

Meaning and Demeaning, Values and Devaluation: Thinking Sociologically about Christian Sexism and Heterosexism

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I began my book *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church* (Udis-Kessler 2008) with the following words:

“As social institutions go, religion may be the one that contributes both the greatest good and the greatest harm to the world. At its best, religion provides community, meaning and support to people in times of celebration and trouble, and it offers people a means of ordering their lives. Religious values and beliefs can enable people to take risks on behalf of healing the world, and can even provide the impetus for wanting to heal the world in the first place. In short, religion can be a source of great abundance, both for individuals and society. At its worst, however, religion can create insular communities that shut people out. Religion can be built on meaning systems that devalue some people, whether heathens or homosexuals, leading to dehumanization and violence. The support that religion offers can require problematic levels of commitment that force practitioners to choose between the religious organization and the “outside world.” In enabling people to order their lives, religion can mandate that believers set aside reason and reflection on their own experiences in making value judgments and choosing courses of action. Religious values and beliefs can lead people to hate and kill each other, and to be willing to destroy the world. In short, religion can be a source of great injury, both for individuals and society.”

More than a decade later, these words still ring true, especially in considering the role of US Evangelical Christians in supporting white supremacy, rejecting both democracy and empirical reality, and refusing the truths and healing possibilities of science and medicine during a brutal pandemic. At the same time, progressive religious and interfaith communities and organizations are carrying out valuable work against white supremacy and for women’s reproductive health, and some of the more interesting critiques of late-stage capitalism are emerging from anarchist and socialist Christian individuals and communities. There is harm, and there is hope.

In this essay, written for your class, I (1) introduce some key aspects of the sociology of religion, (2) describe gender and sexuality as systems of power that produce inequality across levels of society and over time, (3) introduce the concepts of moral exclusion and symbolization, (4) briefly introduce the cultural element of Christian sexism and heterosexism, and (5), mention two concrete outcomes of Christian sexism and heterosexism: first, the relationship between purity culture and rape culture, and second, the presence of religious exemptions that allow people not to provide services to LGBT people. Where possible, I have relied on recent data and analysis, but I do draw on some older sources based on my sociology doctoral research, which took place from 1998 to 2001.

The Sociology of Religion

We can think of sociology as the study of social patterns and the way those patterns play out in our lives, or as the study of the connections between people, perspectives, and practices. How we see the world informs how we act in the world; the opportunities available to us are based substantially on what other people think of us. Sociology's passion and genius is in teasing apart the strands of our lives to better understand what our various "ideologies, institutions, interests, identities, and interactions" (Hughey 2015) have to do with each other, how they make us who we are, and what we would need to do to change them in order to build a society where everyone has a genuine chance to flourish. The point of studying social inequality, after all, is to figure out how to get rid of it.

The sociology of religion takes this approach and applies it to the many ways in which (1) people practice religion, individually and communally, (2) religion shapes people, (3) religion intersects with other social institutions, and (4) religion reproduces or works against forms of systematic inequality, using all the methodological tools of sociology to study these topics.

When focused on individuals, sociologists of religion study religious beliefs, values and ethics, rituals, life practices and choices, and interpersonal relationships. At a communal or organizational level, sociologists of religion study congregational or group worship, the organization of congregations, denominations, and other religious bodies, and how those groups persist and change over time. In studying how religion shapes people, sociologists seek to understand religion as a cultural form or meaning-making system in which "...religious communities, beliefs, and practices provide traditions, narratives, ideas, symbols and metaphors that are used as cultural tools for understanding and interacting with the broader social world" (Tranby and Zulkowski 2012: 872). As a large-scale social institution comprised of many individual organizations, religion intersects not only with individual lives and cultural messages but also with all other large-scale social institutions: the family, education, the law, the economy, the government, workplaces and industry, healthcare and medicine, the media, the arts, and others. Finally, some sociologists of religion are interested in specific ways that religion either reproduces or challenges systematic inequality; for example, the remainder of this document focuses on some ways that Evangelical and conservative Christianity contribute to and maintain sexism and heterosexism.

