of mothering and fathering, yes, but ultimately it will also enrich them.

The third concern of heterosexism is this: "Can two gay men or two lesbian women, committed to one another and to the nurturing of their family, rear children responsibly and healthily?" No evidence (1) suggests that they cannot be responsible, or (2) supports the view that children will become gay or lesbian simply because they have two homosexual men or women as parents. In spite of the lack of consensus regarding the exact causes of homosexuality or heterosexuality, we do know that there appears to be little correlation between the sexual orientations of nurturing parents and their children.

Heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual men and women are equally capable of being responsible participants in society. No sig-

nificant data exists to suggest that they cannot all be loving parents and loving members of families.⁵ On the other hand, it is equally true that all people are capable of destructive behaviors and unhealthy relationships. The family is not threatened by responsible sexual behavior that expresses authenticity and integrity. Gender identity does not depend on having two parents of different sexes. Gender confusion, whatever its causes or duration, may threaten stereotypical gender roles but does not threaten the development of family.

Even when the nuclear family of one father, one mother, and children constitutes the ideal norm in a culture, people recognize the adequacy and legitimacy of some alternatives. When a spouse dies, for example, many may lament the fact that the surviving spouse has been left alone with all the children. Yet no one questions the validity of the surviving spouse rearing those children. Whether the household consists of all men (a surviving father and sons) or all women (a surviving mother and daughters) or a mixture is irrelevant to the social acceptance of a different, but legitimate alternative for what it now means to be a family. Of course a nagging concern to some people is whether the children will "turn out as good" as they might have if both parents were living. In other words, the "alternativeness" of all this tragic reality simply indicates how it compromises the ideal. The mere fact of this secondary character, therefore, reinforces heterosexist bias about the similarly less than ideal character of same-sex parent families.

The variety of family settings that nurture children and the sometimes unpredictable results—well-adjusted children coming from "broken" homes, incorrigible children coming from stable and loving environments—make us aware of the difficulty raised by the facile assumption that any single pattern suffices for nurturing children. We agree that people must make *informed* judgments about what constitutes healthy or even ideal environments. The heterosexist, however, must defend the bias that says only a man and a woman united as husband and wife can properly rear children. They must also not conclude on the basis of admittedly disturbing data about the negative impact of broken homes on children, that differently constituted families will result in similarly negative consequences for children.

Even if the environment profoundly influences the social construction of one's sexual identity, "becoming gay or lesbian" is a problem only in a heterosexist culture that denies the validity or normalcy of homosexual identity. Only when people view homosexual-

ity as a defect or something that needs to be fixed does one get concerned about a person's gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity. Throughout this book we argue that such a view is unnecessary and unhelpful.

We have the common task, of course, of shaping a society that honors all its members and encourages and nurtures relationships that foster such honoring. When we set ourselves to this task in our personal day-to-day living we build up the community. This is not pious, wishful thinking, but rather the commonsense recognition present in even the simplest observation of how life works.

We find irony in the accusation that accepting or nurturing homosexuality would undermine the family, because heterosexism and homophobia already undermine the family. Many bisexual and homosexual children fail to develop close ties with their parents or siblings because they fear rejection. How can we measure the cost of the pain and alienation that result from parents ostracizing their own children when they find out that they have a gay son or lesbian daughter? How can we measure the cost of marriages between men and women entered into for the sake of protecting one's gay or lesbian identity? Our sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters, our aunts and uncles and cousins become the gay and lesbian outcasts. Heterosexism destroys families.

Destabilizing Society

Practically all political philosophies, except perhaps libertarianism, concede that a society must exercise some control over some of the impulses and inclinations of its individual members for the sake of the common good. If the benefits of such controls outweigh the harms that accompany them, they are usually justified. If homosexual and bisexual relations undermine the values crucial to the welfare of society they might justly be suppressed. In other words, if one could demonstrate that homosexuality destabilizes society (as might be said of chemical dependency), heterosexism would find significant support in this supposed consequence. Although such a charge is frequently made, little substantial evidence is ever mounted to support it.

