

Toward a Positive Black Male Heterosexuality

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From 1981 to 1988, I earned my M.Div., M.Phil., and Ph.D. degrees from Union Theological Seminary, New York. The Reverend Canon Richard A. Norris, Jr., taught me several classes. One of my fondest memories is a semester-long session where he tutored me one-on-one on Augustine.

In addition to his profound grasp of the tradition, Norris shared a deep love of helping his students to learn creatively. And he related to us as junior colleagues. For instance, the Pit is the downstairs area at Union where students eat, drink, sit, talk, and debate issues. Professor Norris, as we called him, regularly joined us there and engaged in our lively intellectual comradery. Even when one of us had advanced a rather dubious claim in our argumentation, Professor Norris would not display any put-down. Rather, taking a drag on his cigarette (Union was a smoking area during those days) and displaying his subtle cat-like smile, he would simply say: “You might want to reconsider the basis of that position.”

He was a rare man who combined an astute intellect with compassion for building community through affirming different gifts God had given us all. And to that part of his legacy—affirming difference to build God’s unity—I now turn. Specifically, Professor Norris’s outline notes on the relation between moral discourse and homosexuality suggest some implications for how to recreate a new heterosexual black man in the U.S.A.

I write as a black theologian and as one born into legal segregation during the early 1950s in Richmond, Virginia. Yet my eighth through twelfth grades (second through sixth forms) were spent at Groton School (Massachusetts), an all-boys Episcopal boarding school. I also attended, as an undergraduate, Harvard University, another institution heavily influenced by the Episcopal Church. And so my appreciation of Professor Norris is both of him and his scholarship, and of the rich Episcopal/Anglican global communion with its tradition of accepting difference to enhance greater unity.

Too many people within the African American community, church, and black theology believe that gender concerns only women. When the gender issue becomes the center of discussion, most black men, for example, become like corpses. Their tongues grow silent; their bodies drop to a limp posture; and their presence fades into a ghostlike absence. Gender, from their vantage point, relates only to black women. If this logic is true, they reason, then it would be another example of black male sexism to enter the conversation and dominate what is said and not said. The flip side of this belief is that African American men do not have a gender, which is obviously false. Black men have a male gender, so gender refers to both men and women.

Gender differs from sex. Sex speaks to human biology, the genitalia with which each person is born, while gender is defined and determined not by nature but by human culture. Usually sex identification is not changed by human nurturing. Gender construction remains a socialization process influenced by child-rearing and parenting models, peer pressure and positive examples, movies and other media, educational institutions and training organizations, and biblical interpretation and faith communities. Human beings make other human beings into specific male and female genders.

Restated, gender represents both a cultural category and a dynamic process of socialization. Culture includes every aspect of a person's way of believing, thinking, judging, saying, and doing in the world. Culture, moreover, indicates a communal existence. There are no cultures of individuals, only cultures of people, groups, and communities. As a result, we identify an individual based on his or her relation to and interaction with a group. Group culture contains certain rituals and myths that glue the culture together and help to distinguish one culture from another. Furthermore, culture always carries a specific language spoken by a community.

As it is a product of socialization, gender is not formed overnight, nor is it ever a completely finished product. As a vibrant creation, gender follows the ongoing formation of a culture. Cultures of groups do not remain static. In the process of cultures modifying themselves continually, cultures also modify the definition of gender. Consequently, gender becomes a fluid category. It is solid like ice and liquid like water, and it evaporates like mist. Furthermore, socialization tells us that there exists no absolute identification of gender. From this perspective, there are no right or wrong definitions of gender because

gender results from how each society socializes people into gender roles.

For black theology of liberation, the key to whatever gender relationships take place in a community is not the description of the genders but the presence or absence of liberation, the ethics of equality, and mutual sharing. In other words, when babies are born, they can become any gender that society socializes them to be. If the privileges that come along with being male rather than female are created by human beings (who go against the spirit of divine liberation), then human beings (who work with the spirit to practice equality) can bring about social change to remove these privileges from the male gender.

Human societies use the dynamic process of socialization to produce a desired gender. The family remains the basic unit for modeling male and female genders. Other factors of influence are schools, sports, visual and audio entertainment, sex roles, jobs and professions, churches and other faith institutions, news media, languages, myths, rituals, laws, and race. Especially within the United States of America, the capitalist system sets the broader context for all definitions and formations of gender. This political economic structure maintains a bottom-line culture of profit-making at the expense of the majority of the people. The root of the profit-culture is private ownership of capital and wealth by a small elite group of families headed mainly by heterosexual men.