Gender and Sexuality as Systems of Power

The general education learning outcome for Equity and Power-designated courses such as this reads,

"Explain how systems of power (such as white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, ableism, classism, capitalism, or colonialism) produce forms of inequality related to race, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, class, or nation, etc."

In this section of the essay, I provide a way of thinking about "systems of power" and indicate how they produce inequality at individual, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels, as well as how they reproduce inequality over time. Given today's topic, I focus on sexism and

heterosexism, or what the above learning outcome refers to as “heteropatriarchy.” As this term suggests, sexism and heterosexism are deeply interconnected.

We can think of power in two, related ways: as capacity (the power *to* do something) and as authority (power *over* someone else). Capacity and authority are related because (a) authority is a kind of capacity, the capacity to impact other people, and (b) authority can be used to either enable or constrain capacity, to provide resources (or experiences or opportunities) or take them away. When we have power, either over our own lives or over other people’s lives, our options are expanded; when other people have authority over us, their options about how to treat us are expanded. They may choose to treat us well or badly, to grant us access or withhold access, to leave us alone or make our lives harder.

A system of power, such as heteropatriarchy, is primarily driven by how authority (the power of some people over other people) works to limit or enable the capacity of the people who are not in authority. Authority can take various forms; some people maintain power over others through violence, for example (a common and important component of both sexism and heterosexism), but in a discussion of religion we are focused on socially legitimated, institutionalized authority and on cultural authority.

The main kind of institutionalized authority is decision-making authority. Having decision-making authority means being granted the capacity to make decisions about other people’s lives that will enhance or limit the well-being of those people. Those with decision-making authority have the discretion to share or withhold social, cultural, political, and/or economic resources from others. They have the discretion to restrict, punish, or scapegoat people or to choose not to restrict, punish, or scapegoat them. When someone with decision-making authority uses that authority to welcome someone else or to reject them, to benefit them or harm them, the impact of this authority can have a powerful impact on the other person’s life, for good or ill. (In the case of racism in the criminal justice system, for example, police authority has legitimated the killing of many people from BIPOC communities, often in situations where the police officer was not in danger.)

It’s extremely important to understand that society largely accepts the decisions authorized people make as appropriate because they are (or are seen as) acting on behalf of the organizations or institutions they represent. If Ed says that women are not acceptable as pastors in God’s eyes and Ed is just a guy who lives on my street, I might be skeptical (to say the least); if Ed is Ed Litton, current President of the Southern Baptist Convention, and I am a Southern Baptist, I don’t hear the claim as coming from an individual; I hear it as coming from my church, which I understand to have a legitimate claim about the truth in these matters. If Ed is Ed Litton and I am not a Southern Baptist, I might not agree with the Southern Baptist perspective on women pastors but I probably would have to acknowledge that the Southern Baptists have a right to hold whatever position on the issue they find to be true.

This example leads to the second kind of authority, cultural authority. Cultural authority is the socially legitimated authority to say what (and who) is good or bad, what (and who) is right or wrong, and what can (or cannot) and should (or should not) be done – and to have other people take those opinions seriously. Everyone has an opinion about who or what is good or bad, of

course, but when someone without cultural authority has an opinion, it is just that: their own opinion. They cannot necessarily make other people agree with it. In contrast, when someone with cultural authority has an opinion, they also have the capacity to make other people take their opinion seriously, to take it on themselves and to act on it. We could also call this kind of power moral authority; I prefer “cultural authority” because it can cover topics outside of morality.

As my example above suggests, cultural authority and decision-making authority can be tightly interwoven. The actual decisions made by those with decision-making authority often rest on the already-existing perspectives and values of those with cultural authority. The fact that the President of the Southern Baptist Convention can say that women should not be ordained as clergy, as a matter of his decision-making authority, would be meaningless if the Convention had not already been influenced to believe that, in fact, God has stated that only men should be clergy. If I have been influenced to believe certain things proclaimed by someone with cultural authority, I am more likely to support decisions made by those with decision-making authority when those decisions are based on the same beliefs and values.