The charge is rooted in two interrelated fears. First, if pluriform family structures were adopted the larger society would be threatened. This view perceives only one form of the basic family or household unit as adequately providing a foundation for building

broader social structures. Second, gender confusion will undermine the capacity of men and women to function. Although many critics are quick to point to contemporary social ills as a consequence of the breakdown of the nuclear, especially traditional, family, there is no compelling evidence to sustain the forging of such links. One can just as easily muster evidence that urbanization, industrialization, capitalism, mass media, or some combination of these have produced the social ills that beset us.

In this view gender roles are often, though not necessarily, restrictive. Only men, for example, should be construction workers. Only women should be nurses. Violating the expected gender roles contributes to an unstable society by rendering people incapable of predictable behaviors. We acknowledge that changing gender roles creates a feeling of instability and that gay and lesbian relations challenge gender stereotypes. All transitions render life momentarily unstable; all social reform movements are in that sense destabilizing. The gradual dismantling of sexism and racism provides ample evidence of this.

It takes time to break down stereotypes and integrate new ways of thinking and acting within a culture, but reformers believe these changes will strengthen social order. Analogously, when a new member enters a family it takes time for the patterns of relationship to change sufficiently to incorporate the person fully. We know the difficulties such integration presents on the small scale of family life in a single household, but we judge the process to be one of growth not decay. When the tasks involve many people and whole societies the complexity seems overwhelming.

Heterosexism, like racism and sexism, creates deep resentments and frustrations that eventually erupt with destructive destabilizing consequences. Even apart from such critical moments of violent outburst, the energy required to keep sexuality inappropriately repressed and render gay and lesbian people invisible tears the fabric of communities. The dishonesty, secretiveness, manipulation, hatred, and ostracism fostered by heterosexism undermine the development of healthy social interaction. Most important, they hinder the ability of people—heterosexuals, bisexuals, and homosexuals alike—to address together the questions of how to develop sexual behaviors that honor and respect each person's sexual identity while contributing to the well-being of the larger society.

One can draw from a variety of intriguing historical examples to make the case that society is stabilized by the full participation of members who are considered a threat at one level, yet are needed at

another. In World War II Americans experienced women expanding traditional gender roles to work in positions abandoned by men who had gone to war. "Rosie the Riveter" became a symbol of women's ability to function fully and well in roles that had formerly been assumed to be for men only. Unfortunately, when the war ended and men returned looking for their old jobs, women were again relegated to restricted participation in the workplace.

Such instances in our own history make clear how flexible and productive we can be when we allow ourselves to step outside the prejudices that bind us. Homosexual men and women are already contributors to the stability of society insofar as they are our companions in the workplace, in the arts, in all fields of endeavor. They may be closeted. We may close our eyes to their presence. But they are clearly there as faithful, steady workers and friends. Without them our culture would be diminished and our social structures less stable.

Opening the doors to their closets has the potential to strengthen the commitments and the participation of gay and lesbian people in our culture. The energy presently expended to protect a secret identity would be more usefully and positively invested in using the gifts they, like every heterosexual person, possess. Again, the analogy with racism and sexism is apparent. Some people feel threatened by the possibility that women or people of color will claim a full and equal place in the world. When the blinders of our prejudices are removed, we see instead that the lives of all can be enriched by the unhindered exercise of such freedom (see chapter 7 for a more detailed discussion of issues related to sexual authenticity).

Weakening Procreativity

It is difficult to give any credence to this perceived threat. Heterosexuals argue that if the union of gay and lesbian couples is legitimated, heterosexual mating will decrease. To fail to provide heirs and perpetuate the race is to betray the whole social system. In her novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood rightly surmises that in a strictly patriarchal world homosexuals would be criminals whose insult to their gender roles and the holy purposes of sexual differentiation warrants death.

If people are allowed, even encouraged to fall in love with members of the same sex, no one will want to have children. Such reasoning presumes that childbearing and child rearing are onerous duties.

