

## Defining Heterosexism

I had lived at the same address behind the drugstore for six years. I made it a point to use local businesses whenever possible, and had been a regular customer at that drugstore. After my partner and I had opened a joint checking account, I stopped at the drugstore to have a prescription filled. I wrote out a check for the amount of the prescription, but the clerk refused to accept my check; not because of any problem with my account, but because there were two female names on the check. In the clerk's words, "Two female names on the account just couldn't be right." Not only was it embarrassing to have my check turned down, and to stand there among other customers and explain my living situation, but I also ended up having to drive to another drugstore some distance away to purchase the drugs prescribed for me.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and define *heterosexism*. The preceding story illustrates one experience of heterosexism in North America. It depicts neither an especially heinous nor a particularly benign instance of this reality. Although obviously unique, it represents the experience of uncloseted gay men and lesbians in our world today. This brief vignette puts a face on the heterosexism endured on a daily basis by openly homosexual persons.

### A REASONED SYSTEM OF PREJUDICE

*Heterosexism* is a reasoned system of bias regarding sexual orientation. It denotes prejudice in favor of heterosexual people and connotes prejudice against bisexual and, especially, homosexual people. By describing it as a *reasoned* system of prejudice we do not mean to imply that it is rationally defensible. Subsequent chapters will develop arguments against such a conclusion. Rather we mean to suggest that heterosexism is not grounded primarily in emotional fears, hatreds, or other visceral responses to homosexuality. Instead it is rooted in a largely cognitive constellation of beliefs about human sexuality.

Although heterosexism is often accompanied by *homophobia*, no logical or necessary connection exists between the two. People who are homophobic may not be heterosexist; those who are heterosexist may not be homophobic. Heterosexism is analogous to racism and sexism. Homophobia finds appropriate analogies in racial bigotry and misogyny. Whether gay or straight, people might be homophobic because they cannot think of male same-sex activity without also imaging men as physically vulnerable, as potentially subject to rape. They cannot think of female same-sex activity without imaging women as powerful, as potentially free of male control. Such images of male vulnerability and female strength challenge the heterosexist myth to which we have all grown accustomed.

As a pattern of discrimination heterosexism pervades most dimensions of our cultural life. This "system" shapes our legal, economic, political, social, interpersonal, familial, historical, educational, and ecclesial institutions.<sup>2</sup> *Heterocentrism* lies at the heart of this system of prejudice. Heterocentrism leads to the conviction that heterosexuality is *the* normative form of human sexuality. It is the measure by which all other sexual orientations are judged. All sexual authority, value, and power are centered in heterosexuality.

We can best understand these definitions in the context of a specific history. The term *heterosexuality* was coined in the nineteenth century and first gained currency in the field of medical science. It is an abstract construction that derives its meaning in part from its contrast with "homosexuality."<sup>3</sup> Neither word has an objective referent; that is, they do not refer to a person or thing. Each constitutes a shorthand way to label certain aspects of human sexuality.

We might logically suppose that bisexual and homosexual people could have a "place" in a heterocentric culture. After all, in patriarchal cultures even a woman has a rightful, albeit private, place of activity in her father's or husband's home. Of course, we would need to circumscribe carefully a similar place for gay men and lesbians as we have for our racial and economic ghettos. They would need to recognize, even while in such a place, their obvious subservience and inferiority to the heterocentric norm. Culturally we have developed structures to keep people "in place" in various dimensions of their lives. Such structures link most, if not all, of the "isms" we experience. In this regard heterosexism is deeply connected to sexism, racism, and classism. Our focus on heterosexism provides illumination of the power of these paradigmatic structures to "place" people.

Even within families the only acceptable place for most persons who are not heterosexual is their “closet.” Gay people have no safe haven in our culture, not even in the private world of their homes. We ask them to be invisible in our public institutions. Those few places we commonly associate with homosexuality—openly gay neighborhoods and bars—routinely experience all manner of violence, from trashings to bombings. We demand that gay people keep their homosexual orientation private. Why? Because, so the ideology argues, one should not publicly parade or celebrate what is not fully or normatively human (natural!).

We do not offer gay people the protection and safety usually associated with the private sphere. We deprive them not only of a public life but of a private life as well. Apparently it is not enough to confine them to a generally invisible and certainly ignorable private world. We also silence them in our homes and other spheres (such as our churches). In a heterosexist world, a gay person has no safe place to go except into the closet. That is where heterosexist prejudices force such a “scandalous skeleton” to live.

One night I took a walk in a park. The neighborhood surrounding this park was a safe place, so I was not worried. This particular area is also known as a gay cruising area. Unfortunately I was unconscious of that reputation.

As I was walking back to my car after my walk I was physically attacked from behind by a male who was part of a gang hanging out in the park. I was assumed to be gay by this gang and I was beaten for it. Luckily I was able to get away with only a bruised kidney, a slightly fractured jaw and a bloody shoulder and hand. It could have been worse!