Because religion as an institution is built so centrally around meaning-making, it can be an exceptionally powerful arena for those with cultural authority and it can provide seamless, internally consistent justifications for how those with decision-making authority act in light of cultural values.

To describe heteropatriarchy as a system of power (or sexism and heterosexism as systems of power) is to make the following claims:

- Decision-making and cultural authority is exclusively or overwhelmingly in the hands of members of certain groups (men, heterosexuals, cisgender people).
- Those with decision-making and cultural authority use that authority to produce and reproduce inequality through the production and reproduction of ideas, values, norms, materials, rules, practices, and resource distribution that benefit their groups while penalizing women, lesbian/gay/bisexual people and those of other non-heterosexual sexualities, and trans/nonbinary/genderqueer people (to whom I refer below as “trans+ people”).
- One effect of ideas, values, norms, materials, rules, practices, and resource distributions that benefit men, heterosexuals, and cisgender people is to naturalize and normalize the inequality – to justify it, to make it unquestionable, to make it seem like “just how things are.”
- Another effect is to enable men, heterosexuals, and cisgender people to hoard valued resources, opportunities and experiences for themselves, which (among other things) enables them to maintain their decision-making and cultural authority over time and across different places. For example, the 2018-2019 National Congregations Survey found that 86.5% of religious leaders in the congregations surveyed were male, hardly any change from the 1998 figure of 89.4% (Association of Religion Data Archives 2022)
- The decisions and cultural values of men, heterosexuals, and cisgender people produce inequality at individual, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels; the multiple levels at which the inequality is produced interact with each other and strengthen both the cultural justifications for inequality and the decisions made to maintain it.
- The decisions and cultural values of men, heterosexuals, and cisgender people also reproduce inequality over time in three ways. First, every cultural claim or formal decision that continues heteropatriarchal patterns reinforces the beliefs, rules, and apparent naturalness of

the inequality. Second, each instance of reproduction further empowers men, heterosexual people, and cisgender people while further disempowering women, LGB+ people and trans+ people. Third, there is a certain accretion of weight and inertia that goes with taken-for-granted values and practices, and particularly in complex or challenging times, it can simply be easier to go with what one already “knows” or how things already are.

How exactly does heteropatriarchy produce gender and sexuality inequality? My doctoral research on the struggle over LGBT inclusion in the United Methodist Church (UMC) offers a productive example. The UMC is only formally gathered as an institution once every four years during its General Conference, when delegates vote on keeping or changing the rules in the denominational rulebook, known as the Book of Discipline. In 1972, in response to the new visibility of the lesbian and gay liberation movement, delegates at General Conference added language to the Book of Discipline stating that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” This act on the part of decision-making authorities, based on the values of cultural authorities, formally delegitimized homosexuality in the UMC.

Once that language was in place, and in response to changing circumstances in society, it became easy for later delegates to build on it, reinforcing both heterosexist values and heterosexist outcomes in practical terms. For example, delegates at a later General Conference added language forbidding lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals in same-sex relationships from being ordained as pastors (and defrocking them if they were “caught” in such a relationship or chose to come out). The specific language reads, “Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers or appointed to serve in the United Methodist Church.” The values and authority of those benefiting from heterosexism enabled them to define homosexuality as un-Christian and to make that definition “stick” legally for the denomination; that definition, once on the books, justified unequal treatment of LGB individuals wishing to become or remain pastors. (Additional later restrictions forbid UMC pastors from marrying same-sex couples and forbid the UMC as a whole from funding church organizations that “supported” homosexuality or LGBT people.)