Additionally it presumes that the heterosexual population would either (1) cease having sexual interest in each other or (2) cease the desire to procreate because same-sex partnerships were nurtured. This assumes that a heterosexual person's orientation can be changed and that interest in procreation is incompatible with same-sex relationships.

We live in a time when the birthrate of almost all nations and ethnic groups is unhealthy, so that our modern problem is overpopulation not the threat of extinction of the species. We need to take seriously such historical and cultural circumstances. If we lived in a time and place where the birthrate was dangerously low, we might indeed have moral grounds for encouraging procreation. Even then it is doubtful that prohibiting homosexual relationships would need to be the means for such encouragement. If the entire population were homosexual in orientation and behavior, nothing would prohibit men and women from producing children through new reproductive technologies. It truly stretches the imagination to the breaking point to propose that the abolition of heterosexism might endanger the survival of the species.

Confusing Youth

Some assume that because homosexual people cannot have children they will recruit children to become homosexual. In addition, children will be confused about whether they are or ought to be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual if they are aware of these options through positive role models. We have already discussed the fallacious reasoning regarding sexual orientation that lies behind such views. But there is more to the issue. As one writer put it, "it is inescapable: sanctioning homosexual lifestyles will affect the way the young perceive adult society, and it will have an effect on the kind of people they grow up to be."⁶ The irony of this comment is that, taken out of its heterosexist context, it is both accurate and helpful.

Sanctioning homosexual lifestyles will indeed reveal something about adult society. Like sanctioning integration or sanctioning the full participation of women in society, it will reveal that we are capable of recognizing and overcoming prejudices that rob us of much of the richness of life. The young will perceive that their culture need not be heterosexist. They will perceive that responsible sexual behavior is determined by love, justice, and commitment not by prohibition and control.

The effect it will have on the kind of people they grow up to be can be profound indeed. They may be less prejudiced than those who have gone before them. Perhaps they will abandon bigotry. They may grow up to be people who know how to celebrate and not simply tolerate diversity. They may even see more clearly than their parents that sexuality, love, friendship, and marriage are good gifts of God that cannot be reduced to commands.

Because there is no agreed upon etiology for either homosexuality or heterosexuality, we must take seriously this concern about creating confusion in the formation of sexual identity. To take it seriously, however, means acknowledging the inevitable sexual ambiguity that occurs for every adolescent human being. Only in a heterosexist context does it mean hiding from the reality of same-sex affections and from the possibility of a homosexual identity.

Another of the uncounted costs of heterosexism is that gay and lesbian adults are inhibited (and sometimes prohibited) from being healthy role models and counselors for gay youth. Openly gay and lesbian schoolteachers are almost always fired from their jobs. Gays and lesbians are not trusted to lead youth groups or provide support to young people for fear that they will influence the young to become gay.

The loss for Church and society is tragic. Talented, creative people who are gay cannot exercise their gifts to build up the community exactly where the community needs them most. In some respects gay and lesbian people no longer need the Church. It has, after all, continuously condemned and rejected them; and who needs that? The real issue is that the Church truly needs them. Perhaps no one needs them more than youth who are struggling to discover their sexual identity. Healthy sexuality is nourished by honest answers to honest questions about what it means to be sexual human beings.

Preying on the Vulnerable

Children are at the heart of this fear as well. They are among the most vulnerable in any society. The potential abuse of children poses a significant threat in any community. In this case those who would oppose abolishing heterosexism charge that advocacy for the gay community will lead inevitably to a slippery slope on which no case could be made against pedophilia. Some describe reformers as having no way to advocate reform when confronted with the exis-

tence of sexual abuse of children. "One wonders how those calling us to be more receptive to homoeroticism would explain the church is not to be inclusive of 'boy love'?" Neither logical nor factual grounds can justify this outrageous claim.

Logically, the affirmation of the goodness of heterosexuality does not entail the approval of *all* forms of heterosexual behavior. Likewise, the affirmation of the goodness of homosexuality does not entail the approval of all forms of homosexual behavior. Experientially, all of the evidence points to the fact that most sexual abuse of children is perpetrated by heterosexual men. Being a gay adult male, just like being a heterosexual adult male, does not mean that one is a pedophile. They are completely separate issues.

