

**All in the Same Boat:  
Justice for Reproductive Health and Same-Sex Love  
by Mary E. Hunt  
Saturday April 14, 2007  
Lafayette, Indiana**

**L**et me say by way of introduction that I am a Catholic feminist liberation theologian, pro-choice, living happily with my longtime partner who graduated from St. Mary-of-the-Woods in Terre Haute, IN and our 6-year-old daughter adopted from China. We are, depending on your lights, a nightmare scenario or the Catholic Family of the Year. I say this simply to contextualize my remarks and to point out that these are not areas simply of academic interest to me but of existential concern.

This sense that we are “all in the same boat” comes to me over and over when I work with groups like the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, Catholics for a Free Choice, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Rainbow Families, and so many others that struggle against the odds to make and maintain social, legal, economic, and religious justice on issues related to sexuality.

We struggle to name our issues on our terms—reproductive justice, not abortion; heterosexism, not homosexuality—though we often find ourselves reacting to and defending against the ideological onslaught on its terms, not ours. We struggle to find the financial and human resources to keep the pressure on, often discovering on both fronts that the cuts in welfare and other social sharing programs are so severe that those who would support us are literally paying to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. We struggle to be taken seriously in our various religious traditions where, with notable exceptions, we find more opposition than support, more rejection than acceptance, more problems than solutions. In short, we struggle, and our struggle has integrity.

I want to train our critical skills on how we can struggle more effectively and achieve our goals which I take to be bringing about equality and justice, mutuality and cooperation in a world ever more fraught with the lack of them. I observe that while we have made strides on both of these issues—reproductive choice post Roe is certainly different than pre Roe; the end of sodomy laws and the beginning of domestic partnerships unto marriage was unheard of a decade ago. We are still so far from anything like equality and justice in this country, much less in most parts of the world, that I think it is safe to say we are at the beginning of this journey, not anywhere close to the end. So fasten your seat belt and let’s look at how efforts to achieve reproductive justice and to bring dignity to same-sex love intersect, how such efforts diverge, and

what those of us from religious communities might contribute that would be helpful.

1. I begin with four parallels between the issues:

- a. anti-sex
- b. anti-women at base
- c. religiously justified
- d. theo-politically instrumentalized

a. Prohibitions on abortion (also limits on sex education and contraception) are anti-sex. They harken back to a time when women were objects/property, men were in control of everything but their libido, and when marriage and childbearing were linked. A look at a special section in the New York Times (4/10/07) on desire shows how little most of us know about sex to begin with. Apparently women are far more ambidextrous sexually than men, with arousal leading to desire for women, not vice versa as long thought. Who knew?

We do know that a major cultural shift in the 20<sup>th</sup> century at least among affluent people with available birth control, women’s increasing moral agency, and the growing public character of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer life has been twofold. First, heterosex is no longer the only option and second, where it is chosen, it is not necessarily linked with procreation as the Catholic Church and other religious right groups would have it but with pleasure and the deepening of relationship, just like same-sex love. More important, the overwhelming majority of heterosexually active women use contraception so that instead of having all the children their sexual activities might produce, they are intentionally having unprotected sex only enough to have the one, two, or perhaps three children they want. This is a giant shift in human life for which both abortion and same-sex love are central. Efforts to squelch both are efforts to turn back this tide, or what I label anti-sex.

b. Opposition to abortion and same-sex love are also anti-women at base since the greatest impact of this social change has been on women, especially young and poor women whose options are circumscribed. Older and wealthier women have always had and will continue to have options even if Roe is overturned or if same-sex marriage never comes about. But it is women who bear the children and bear the economic injustices. A woman pregnant against her wishes does not worry about all

women but about herself; two women living together, as Adrienne Rich wrote, “have more than their sleep to defend.” Without legal, accessible abortion and the social/religious ideology to encourage women to use it when necessary women will live as their mothers and grandmothers did with sex and procreation yoked. Without social/religious/legal support for same-sex relationships, lesbian women including Mary Cheney will lack the protections that their families deserve.

c. A third similarity is that most of the opposition to abortion rights (de facto to sex education in public schools, contraception readily available to all who need it as is the case in more civilized countries like Sweden and Denmark with their low abortion rates to prove it) and to same-sex marriage and domestic partnership laws is religiously based. Whether Catholic, Mormon, or Muslim, the arguments differ but the bottom line is that God does not approve. It is not simply that some human beings do not approve, but the Divine is trotted out as standing in judgment over such choices. One has only to observe the anti-choice movement to see its Catholic and conservative Christian roots. One has only to follow the money to see how much religious groups like the Catholic Church and others of the religious right are putting into efforts to prevent same-sex marriage, to fuel the dubious ex-gay groups, and to stop same-sex couples from adopting children.