One last detail is important. About 2000 delegates gathered for each General Conference, half of whom were clergy and half of whom were laity (non-clergy). Because openly LGB people were not permitted to be pastors, fully half of the voting delegates were, by definition (if not always completely in practice) heterosexual. There were always some inclusion-minded, anti-heterosexist delegates (of all sexualities; lay delegates from some parts of the US were LGB), but the rule against LGB clergy meant that UMC clergy who were themselves LGB either had to hide that identity or risk being defrocked and removed from their positions (positions which were not merely jobs but which they had often come to out of a sense of a calling from God). This meant that LGB clergy who managed to become delegates could not speak their own personal truth freely during debates over changing the rules. They were not at liberty to say how their sexual identity made them better Christians (or better clergy). They were not allowed to be experts on their own lives, to be witnesses to their own moral integrity. Their stories, which theoretically could have led some other delegates to vote to remove the prohibition and negative language, were literally untellable because of the rules already in place, which made it easier to keep centrist and conservative delegates from feeling any need to remove the prohibitions.

Moral Exclusion and Symbolization

This example also demonstrates the power of what Opatow (1990) refers to as “moral exclusion.” According to Opatow (1990: 1),

“Moral exclusion occurs when individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply. Those who are morally excluded are perceived as nonentities, expendable, or undeserving. Consequently, harming or exploiting them appears to be appropriate, acceptable, or just.”

Opatow (1990: 10-11) identifies a variety of processes used in cases of moral exclusion, including denigrating the excluded group, evaluating them in biased ways, dehumanizing them, fearing that contact with them will be contaminating, approving of destructive behavior toward them (or redefining moral standards so that harm to the group is morally acceptable), and blaming members of the group for bad things that happen to them. I saw many of these processes at work during my dissertation research. Clearly, the idea that homosexuality was “incompatible” with Christian teaching justified not just formally excluding lesbians and gay men from aspects of church life but also referring to them in cruel, dehumanizing ways (as “fruits,” as “disgusting,” with the implication that their sexuality was Satanic).

One form of dehumanization, which I saw frequently in my research, was symbolization, in which a despised group of people stand for negative values. During my research, I learned that conservative Methodists understood homosexuality to stand for (among other things),

- “The world” (as opposed to the church),
- Selfish individualism (as opposed to Christian community),
- Radical leftist politics and activism (as opposed to religion),
- Faithlessness (as opposed to faith),
- Idolatry (as opposed to commitment to God’s plan for humanity),
- Carnality/the body/the flesh/sex (as opposed to the Spirit),
- Darkness (as opposed to light, and yes, that’s racism at work),
- Sinfulness/fallenness/corruption (as opposed to purity/holiness/perfection),
- Low or no moral standards (as opposed to high moral standards),
- Gender breakdown (as opposed to God’s gendered order), and
- Chaos/relativism/a loss of boundaries (as opposed to order and boundaries).

In these ways, conservative Christians found homosexuality to be a threat to Christianity and, to some extent, to the social order more broadly. A Methodist sociologist (Wood 2000: 21), reporting on the conservative perspective during the time I carried out my research, quoted a conservative as saying, “When the authority of Scripture is no longer our starting point, anything can become acceptable – even the practice of homosexuality.” Another sociologist (Moon 2004) studying the LGBT inclusion struggle in two United Methodist congregations at around the same time, found that homosexuality symbolized the sexual, the physical, the embodied, the tainted, and the profane to those churchgoers opposed to it. This sociologist (Moon 2004: 165) observed that, “insofar as members’ mental pictures of homosexuality were drawn in stark opposition to everything they saw as righteous and spiritual, some gay and lesbian members found themselves struggling to show that they were not the living embodiments of sin.”