To be oriented primarily to a member of the same sex or to a member of the other sex has nothing to do with how one responds to children.* "Pederasts (men who are erotically attracted to young boys) are not necessarily exclusively or primarily homosexual. . . . Sometimes they are just as sexually attracted to young girls, and thus might more accurately be termed pedophiliacs (adults who desire children)." Heterosexism does little to protect children. Indeed by mistargeting much of our concern about the dangers of sexual misconduct onto the just, faithful, and loving unions of gay men and lesbians, it leaves our children more vulnerable to all those who would prey on them.

All societies must be concerned for those in their midst who are vulnerable. Clearly children will be numbered among those who are not strong enough to protect themselves. Making homosexuality an open and public reality may help to highlight the concern, but it will not solve the problem. After all, heterosexuality is open and public, yet that fact alone does not protect children from abuse at the hands of heterosexual men and women. What will protect our children is open and healthy understanding and discussion of human sexuality in all its facets.

Sexism

Dismantling heterosexism does pose a real threat to some of the inherited ways in which we have treated matters of sexual ethics and accepted uncritically the biases of a heterocentric culture. We believe that what is threatened in this regard ought to be threatened. We should not shrink from naming evil as evil. For example, challenging heterosexism will include continuing the battle against sexism.

To my knowledge only once in my life was I ever labeled *lesbian*. My undergraduate roommate was dating a law student. They had a rocky, stormy relationship, and she had decided not to see him anymore. Her decision stemmed in part from the pressure he was putting on her to engage in genital activity.

When his phone call came, I was surprised. He asked me to go for a cup of coffee. Once settled in he began to inquire about my affection for and friendship with Kim. He pursued this line of questioning and I finally realized that he thought there was something wrong. To be truthful, I thought he was accusing me of betraying or being disloyal to her. Of course that was not his point. Finally he simply blurted out: "even though you are lesbian, if you really cared for Kimberly, you would let her go." I was absolutely stunned. Speechless, I left and walked back to the dorm.

I was quite settled with my sexual identity. I did indeed love Kim as I had loved no other, but I had no erotic desires for her. I decided to ask Kim what she thought was going on with him. I can still hear her laughing. His line of "reasoning" was clear: women who identify with each other and who are sexually noncompliant with men must be lesbian. Who else would so challenge the male role?

Suzanne Pharr reports that labeling "noncompliant" women *lesbians* is a common ploy in our society.¹⁰ This baiting is designed to keep under control women who are resistant to male dominance. Battered women, she explains, talk frequently about how they are called *lesbians* by those who beat them. She sees this as interconnected with charges made by a constellation of conservative organizations against the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. These groups accused the coalition of being "prolesbian" and "antifamily."

Such labeling tactics are designed to hold women in line and to isolate and alienate them from one another. Fear of such a designation is one of the several factors that contributes to male domination. This same fear also buries information about alternatives to patriarchal relations. It hides the stories of women who have not collaborated with patriarchy. Lesbians have rejected the dependence on men ascribed to them by patriarchy. Patriarchy demands that history of their independent survival be erased and that lesbians be driven underground.¹¹

Lesbians do threaten social orders built on male dominance and control. But the prospect of a man forfeiting his proper place in the pattern most terrifies heterosexuals. According to Pharr's analysis,

gay men are perceived as breaking rank and therefore endangering the fabric as a whole. Because their refusal to be "men" (as defined by patriarchy) threatens to unravel the whole system, they are attacked with a vengeance.