While I know there are people whose religious convictions are anti-choice and anti-gay based on what I consider a misreading of the Bible and theological sources, there are a lot of such efforts that masquerade as religious but are really something else. For example, I recall talking with the Catholic bishops’ spokesperson on abortion. When I asked her directly why the Catholic Church did not insist publicly on contraception as on abortion when the two are of the same level in terms of teaching, she quite bluntly said, “Because we could not win on it,” a phrase reminiscent of living too long in Washington. I was naïve and shocked because I thought such persons had the same depth of conviction on the issues as I do. To be disabused of that notion was a political growing up moment for me. It is apparently just another political issue, a place to win or lose ground. While I disagree with the anti-choice position, I am even more troubled by the lack of integrity apparent in this approach. On the same-sex love side, this is the Ted Haggard factor where some gentlemen (perhaps some straight ladies too) protest too much. Like some wealthy anti-choice folks who make sure their pregnant teens have all the abortions they need, such closeted LGBTQ people, especially religious leaders in power, are hard to respect.

d. Another similarity is that both issues are instrumentalized theo-politically. That is, they are used by religious leaders as ways to keep their religion in the loop when many have lost their power of persuasion. Think of Catholicism (I do not pick on Catholics, I simply am Catholic and try to limit my examples for sake of ecumenical politeness) minus its anti-abortion, anti-gay positions. Do you know where that institution stands on the death penalty, on nuclear weapons, on war? Does anyone with political power care? No wonder Catholic clergy (even on Easter Sunday, I can report) continue to flag abortion at every opportunity since they have little influence on other issues. The opposition to same-sex marriage is almost entirely religiously based. It would upset the anthropological apple cart of male-female pair bonding; it would defeat the order of creation as God intended it. Ministers would be forced by the state—fat chance—to perform ceremonies they do not think ought to happen. All of these fatuous religious arguments miss the real point, namely, that most religions teach love as the greatest human endeavor. Few of them can demonstrate textually that love is only for men with women and women with men. Rather, most religious traditions prioritize the care of children and others who are vulnerable, the importance of family and community, and the value of committed love, all of which are supported by same-sex marriage.

What is clear in both cases is that conservative religious groups choose issues that they believe will shore up support for their ways of being. Conservative Christian groups specialize in building their case among politicians and lawmakers in an effort to turn back the clock in what Diana Eck has so helpfully called *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*.<sup>1</sup> It is important that religious values influence public policy, but they need to be weighed on their own merits in the public sphere, not foisted upon us as the so-called culture wars have been.

2. These four areas of convergence are only part of the story. I think the two issues of abortion and same-sex love are also different in many ways and those differences are instructive. The divergences take at least three major forms:

- a. They challenge sexual mores in quite different ways
  - b. They affect women and men differently
  - c. They have different legal status
- a. Abortion and same-sex love challenge our social fabric in quite different ways. Abortion involves a decision to end a potential life. I do not say this to collude with those who oppose our right to choose, but to be honest about what is

at stake. While a fetus is not a human person, neither is it a rock. This means that abortion in my view requires a very careful and considered judgment on the part of the woman, perhaps in consultation with her partner and with medical professionals. What concerns me is not so much *what* she chooses because at the abort/don't abort stage most of what is morally relevant is moot, but what concerns me is the social conditions—poverty, violence, racism, women's low self esteem—that make such choices necessary and hard in the first place. But the impact is primarily on women.

By contrast, same-sex love is almost a no-brainer and has an impact on both women and men, though as transgender friends teach us, such gender binaries are no longer very useful. Practically speaking, who cares with whom one has sexual relations as long as they are safe and consensual? Whose business is it after all? What harm is done? Since such unions are not procreative by nature (though they can be by nurture as lesbians seeking to conceive have discovered when they couple insemination with lovemaking), why are they so threatening?