When the police arrived on the scene I pointed out my attacker. The officer let the attacker go when he assumed it was a hate crime. I went to the police station and pressed charges against the attacker. Nine months later my assailant went to prison for one month. Being a victim of a violent attack was very difficult for me. What I needed was lots of support. I could not go to the gay community and risk blowing my cover. I had to remain in a tight closet if I wished to continue serving as a pastor. So I tried to get support from my church. When I told the senior pastor about the attack he asked me: “Why are you telling me this?” Apparently he knew the reputation of the park and blamed me for being there. Another “support group” in the church told me I should have known better.

When I told them I was assumed to be gay by my attacker, and that the assault was an incident of “gay bashing,” they quickly dismissed that information as not important. They gave me clear sig-

nals not to bring *that* fact up again. They began to distance themselves from me from that time on. The attack itself was quickly dismissed as an insignificant event.

Such is the conflict and rejection endured by a closeted gay person. Life in such solitary confinement threatens to break even the strongest of spirits.

We will return to the impact of heterosexism on our life together at the close of this chapter (and again in chapter 4). At this juncture we must en flesh our preliminary definitions of heterosexism. We propose to do this by examining five different moral points of view on homosexuality. Four of these distinct perspectives are heterosexist; one is not. Although not a comprehensive or even a particularly balanced spectrum of opinion, these perspectives reflect some of the common ways in which people think about homosexuality in our culture.

We realize that we are shifting our attention at this point from heterosexism to homosexuality. This is a necessary shift because (1) how persons view homosexuality shapes the ways in which they live out heterosexist biases; and (2) the whole system of heterosexism is supported by a variety of negative judgments about homosexuality. Inattention to what causes or lies behind heterosexism will hinder attempts to dismantle it.

We intend in our description of these moral positions to be fair, but as our subsequent analysis of heterosexism will make clear, we are not neutral in regard to them. We understand this to be inescapable and note that all others who come to such deliberations are equally (though obviously not identically) biased. To avoid manipulation we delineate our key premises for public scrutiny and outline five basic positions about the morality of homosexuality. We introduce our typology of these positions on homosexuality by reviewing a basic distinction.

## ORIENTATION AND BEHAVIOR

A person's *sexual identity* consists of a number of components. It includes that individual's biological sex (various chromosomal, hormonal, and anatomical factors), his or her gender identification (sense of being male or female), the person's social sex role (the cultural definition of being male and female), and the person's sexual orientation.<sup>4</sup> Broadly speaking *sexual orientation* includes (1) arousal

patterns (including fantasy), (2) affective preferences, and (3) behavior (patterns of physical contact with others).<sup>5</sup> Of the three aspects of orientation, behavior can be separated out insofar as it is voluntaristic. One cannot choose not to be aroused by or to “feel” drawn to others. Such an electric charge simply happens. One can, however, choose whether to nurture or repress and how and when to act on these impulses and feelings.

Recognizing the distinction between orientation in its first two aspects and behavior shapes moral arguments. For example, it would be wrong to blame or praise people for conditions over which they have no personal control.<sup>6</sup> It would be morally inappropriate to hold individuals responsible or to ascribe to them blame or merit for what they experience as erotically attractive in adolescence and beyond. This includes people who are attracted sexually to children or close relatives. The issue is whether and how people act in response to their erotic attractions.

It is important to take note of this distinction between sexual orientation and behavior for at least two reasons.<sup>7</sup> First, all who debate this issue agree that people to some degree can change and therefore be held responsible for their sexual behavior and public sexual lifestyles. Nevertheless many do not believe that an individual’s sexual orientation can be significantly altered.<sup>8</sup> Second, it is possible to engage in sexual behavior and to have a public sexual lifestyle that is inconsistent with one’s basic sexual orientation.

### *Orientation and Change*

Many researchers now believe that the basic or constitutional sexual orientation of most individuals has been determined by the age of 4 or before.<sup>9</sup> A review of the literature regarding the etiology of homosexuality reveals that no compelling and coherent explanation of its origins is available to us at the present. We do know which hypotheses have failed to account for it. For example, the traditional Freudian theory that homosexuality is a result of arrested or abnormal psychosexual development resulted in over sixty different specific hypotheses. Many of these theories—that homosexuality stems from cold father-son relationships, from the impact of hostile domineering mothers on fragile egos, or from a sexually traumatic childhood experience like incest or exposure to pornography—have been clearly disproven.<sup>10</sup>

Considerable debate remains about whether a person’s sexual orientation is psychosocially, biologically (for example, from stress

related hormones released during pregnancy), or genetically determined.<sup>11</sup> Whatever combination of causes lies behind a person's sexual orientation, it is for each one personally a "given" in one's life beginning early in childhood. One discovers one's orientation rather than chooses it, as the following brief vignette dramatizes.

I first remember being "turned on" while watching the Academy Award presentation of the Oscars on TV. That naked little statue gave me such strong feelings that I searched for it in all the movie ads in the newspapers for months after that. All of my friends were fascinated with the ladies' underwear ads in the J.C. Penney catalogue, but these did nothing for me! Back then male models were never used. I was very young, and it seems silly, but that is the kind of thing that first awakens one's sense of sexual identity.