Cultural Elements of Christian Sexism and Heterosexism

“Conservative Christians generally believe men and women are fundamentally different from one another, naturally endowed with diverse drives, desires, and capabilities, and therefore suited to different social roles as part of God’s grand plan. Part of this complementarian conviction includes the belief that men are particularly suited for leadership whereas women are designed to serve as helpers...The two genders complement each other because they are fundamentally different. In the evangelical Protestant view, God had a practical purpose in making men and women diverse, with women intended to be supporters for their spouses, as well as [for] men more generally...Thus, complementary gender roles are necessary for the proper functioning of the family, the church, and society at large.” (Homan and Burdette (2021: 237-238)

“The concept of heteronormativity highlights the alignment of gender roles, gender identity and sexual identity...The heteronormative orientation assumes that men and women are distinct, complementary genders with fixed, natural roles and that heterosexuality is the normal and moral sexual orientation.” (Tranby and Zulkowski 2012: 878).

Complementarianism, as described in the above two quotes, is at the heart of Christian sexism; heteronormativity, as described in the second quote, is at the heart of Christian heterosexism. Complementarianism makes women subservient to men and requires women to be submissive to men, who are the “head of household.” A number of Biblical passages, captured in your reading “Sexism and Heterosexism in the Bible,” appear to justify complementarianism.

Haddad (2018) identifies the following Biblical arguments underlying complementarianism:

- Jesus was male, and his maleness was essential to his mission as Messiah.
- Scripture reveals God as Father and not as mother. This validates the centering of male language and experience when imaging God and people.
- There are many more male leaders in Scripture than female.
- Man is called “head” (interpreted as authority) over woman; men are God’s appointed leaders.
- Adam was created first (Genesis 2:7). Man must be “first” in all ways.
- God created woman as man’s “helper” or subordinate (Genesis 2:18). Woman was created from man and for him.
- Woman was the first to be deceived and disobey God. Women are more prone to deception and evil, so women need men to lead them.
- Punished for disobeying God, women will desire men who rule over them (Genesis 3:16). Male rule is therefore God’s justice.

Similarly, heteronormativity is built on the normalcy and morality of heterosexuality and the abnormality and immorality of homosexuality. Thus, despite growing up secular, I received the following, very clear messages about what Christians believed about homosexuality:

- God hates lesbian and gay people (bisexuals don’t exist)
- Homosexuality is a sin – not only a sin but the absolute worst sin
- LGBT people are an “abomination”
- Christians “love the sinner but hate the sin”
- “God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve”

- Homosexuals are going to hell and will suffer eternal misery
- It's not possible to be Christian and homosexual
- God can make gay people straight if they pray hard enough and repress their attractions

Messages such as these, especially when internalized by children and young adults, can cause tremendous psychological harm and alienation. It is not surprising that recent research (Green et al 2020) found that LGBT young adults (21-25 years old) who had undergone attempted sexual orientation or gender identity “conversion therapy” efforts were more than twice as likely as LGBT young adults who had not undergone conversion therapy to report having attempted suicide at least once, and to report having made multiple suicide attempts.

Purity Culture and Religious Exemptions: Christian Sexism and Heterosexism Today

Christian sexism and heterosexism harm women and LGBTQ+ people within Evangelical Christianity; they can also have effects in the broader world. In this section, I provide one example of each situation, beginning with the connection between Evangelical Christian “purity culture” ideas and violence against women, and continuing with current information about the states that legally permit certain decision makers to refuse service to LGBTQ+ people and their families on religious grounds.

In recent decades, Evangelical Christianity has developed ideas and practices related to “purity culture,” which is focused on the importance of women remaining sexually “pure” (inexperienced) until marriage. Purity culture includes virginity pledge programs, purity balls, and “ceremonies where fathers pledge to ‘cover’ their daughters until the day they hand the girls over to their husbands” (Klement and Sagarin 2017: 207). Owens, Hall, and Anderson (2020: 3-4) describe purity culture as including an emphasis on female virginity, prohibiting physical affection, demanding modesty among women (to keep males from “stumbling” in lust), demanding that women practice sexual gatekeeping (since men can’t control themselves), denying female bodily autonomy, and rejecting the idea that women should receive education about the nature and value of sexual consent.