I suggest that while abortion threatens the power of men to control women's fertility, same-sex love threatens the sexual equation even more foundationally. Two men and two women represent something quite other than the top-down model with men in charge and women subservient. A hetero-patriarchal society reads two men as one taking the place of a woman, and two women as the refusal to have one dominate the other. This means while everyone is not gay or lesbian, ALL men and ALL women can potentially break out of the molds that have been so constraining to ALL of us. That is a foundational challenge to society.

b. Women and men have different experiences of these movements. For most women, the move toward legal and accessible abortion is a liberation even if it is never necessary to avail oneself of such services. As a lesbian of a certain age I can say that I am committed to keeping abortion legal not because I expect to need one, but because I have a daughter. Moreover, I know the anxiety women suffer over both unwanted pregnancy and infertility. I know the life-changing experience having a child is. But most of all, I know that women, especially poor, young, and women of color will never have a fair chance to actualize their lives according to their lights, including being sexually active, if abortion is not available. I wish it were otherwise. Yet for most men, even those who accompany their wives/girlfriends to clinics, I think abortion remains a fairly theoretical matter. There are exceptions, of course, but I think this is part of why the two issues—abortion and same-sex love—have not been linked.

Most gay men deal with being gay in a heterosexist patriarchal environment. While there are challenges to their manhood, for the most part they still live out male privilege with the jobs, money, time, and choices that accrue. Women, including lesbian women, deal with being women first and foremost, our sexuality taking a back seat. Our similarities across the heterosexual-lesbian continuum are often stronger than our differences. Indeed I would argue that having the care of children or not makes a big difference. But in any case, since the lgbtq movements, both secular and religious, have been predominantly male, I think the crossover to see how abortion rights impact all women has been limited. Likewise, one could say in fairness, that abortion rights, or better, the reproductive justice movements, have not always been inclusive of lgbtq concerns for fear of being labeled and marginalized “with those people.” How shortsighted all around.

c. The legal status of the two issues is also somewhat different. While the “Mapping Our Rights” project does a good job of showing current state-by-state situations with regard to these issues, I think it is important to make a few distinctions.<sup>2</sup> Roe is “settled law” that will be undone by the Supreme Court while marriage rights and domestic partnership benefits will be decided by the states. There is general consensus among progressives that abortion needs to remain legal. However, there is a strong and increasingly persuasive movement called “Beyond Marriage” that is raising hard questions about whether same-sex marriage is an unmitigated good. I have signed that group's petition and written about why I think marriage is not the best solution. All this is to say that the strategies that we employ are different.

3. Let me turn in conclusion to some strategies for linking our efforts as I read them from a religious perspective. I want to animate a conversation that will lead to local and larger action. I think we need strategic coalitions where these issues can be teased out and understood. I see them in three forms, what I call:

- a. The same old people
- b. New people from each side appreciating the other
- c. Interreligious support coming from shared but unique beliefs and commitments

a. I suspect that this room is full of what I think of as “the same old people.” They are the justice-seekers you can count on whether the issue touches them directly or not. They are the PFLAG and supportive straights, the gay/straight alliance types, the men supporting choice, the peace-people who know that assaults on rights are

assaults on peace. Rather than being disappointed by knowing everyone, thinking we are too few, and other self-defeating tactics, I say thank God for the same old people. It is when I am on the other side from them that I worry!

b. But the challenge of the day is how to get new people appreciating and entering into one another's struggle from both sides. Abortion rights folks need to see that the same bogus religious arguments that will keep women from being moral agents apply to keeping same-sex lovers from being moral agents. The limits on who can have sex with whom come from the same partial reading of human love that inform restraints on women making hard decisions that affect their own well being and that of their families. The same top-down, authoritarian, bedroom snooping that would outlaw same-sex sex will outlaw women's reproductive health options. That all of these constricting social moves have a deeper and more pernicious impact on young people, people of color, and those who are poor is reason enough to work together.

c. We also need to develop interreligious support for such coalition work, realizing that while we may see things differently there is sufficient overlap on the matters of justice and mercy that we can work together across faith lines on these issues. That is the work of IRCRC

and its partners, and of the National Religious Leadership Roundtable of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and its partners. I have been on panel after panel—the Presbyterian minister, the Jewish rabbi, the two Hindu swamis, and the Catholic feminist as one recent team of us went at Georgetown Law School and George Washington University—where we have found in the depths of our traditions the resources to claim the goodness of reproductive choice and same-sex love.

This is also work that people who have no particular interest in religion can partake in because it is not finally parochially religious work but humanly committed work. Whether one approaches it with religious foundations or not, the struggle for social justice is one. The boat is large. Lucky are we to be in it together.

<sup>1</sup> Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997 (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Mapping Our Rights, [http://www.ipas.org/mapping/final\\_map.asp](http://www.ipas.org/mapping/final_map.asp), accessed April 13, 2007.

“All in the Same Boat: Justice for Reproductive  
Health and Same-Sex Love”  
was sponsored by  
Indiana Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice  
PO Box 723  
Lafayette IN 47902  
Tel: 877-441-5797  
info@ircrc.org  
www.ircrc.org