Although significant variations exist in the reasons given for the causes of sexual orientation, two basic approaches have characterized the research and writing on sexuality in the past four decades: one is biological; the other is social. These are embraced by a broader, though parallel, set of terms: nature and history. Both approaches conclude that individuals are either heterosexual or homosexual. Those who ascribe biological-natural origins to sexual orientation view it as an actual innate essence. Those who ascribe sexual orientation to largely social-historical origins view it as constructed over time.

The conviction that only heterosexuality is normative emerged from the debate about what constitutes "natural" in human sexuality. The most frequent charge leveled at same-sex behavior historically has been that it violates nature. Heterosexuality (even when the term was not used) was assumed to be the natural form of sexuality. The biological-natural arguments have provided the justification for centering sexual authority, value, and power in heterosexuality. A key assumption has been that what is natural is good and right. Since heterosexuality is statistically dominant, a corollary assumption holds that it is obviously natural, and alone good and right.

Much recent scholarship on the origins of homosexuality has called into question through the use of historical analysis these more traditional arguments about what is natural.<sup>12</sup> Sexuality in the historical perspective is an enormously diverse set of historical constructs, not an immutable given in creation. Homosexuality varies tremendously in this view. The biological-natural versus social-historical distinction continues to fuel current conversations about homosexuality.

Where one settles on the question of origins obviously affects what factors one subsequently recognizes as morally relevant. Even if future research reveals that a person's sexual orientation is at least in part a social construction, it does not automatically follow that we as a culture should not allow or encourage the construction of a homosexual identity. Such a prohibition rests on the premise that there is something wrong with being homosexual in orientation, and that is precisely the question under examination.<sup>13</sup>

Many therapists do not believe that an individual's sexual orientation can be changed once it is established, not even through the so-called reparation therapy of ex-gay groups. Although Masters and Johnson believe in theory that under the right conditions even a totally or decisively gay person might be able to alter his or her sexual orientation, they offer no scientific evidence in support of that conclusion.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the only documented "successes" at such alteration have been through behavioral modification programs using aversion therapies, including electric shock. These homosexual persons have been conditioned for a time against attraction to their own sex. Such programs have had no documented success at reorienting homosexuals; that is, at fostering in them an attraction to persons of the other sex.

The question of the origins of homosexuality has come under broader examination only in the past two decades. Until recently the parameters of and participants in the debate have been constrained by the "disease model" of homosexuality. As long as a homosexual orientation was considered medically abnormal or dysfunctional in a clinical sense, genuine exploration of it was truncated.

The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses in 1973.<sup>15</sup> Studies demonstrated that gay men and lesbians were no more or less likely to be socially dysfunctional or emotionally disturbed or to engage in violent, exploitative, or sexually abusive behaviors (such as pederasty) than were heterosexual people. This judgment has received global confirmation. The new edition of the World Health Organization's (WHO) *International Classification of Diseases* does not list homosexuality as a disease. All thirty-seven member nations from the Americas agreed to delete homosexuality from this WHO index.

### *Behavior and Change*

The distinction between orientation and behavior is significant for a second reason. A person can both have a public sexual lifestyle and

engage in sexual behaviors inconsistent with their basic sexual orientation.<sup>16</sup> For example, someone with a basically heterosexual orientation can engage in homosexual behaviors. Sexual behavior in prison populations gives evidence of this as does the exploitation of gay people by heterosexual people seeking the thrill of variation or the comfort of having some kind of sexual intimacy.

We see the converse of this inconsistency among homosexual people. Statistically we know that somewhere between 4 and 13 percent, many would say roughly 10 percent, of all males and females in our culture are primarily homosexual in orientation. The vast majority of these 28 million or more U.S. citizens closet themselves behind the facade of heterosexual identities and marriages for decades if not their entire lifetime. Their public sexual identity and their sexual orientation are at odds.

For this reason an individual's sexual orientation cannot be defined on behavioral grounds alone. Some heterosexual people are circumstantially homosexual, usually for short periods of time in our culture. Similarly, some gay people are circumstantially heterosexual, typically in our culture for much longer as they often closet themselves in long-term heterosexual marriages. Clearly, affectional or imaginative responsiveness are more central than genital behavior to the identification of an individual's sexual orientation. Thus a woman who is predominantly and persistently attracted to other women may be lesbian even if she has never engaged in genital contact with another woman.<sup>17</sup>

These examples represent some very important but frequently neglected moral problems. The human capacity to behave sexually in a manner inconsistent with one's basic sexual orientation and to establish a public sexual lifestyle incongruent with that orientation provide the background against which the moral significance of sexual authenticity becomes clear (see chapter 7 for a more detailed discussion).

Many supposedly value-free researchers, especially those who represent the essentialist (biological-natural) approach to sexuality, treat homosexuality as a naturally occurring departure from heterosexuality. They seek to explain and defend why such alternatives exist. This situation illustrates how social scientists who pride themselves on objectivity beg the question of homosexuality. The very terms *departure* and *alternative* presuppose that heterosexuality is normative. Heterocentrism has dictated both the content and structure of the debate in ways that make it impossible for us to see homosexuality as anything other than an aberration (even if it is called a *naturally occurring* aberration).