Klement and Sagarin (2017) found a relationship between purity culture and rape-supportive messages in Christian dating books aimed at women. Their research showed that purity culture messages (women must remain virgins, otherwise they were – and should be seen as – whores) intersected with rape culture messages supporting sexual violence and invoking consequences for women who deviated from Christian gender norms. Themes included the idea that sex devalues women; women’s sexuality is not their own but exists for men; women are responsible for sexual violence that men perpetrate; and women should expect and accept sexual violence as a normal part of life. Both purity culture themes and rape-supportive messages ultimately serve “to control women and limit their life choices” (2017: 207). Ultimately, Klement and Sagarin called attention to the sexual double standard about what is acceptable for men and women in these books: men are described as sexually voracious and as unable to control themselves sexually, while women are described as “objects with no bodily autonomy to be ‘given away’ by their fathers” (2017: 209).

Owens, Hall, and Anderson (2020) studied the relationship between purity culture and acceptance of rape myths. Rape myths include the ideas that only “bad girls” get raped, that rapists are sex-starved, that women lie about being raped, that there is no such thing as “marital rape” or “date rape” (since by dating a man or marrying him, women are giving full consent for any sexual activity a man wants at any time), and that women enjoy sexual violence (Owens et al 2020, Prina and Schatz-Stevens 2020). Rape myths tend to legitimate male sexual assault against women and to blame women for being raped. The researchers found that endorsement of purity culture was related to increased acceptance of rape myths as well as to increased likelihood of labeling marital rape and acquaintance rape scenarios as consensual sex.

Ultimately, purity culture can keep women from seeing themselves as (or becoming) sexual agents, it can blame them for men’s sexual assaults, and it can police them in ways that are not realistically expected of men. Women are understood to belong to their fathers until they belong to their husbands; at no time do they truly belong to themselves. Purity culture thus reinforces sexism in multiple ways, and with disturbing consequences.

Christian sexism and heterosexism can also harm people outside of Evangelical and conservative Christian communities, of course. As an example, ten states* permit state-licensed child welfare agencies to refuse to place children with LGBT people or same-sex couples if doing so conflicts with their religious beliefs, and similarly permit such agencies to refuse to provide services to LGBT children or families for the same reason. Kansas and Mississippi have targeted religious exemptions that permit private businesses to deny services to married same-sex couples, while six states** have targeted religious exemptions that permit medical professionals to decline to serve LGBT clients. North Carolina and Mississippi have targeted religious exemption laws that permit state and local officials to decline to marry couples of whose marriages they disapprove. An estimated 20% of LGBT people in the United States live in states that permit child welfare agencies to refuse to place children with them or provide services to them, while an estimated 11% live in states with targeted religious exemptions that permit medical professionals to decline to serve LGBT clients (Map Advancement Project 2022). Whether a given LGBT person or couple is Christian or not, if they live in one of these states, they may face legally permitted discrimination in treatment, with effects that can range from profound emotional pain to – in the six states with religious exemptions for medical professionals – potential death.

In Closing

As I noted at the beginning of this essay, religion can be life-giving and rewarding, nurturing and healing, and a source of well-being; in my own life, religion is in fact all of these things. And it is precisely for that reason that the harm of religion is so grievous when it is harmful.

Women, LGB people, and trans+ people have chosen a wide range of responses to the harm of conservative Christianity, from staying within it and working to change it to leaving it and finding other religious homes or no religious home, and from working to remove sexist and heterosexist messages from our own heads and hearts to engaging in political activism to

* Alabama, Kansas, Michigan, Mississippi, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, and Virginia

** Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Mississippi, Ohio, and Tennessee

challenge conservative religion's public power. Whatever our individual relationship to organized religion, we can better understand how to support ourselves and those we love, as well as how to work for social, cultural, and political change, if we understand religion's power, how it can be used in the service of inequality, and how to envision and work toward a world in which religion, where it is present at all, is only used in the service of human well-being.

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