The sexist slant to heterosexism is not new. Women counted for so little that even their "sexual sins" were not worth attention; hence the lack of concern for lesbianism in history. Rosemary Haughton comments on this phenomenon with a touch of sarcasm: "Moralists (male, of course) were divided on whether sexual relations between women were even possible; they argued learnedly about whether sexual "sin" between women could occur, given that the poor things lacked the essential appendage for intercourse (as they understood it) to take place."¹²

In turn heterosexism reinforces sexism in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most pervasive is in role expectations. Dismantling heterosexism poses a threat to gender stereotyped roles in marriage, family, and society. The following comment by one of the partners in a lesbian marriage highlights the issue: "Treating T.R. and me as 'husband and wife' is not helpful. Those roles are archaic and we reject them completely. We are equal partners of the same sex. We are two people who together are one new thing. We are not the roles of husband and wife and do not wish to be treated as such. When a waitress hands me the check because I'm more butch ('the husband') I hand it to T.R. because she pays the bills and earns the money at the moment." New patterns of partnership developed in same-sex relationships will inevitably influence how heterosexual partners see themselves. Different models for shared responsibility and equality can enhance both. The influence will not be unidirectional.

Our tendency to be rigid in our interpretations of roles will be challenged in general. An interesting example from our media-conscious culture of this tendency to fix our images in one form was the initial reaction to the TV series, "Star Trek: The Next Generation." In interviews and public appearances the new stars were asked repeatedly, "Which one are you? Which of the original show's characters are you?" After the new series had established its own integrity and demonstrated the vitality of its new roles, the questions stopped. The characters were allowed to be themselves.

Our heterosexist success in rendering same-sex couples culturally invisible hinders the ability of gays and lesbians to demonstrate publicly the integrity and vitality of their lives. What are heterosexuals afraid will be uncovered? They fear losing the traditional, and therefore controllable, roles of husband and wife. The gender defin-

ition of those roles in marriage has already undergone significant revision and many are reluctant to see them challenged further.

The theory of gender complementarity is threatened when we assert that sexual identity can find fulfillment or completion with persons of the same sex just as well as with persons of the other sex. Male-female complementarity, as if two unfinished halves must come together to create a genuine whole, is not the source of the human desire to be in relationship. The fact that two people in relationship are women does not diminish the reality of their being two different women. They can complement each other as well as a man and a woman can.

What is worth preserving in the concept of complementarity is more than the notion of a "fit" based on the *differences* between persons. It is a fit based on common abilities and similarities as well. The abolition of heterosexism challenges understandings like this one expressed by Gilbert Meilaender: "Homosexual acts are forbidden precisely because lover and beloved are, biologically, not sufficiently other. The relation approaches too closely the forbidden love of self."¹³ We need not pit love and self-love against each other. To view them as part of each other is especially healthy for women in patriarchal societies in which many women may come to love for self only by identifying with women who love other women.

The subordination and abuse of women provides the clearest example of heterosexism's link with sexism. The most virulent attacks on homosexual men historically have been justified by the argument that those who act like women (that is, the male partner who is "passive") are relegated to the same inferior status that women hold and therefore can be treated (abusively) like women. Such links among power, subordination, domination, and sexuality are strong and complex but not unbreakable. When sexual expression is freed from efforts to control another person it can serve the mutuality of human relationship. Sexual intimacy alone does not create relationships. As a function of the desire for human bonding it is not an end in itself.¹⁴

In North American culture, however, in both gay and straight communities the objectification of sexual intimacy constantly reinforces seeing and using it as an end in itself. The destructive consequences of this become evident in the near epidemic abuse of women and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, to name the most obvious. Although heterocentrism and its link with patriarchy are not alone responsible for such dilemmas, we believe that an unreformed heterosexist world-view has not been capable of addressing

such concerns. The fundamental reason for this is its inability to take diversity and mutuality seriously.

Because sexism and heterosexism are so intimately linked we cannot dismantle one without attention to dismantling the other. Feminists and gay rights activists have not always been willing to recognize and act on this common concern.¹⁵ It is not helpful to suggest that heterosexism is a mere consequence of sexism or vice versa. Each demands our full attention. Such attention must include exploring, for example, the connections among dualism, hierarchy, individualism, violence, and exploitation. This kind of multifaceted analysis is crucial because the context of the prevailing heterosexist paradigm helps to weave an interlocking web among them. This interweaving strengthens each beyond its power alone to distort human sexuality. The task of reform is formidable and has barely begun.