To overcome this problem we must be willing to shift radically the terms of the debate. The only way not to prejudge homosexuality is to regard as normative the fact that human beings are sexual beings. Why we are sexual, and how in any given time and place we ought to live sexually are the appropriate foci of moral debate. This does not mean that we must abandon the terms *heterosexual* and *homosexual*. We need a variety of words to converse about our same-sex and different-sex attractions and behaviors. We must avoid the unexamined assumption that has accompanied the use of these terms—the assumption of the normative character of heterosexuality. This premise has imprisoned inquiry and thwarted dialogue with the gay community. It has proven costly on a personal level as well.

My best friend from the fifth through the eleventh grades and I are now middle-aged men. As boys, Joe and I were inseparable. Long past the time it was considered “socially acceptable,” he and I walked around holding hands. We hiked, read, studied, and vacationed together. In high school we often double dated.

Between the eleventh and twelfth grades our families moved apart. After high school graduation we went to different colleges. We kept in touch for a year or two but then the letters from my friend stopped. Finally I stopped writing too. We didn’t get together again for two years.

When we finally did see one another two years later as a result of his mother’s death, he was cold. Our conversation was cerebral. He spoke of this or that action as being “valid” or “invalid.” He had grown disaffected with the church to which we had both been devoted. He questioned my very sanity in pursuing the ministry. I left his mother’s funeral knowing that but not understanding why I had lost my best friend.

It never even occurred to me why he might be distancing himself. Some twenty years later my old friend finally “came out” to me. Since that time we have begun to reconnect with one another. Looking back, it is clear to me that he must have been struggling with his sexual identity and feeling besieged. I didn’t understand anything except that I had been shut out of his life. The time we lost can never be recovered. I will always regret that.

## FIVE MORAL POSITIONS REGARDING HOMOSEXUALITY

We intend here to give flesh to the concept of heterosexism by introducing the reader to four of its many faces in our culture and to a fifth, nonheterocentric position. We will describe the major compo-

nents of each point of view and briefly relate them to an analogous “problem.” These analogies serve as the primary principle of classification around which we have organized our typology.<sup>18</sup> By clearly ‘typing’ these positions we hope to make them readily accessible to people new to the broad parameters of the debate.

The use of analogies in moral argument is of mixed value. All analogies are inadequate because they inevitably fail at certain junctures to illumine their terms. People risk using them in the wager that they will shed light on more than they obscure. We hope our use of analogies here will clarify rather than distort the perspectives we wish to describe and evaluate.

Each of the descriptions that follows begins with a heading that characterizes the main tenet of the position and identifies the basic judgment proponents of the position make about just, loving, and faithful homosexual behavior. We describe each position from the perspective of a person within it. The value judgments are those made by advocates of the type under consideration. Obviously not all the factors in each position would be held unequivocally by every person who locates his or her primary stance there. Some generalization is necessary to provide sufficient breadth for comparison of the positions. These positions are summarized in Table 1.1.

*Position 1: Homosexual orientations are unnatural; just, loving, and faithful homosexual behavior is evil*

Advocates of this position view homosexual orientation as a learned sexual response, acquired through a series of choices both unfortunate and immoral.<sup>19</sup> In the spectrum of our five-part typology they present the most negative and critical judgments on homosexuality. Some of them argue that it is erroneous to describe it as an attraction to persons of the same sex.<sup>20</sup> They describe the dynamic behind homosexuality as hatred of the opposite sex. From this point of view, for example, all lesbians are “men haters.”

The repugnance that people who hold this position feel about homosexual activity is perhaps akin to how people in our culture feel about cannibalism. They can label as evil only what they believe is so contrary to “right and natural” behavior. Advocates of this position frequently view homosexual desires as temptations similar to the sexual temptation to fornicate or commit adultery. Thus we use the term *immorality* to name this analogy in the typology. Unlike the other four positions which are characterized by a specific, nonsexual moral analogy, no satisfactory, single analogy has emerged that highlights the significant elements of this position.

**Table 1.1** Analogies for Moral Positions on Homosexuality

	$P_1$ : Immorality	$P_2$ : Alcoholism	$P_3$ : Blindness	$P_4$ : Color Blindness	$P_5$ : Left-handedness
Theological Axiom	A paradigmatic sign of the brokenness of the world	A greater sign of the brokenness of the world	A lesser sign of the brokenness of the world	Not quite the fullness of God's original blessing	Part of God's original blessing
Anthropological Axiom	Evil	Disease	Defect	Imperfection	Variation
Personal Culpability	Lots	Little	None	None	None and irrelevant
Primary Moral Judgment	Just, loving, and faithful homosexual unions are evil; sexual reorientation required	Just, loving, and faithful homosexual unions are more evil than lifelong and total abstinence	Just, loving, and faithful homosexual unions are less evil than lifelong and total abstinence	Just, loving, and faithful homosexual unions and lifelong and total abstinence both fall short	Just, loving, and faithful homosexual unions are good
Derivative Moral Rules	No Blessing of unions; no ordaining of any gay person	No blessing of unions; ordain only closeted gay people committed to lifelong and total sexual abstinence	May or may not bless unions; may or may not ordain chaste, closeted gay people	Bless unions privately; ordain chaste, closeted gay people	Publicly bless unions; ordain chaste, uncloseted gay people

According to this position homosexual orientation is a paradigmatic expression of original sin, or concupiscence, for which individuals can be held responsible. Whereas lust merely disorders heterosexual behavior, lust expresses both the disorientation of homosexual passions and the disorder of homosexual behavior. Adherents of this position view homosexuality as a perversion of the natural order of sexuality on one or both of two different grounds. First, some argue that homosexuality is immoral because it does not lead to procreation. God made human sexuality to serve the species through reproduction. Second, some argue that sex serves not primarily or even essentially for reproduction, but for human completion through gender complementarity. For example, proponents of this view believe that a man can become genuinely human only when he has a sexual relationship with a woman, and vice versa. Homosexual relationships pervert the natural order on both counts. They are completely unnatural.

Proponents of this position argue that gay people ought to change their sexual orientation and engage in heterosexual behavior. Abstinence may be permissible during the initial stages of their transformation, but just, loving, and faithful heterosexual marriages provide the only setting for holiness and moral health. Obviously, the Church ought not ordain persons who are homosexual in orientation, whether sexually abstinent or not, nor allow them to serve as lay professionals in the Church. Likewise the Church ought not bless homosexual unions, even if just, loving, and faithful. The Church should oppose any civil legislation that permits or supports any gay or lesbian lifestyle. Heterosexism is a fully justified system of discrimination from this point of view.

*Position 2: Homosexual orientations are diseased; just, loving, and faithful homosexual behavior is not justified*

Advocates of this position view a homosexual orientation as a disease analogous to alcoholism.<sup>21</sup> They perceive alcoholism as a consequence of the Fall and consider it incurable. It has a tremendous impact on the individual, his or her interpersonal relationships, and on society as a whole. Sobriety constitutes the only healthy moral response to it. Similarly, advocates of this position understand homosexuality as incurable and destructive. Thus sexual abstinence provides the only reasonable response to it. Analogously one can be at best a recovering homosexual similar to the sober alcoholic.<sup>22</sup> Even though sexual abstinence may be difficult (perhaps even

impossible) and emotionally costly to practice, it is far less destructive of others and society than sexual lifestyles characterized even by just, faithful, and loving homosexual unions.<sup>23</sup>

We must be clear about what the demand of lifelong sexual abstinence means. The Church appropriately expects all Christians to practice the virtue of chastity. Chastity means that Christians should abstain from any and all reprobate sexual conduct. Thus we expect married as well as single persons to be chaste, although they restrain themselves in quite different ways. For example, the wife who proves chaste refrains from entering into an adulterous relationship. The single man who refrains from sexual behaviors expressive of more intimacy than his dating relationships warrant demonstrates chastity. All who make the concerns of justice integral to their sexual lifestyles practice chastity. The characteristics of justice, love, and fidelity mark chaste sexual practices.

We usually associate chastity with single people because they must abstain from a broader range of sexual activity than people who are married. However, for heterosexual single people chastity is not identical to the requirement of total sexual abstinence. We permit, if not encourage, dating and a modest degree of sexual activity among heterosexual single people. Although some may view them as immature or incomplete, they do not view them as diseased simply because they are single.

We expect homosexual persons whom we require to be abstinent not to be sexually active in even chaste ways. In this respect a demand for lifelong sexual abstinence is tantamount to a calling to perpetual celibacy.<sup>24</sup> Yet the differences between abstinence and celibacy are significant. We understand the call to celibacy as above and beyond the call of most humans. We tie it to a special vocation in service of the Church. We tie abstinence to the belief that homosexual persons are wounded or diseased. From this point of view, homosexuals ought to adopt sexually abstinent lifestyles and communities should support their abstinence. It is ironic that Protestant advocates of this position are arguing for sexual abstinence for such a large class of people. Martin Luther above all was sensitive to the extensive costs of such an expectation.<sup>25</sup>

Since advocates of this position believe no cure exists for the underlying condition and that no one is able to choose this sexual orientation apart from a physiological predisposition, they attach little to no moral blame to being homosexual in orientation.<sup>26</sup> Homosexuality is a disorder, not primarily a sin.<sup>27</sup> They would claim that people make choices in response to but not in regard to their sexual

orientation. The analogy with alcoholism is clear: it is a sin only when one does not take up the struggle to control it.

Proponents of this view would also claim that gay people committed to sexual abstinence lead morally exemplary lives when by their commitment to sexual abstinence they bear witness to the morally normative nature of heterosexuality. The ordination of such gay people and the installation of sexually abstinent homosexual lay professionals is acceptable. Prayers for reorientation are affirmed because "all things are possible with God," but like St. Paul (2 Cor 12:9), advocates of this view recognize that not all wounds are healed in this life. In reality, however, openly homosexual persons would not readily be called to serve or be welcome in many parishes, even if they were sexually abstinent.<sup>28</sup> Advocates of this position really demand that homosexual persons called to ordained or lay professional ministry remain closeted as well as abstinent. Similarly, an alcoholic person who "falls off the wagon" would not readily be called to serve as an ordained minister.

According to this stance, opposition to homosexuality as a lifestyle constitutes neither an unjustifiable nor a futile prejudice. Any activities that promote gay lifestyles as legitimate are morally unacceptable. However, advocates of this position would condemn all violent efforts to restrain or punish gay men and lesbians. As with alcoholic people, the task of others is to love and care for them in order to keep them on the right path (sobriety for the alcoholic person, abstinence for the gay person).

*Position 3: Homosexual orientations are defective; some just, loving, and faithful homosexual behavior may be permissible*

People who hold this position view homosexuality as analogous to a defect like congenital blindness.<sup>29</sup> Such a handicap represents a serious sign of the travail of creation. Like blindness, one does not choose a homosexual orientation for oneself nor wish for it in another. One simply suffers it as a result of the brokenness of the world.

Unlike persons who suffer from alcoholism, those born blind are not held accountable in any way for their condition. They do not contribute to it. Analogously, advocates of this position do not hold gay people responsible for their sexual orientation. Just like someone suffering from alcoholism, however, a blind person must find ways to cope with this fact of life. No coping strategies available to the blind person remove blindness although some can minimize its effects. For the gay person lifelong sexual abstinence is viewed here, unlike Position 2, as a cost-ineffective coping mechanism.

According to advocates of this position, the costs of lifelong sexual abstinence are too high. Abstinence denies a person the chance to cope constructively with their "handicap." Just, loving, and faithful homosexual unions at least honor the effort to cope with one's homosexual identity where lifelong sexual abstinence does not. If the argument of Position 2 hinged on the claim that the cure did less harm than the disease, the argument here hinges on the claim that the cure (abstinence) is no real cure at all. It is analogous to the blind person being denied the right to live out his or her blindness by developing ways to accept rather than deny it.

Despite this accommodation, neither lifelong sexual abstinence nor just, loving, and faithful homosexual unions are seen as good. Both are compromised sexual lifestyles, although the latter is judged less evil than the former because it is healthier as a coping strategy. It is legitimate not to bless or encourage either way of life. Yet clearly some compromise with brokenness is pastorally permissible if not necessitated.<sup>30</sup> Thus some proponents of this position would bless just, loving, and faithful gay unions; others would not. They may or may not participate in the ordination of chaste (but not necessarily sexually abstinent), closeted gay people who are qualified in all other respects for such a leadership role. Again the decision hinges on how one evaluates the importance of engaging in sexual behavior that is consistent with one's orientation.

*Position 4: Homosexual orientations are imperfect; just, loving, and faithful homosexual behavior is justified*

Advocates of this position view a homosexual orientation as an imperfection analogous to color blindness.<sup>31</sup> It constitutes a minor manifestation of the fallenness of the world. Proponents of this view have suggested a variety of causes for this imperfection, such as traumatic injury or arrested development. Being gay represents something wrong or inferior, just as being color blind is less than good from this point of view. It is not ideal. If it were possible to cure the condition in a reasonable fashion, communities would be morally obligated to make this treatment available and gay persons would be morally obligated to avail themselves of the treatment.

According to proponents of this view, however, the fact of the matter is that no cure exists for this condition. People discover themselves to be color sighted or color blind. People discover themselves to be gay. One cannot hold gay people culpable for being gay; it is simply part of the fabric out of which they must shape their lives. Although homosexual orientations cannot be accepted as a norma-

tive ideal, gay men and lesbians act in accordance with their particular nature when they adopt a homosexual lifestyle. People who are color blind can choose only between seeing the world in color deficient ways or closing their eyes. Obviously, they live in accord with the way they can see. Generally we justify imperfect behaviors when they represent the best available course of action in particular circumstances. Analogously, in response to their sexual orientation, gay people must choose between the repression or the imperfect (that is, homosexual) expression of their sexuality. The choice is self-evident: color blind people choose to see rather than close their eyes; gay people act on their sexual identity rather than deny its existence.

Proponents of this view reject lifelong sexual abstinence as an expectation appropriate to gay individuals. They do so for several reasons. First, they see it as an unrealistic expectation, and clearly one should not counsel the unreasonable. Although few would question the significance of sexual intimacy to human life, sexual repression is not life threatening. People can live without orgasms. So why do proponents of this position believe that sexual repression is unrealistic, psychologically destructive, and practically impossible for people to embody? Their answer is quite clear: apart from a special gift from the Spirit, those attempting lifelong sexual abstinence find that it necessitates extreme isolation. Orgasms do not represent all of human sexuality. As Daniel Maguire notes, "erotic desire is deeply interwoven into the human desire and need for closeness and for trusting relationships."<sup>32</sup> To be sexually abstinent without the gift of the Spirit calling them to it, gay people must bring this isolation upon themselves. They must avoid "particular friendships," especially with persons of the same sex but even with persons of the other sex.<sup>33</sup>

Only those who have received celibacy as a special charism from the Spirit can genuinely embody it without engendering crippling isolation. Even though they were great advocates of virginal and celibate lifestyles, the leaders of the early Church recognized that such continence could not be commanded, but only recommended. It was a voluntary not an obligatory lifestyle. Although we may exhort, we cannot demand lifelong sexual abstinence of all gay people. To do so is no more realistic than advising all heterosexual people to refrain from taking an active sexual interest in persons of the other sex.

Color blind people fall short of the normatively human way of seeing, but asking them to close their eyes—analogueous to asking the gay person to abstain from sexual activity—makes no sense. Such a demand is unrealistic and would result in the poor stewardship of



the visual gifts they do have. It would smack of ingratitude. Analogously, gay people are seen as falling short of the normatively human way of sexually relating, but demanding lifelong sexual abstinence would result in poor stewardship of the gifts for sexual intimacy they do have.

Advocates of this position believe that persons living a life of sexual abstinence apart from the gift of celibacy cannot bear witness to or take delight in the gracious goodness of their sexuality. Because they also believe that God calls people to an appropriate fulfilling of their sexual identity, abstinent gay and lesbian Christians cannot model sexual responsibility for the community. Without the gift of celibacy, total sexual restraint becomes purely negative; that is, it does not give purpose to or shed light on the meaning of human sexuality.

In contrast, when marked by justice, love, and fidelity homosexual unions display far more authentic virtue than those neurotic lives warped by frequently futile efforts to remain continent. Advocates of this position view celibacy as a rare and exceptional gift of the Spirit, not routinely given to gay people. Probably most just, faithful, and loving homosexual unions are justifiable. All, however, remain morally less than ideal.

Advocates of this position would encourage and privately bless homosexual unions. Such unions, even though morally permissible, should not receive official civil (public) or ecclesial sanction. Logically, these same persons conclude that because remarriage following divorce is less than perfect, the Church should not officially bless it even though it is now judged both morally commendable and civilly permissible. Most argue that a small, private blessing of homosexual unions is a commendable compromise.

Advocates of this position would usually encourage the ordination of a closeted homosexual person involved in a just, loving, and faithful homosexual union. Debate hinges on to what extent the clergy and professional ministers model only morally normative sexual conduct. If a church ordains (and retains on the clergy roster) persons who are divorced and remarried, consistency requires that it view as eligible for professional ministry those in the less than ideal but morally justifiable lifestyle of a just, loving, and faithful gay or lesbian relationship. In both marriage and ordination the Church's best response is maintaining some kind of distinction between that which it privately blesses and publicly celebrates.

Although one can theoretically justify heterocentric ideals one cannot defend the system of civil discrimination sustained by hetero-

sexism as legitimate. It does more harm than good. Thus proponents of this position view all, even nonviolent, forms of opposition to homosexuality as imprudent, even if technically justifiable. They advocate that human rights legislation include gays and lesbians.

*Position 5: Homosexual orientations are natural; just, loving, and faithful homosexual behavior is good*

This is our own position.<sup>34</sup> We state this for two reasons. First, one best avoids manipulation by placing one's own value convictions in the light of day insofar as possible. Second, one cannot describe other perspectives from a value-free or nonperspectival point of view. Such a claim to objectivity amounts to epistemological nonsense. Thus one cannot view any of the preceding descriptions as neutral. By specifying our convictions on this matter we hope to alert readers to the damage our biases may have done to the other points of view.

This fifth position on homosexuality is not heterosexist, and it provides a contrast with the heterosexist dimensions of the other points of view. Advocates of this position view homosexual orientation as a natural variation in the created order analogous to lefthandedness.<sup>35</sup> Undoubtedly sexuality is far more central to the mystery of our personhood than is being right- or left-handed. Additionally, most people are not so tightly wired sexually as this analogy implies. Most people can be described more accurately as ambidextrous rather than absolutely right- or left-handed.<sup>36</sup> The comparison to lefthandedness, however, despite its obvious shortcomings, proves fruitful for illuminating the systemic quality of heterosexism because we clearly arrange our world in favor of righthanded people. We only recently stopped advocating efforts to reorient people. We have gravely distorted our understanding of left-handedness by false myths for centuries.

According to proponents of this position both homosexual and heterosexual orientation participate in the goodness intrinsic to all of God's creation. Just as there is nothing wrong with or inferior about being lefthanded, there is nothing wrong with being gay from this point of view.<sup>37</sup> Gayness constitutes a manifestation of God's original blessing and one ought to claim it as a gracious gift from God. Just as we do not encourage heterosexual people to tamper with their God-given sexual orientation, so adherents of this position would not encourage gay people to change their orientation, even if such alteration were possible. Such activity desecrates the sexual diversity that constitutes part of the Creator's original blessed design.

Although still prevalent in our culture, negative judgments about and attitudes toward homosexuality arise from misinformation, prejudice, and superstition. Such traditions regarding gay men and lesbians have no more validity than earlier falsehoods and practices surrounding left-handedness. For example, people once believed that all the children born from marriages between royalty and commoners would be left-handed. Sometimes people linked left-handedness with witchcraft and amputated the offending limb.<sup>38</sup>

According to proponents of this final position in our typology, homosexual orientations are fully natural. Gay men and lesbians act naturally when they engage in homosexual conduct. It is unnatural and immoral for gay people to engage in heterosexual behavior or to repress the proper expression and exercise of their God-given homosexual drives (unless they have received from God the gift of celibacy). One should evaluate and govern homosexual behavior in accord with the same norms, such as justice, love, and fidelity, used to evaluate and govern heterosexual behavior.

Many people find it difficult to accept the logical implications of this position. Yet those who see the need for comparable norms press the Church for change on the basis of the demands of justice. Within an equal justice framework civil and ecclesial communities act unjustly and with discrimination when they do not call forth and support-bless the faithful expression of loving homosexual unions. Similarly churches act unjustly and discriminate when they do not install persons authentically called to ordained or professional ministry simply because of their homosexual orientation or their participation in loving and faithful homosexual unions. From this perspective churches perpetuate and authorize heterosexism—a system of discrimination that cannot be justified.

## CONCLUSION

As the preceding descriptions make evident, no single viewpoint on homosexuality constitutes heterosexism. It has many faces and is frequently associated with and reinforced by homophobia. Definitions and a review of related outlooks can demarcate the landscape, but we need to put a human face on this reality. What does it mean for a person to be heterosexual?

As far as I knew I had never met a homosexual person. I had heard about them, read and talked about them, but had never actually

been in the presence of one. So I thought. Naive or not, the situation changed when I left my hometown in Pennsylvania to work for a summer in Sacramento, California.

My wife and I drove to San Francisco one Saturday to see the sights. We decided to walk wherever our inclinations led us after a brief visit in Chinatown. At one point we found ourselves in the midst of a gay neighborhood. How did I know? Because all my stereotypes suddenly became flesh and blood: men dressed as women; women and men in leather and chains; effeminate actions, lisps, public fondling by men with men, women with women; the words *queer*, *fag*, *dyke*, *straight* bandied about by people in doorways. I never felt that we were in any particular danger, but as we walked on through and out of the area I shook my head in dismay.

A few days later I was back in Sacramento meeting with colleagues. I told them of my San Francisco experience. "You should have seen these people!" I exclaimed. "It was incredible." After I finished with the details of the appearances and actions of "these people," one of the men present looked me in the eye. With a mixture of anger and sadness he said, "I had planned to bring some important associates to this meeting who happen to be good friends. I'm sure glad I didn't. They're gay, and it's obvious they wouldn't be welcome here."

I was stunned. I'm not prejudiced! I was simply poking fun at the outrageous scene I had stumbled on to. What was wrong with that?

No one had ever confronted me so directly, so honestly, and so painfully regarding my words and actions, and my unexamined prejudices. "This is just the way things are," I thought to myself, "why is this guy giving me a hard time." The fact that he called them friends is what stung the most. He felt he could not subject his friends to such treatment at my hands. For the first time I began to see the depth of a prejudice I did not even understand.

If one remains unconvinced that American culture is deeply heterosexual, analysis of the use of language about gays, the portrayal of gay and lesbian people in the media, and the legally sanctioned discrimination against gays provides ample evidence that antigay prejudice abounds.

Sufficient study of the treatment of gays in American society has been done to reveal the pervasiveness of this prejudice.<sup>99</sup> The documentation is indisputable. Perhaps the most widespread manifestation of prejudice is the mocking and ridicule of gays and lesbians, as well as the trivialization of their concerns. Discriminatory statutes regarding homosexuality already exist in most states, and proposed

changes in civil rights legislation to include protection of homosexual persons usually meet strong resistance. But the physical harm inflicted on gays and lesbians represents the most serious threat of heterosexism. "Gay bashing" is commonplace.

In his now classic text on discrimination, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Gordon Allport noted over thirty-five years ago that the most deep-rooted prejudice in the United States was directed against homosexual people, who, if they could be more easily targeted, would suffer even greater violence.<sup>40</sup> This discrimination is widespread, and it has been present since the early colonial period. "As early as 1656," writes Adrienne Rich, "the New Haven Colony prescribed the death penalty for lesbians."<sup>41</sup>

The fact that we can read and hear more than ever before about the gay community ought to both trouble and encourage us. It should trouble us because even though up to 70 percent of the incidents may go unreported to avoid further victimization, the published accounts reveal the widespread indifference to harassment, stereotyping, discrimination, and violence. It should encourage us because it indicates that emerging public recognition allows us to talk about the prejudice and work to eliminate it.

Heterosexism is not just another "ism," nor one of a long list of trivial injustices identified by small special interest groups. As we suggested at the beginning of this chapter, it is a deeply rooted problem with extensive implications because it is related to the core human experience of being sexual. The fact that we have been so willing to accept heterocentrism uncritically is, arguably, the most significant contributor to this antigay prejudice. Christians have helped to create the climate in which this heterocentric norm has flourished. We proceed now to a brief identification of the various sources of moral wisdom relevant to a critical reassessment of this norm by the Church.