To forge a decent future affirming difference within the building of God's unity, we require a new socialization process. The new reality will have to come to terms with sexual orientation in the African American community and church. For instance, one of the greatest points of unity that black heterosexuals have is their agreement to oppress and discriminate against black lesbians and gays in the church, family, and larger society. Black heterosexuals have a privilege over black homosexuals. Although black heterosexuals suffer from class exploitation in economics, racial oppression relative to whites, and male supremacy especially for women, one of the few negative things heterosexuals can hold on to as a group is the oppression of lesbians and gays. The tragedy of African American heterosexuals is that they continue a system of oppression using some of the same arguments that too many whites have used against blacks and men have used against women.

The Bible is brought into the conversation as a justification to oppress lesbians and gays. African American churches state that the stories in the Bible are wrong when they call on slaves to obey their

masters, and black heterosexual women argue that the passages proclaiming women should obey men are sinful. Yet this same Bible is interpreted as condemning homosexuals to hell without salvation unless they become heterosexuals. If it is wrong to interpret the Hebrew story and the Jesus narratives as instructing black slaves to obey white masters and women to obey men, then why isn't it wrong to interpret this same Bible as saying homosexuals should deny the sexual orientation that God gave them when God created them?

Others claim that it is not natural for two men or two women to love each other sexually. This argument, which uses nature, is similar to how white racists described blacks as unnatural people, claiming they are naturally inferior in their thinking. And it is natural for whites to own most of the resources and wealth, while it is natural for blacks always to be at the bottom of the job market. Heterosexuals say what is natural in society, because heterosexuals have the power and the privilege to define people who are different from them.

Some believe that homosexuality destroys the black family. But here again heterosexuals are defining the family in the traditional way of the patriarchal father married to the mother who bears his children. The black community has always defined its own experience of being a family in the United States. Thus there is a tradition of creating new types of families different from the patriarchal legacy normalized in the dominant religious, educational, legal, and entertainment perspectives of the United States. In addition, nothing prevents homosexuals from having children and raising a family. Likewise, some of the most stable families in the black community are gay and lesbian families. The argument for a traditional patriarchal definition of the family covers up the many abusive heterosexual families where black men beat their wives, sexually abuse the women in the family, and are alcoholics and drug addicts. However, this is not to forget the thousands of healthy and exemplary black heterosexual families in the United States.

Creating positive human interactions between various sexual orientations likewise follows the ethics and vision of the spirit of liberation. That is to say, the new reality will have heterosexuals believing that their full humanity can be reached only when the full humanity of homosexuals is achieved. God has created all human beings and did not make a mistake. Divine love provides liberation for all humanity, and this includes black lesbians and gays.

Refusing to opt for this negative and abusive choice, African American men can start to reconstruct what it means to be a new heterosexual male. From a black theology perspective, they can begin first by accepting the love of God that is in all black men. The root of all harmful attitudes and actions against black women and children flow from black men's lack of self-love. But self-love can become a reality only when men understand and feel a love that is greater than any one person. It is a transcendent love, a divine love, a love that comes from the collective body. In this sense, it is not an individual love, but a communal love that floods the very being of the individual as a gift of love proceeding from the community into the soul of the individual. Divine love found within black men corresponds to a sacred love for and from the family and community. Ultimate love or God's love means that God loves black men in spite of the broken vessels they are.

Such a love has profound implications for the ongoing struggle of African American people to achieve an inclusive and holistic liberation and to practice freedom. The movement for liberation cannot be sustained through the inevitable ups and downs and forward and backward steps and the high successes as well as the stinging defeats unless black men love themselves. And the starting point is recognition and acceptance of God's unconditional love. Indeed, God's love grants the black man a sacred power that gives him allegiance not to any earthly demonic structures or individual authority figures but to something that transcends the boundaries of this world. Equipped with this love and power in one's feelings and one's intellect, in one's heart and one's head, African American men no longer will have to choose negative and abusive options, including treating homosexuals as a pariah caste.

On the contrary, the struggle for liberation and the practice of freedom become one's vocation from God. This calling places all social relations, uncontrolled cravings, negative pulls of the black male ego, endless tasks, and incorrect focuses on the individual self into perspective. Thus, self-love is not a self-centered practice or feeling where one's worldview and lifestyle become "I pursue money, profit, and wealth, therefore I am." Nor does this love indicate a touchy-feely state of being in the world. It is love of self founded on divine love, which subordinates the lifestyle of the individual African American male to enable liberation from negative personal and social structures and a practice of freedom defined by equality. Such a love helps to

facilitate a healthy life in the family, in the community, and among all humankind. Just as God has created the human family inclusive of lesbian and gay sisters and brothers, the black family is called by God to be the inclusive *imago Dei*.

A spirituality of love from God acts as the foundation for the definition of the self. Spirituality, however, manifests in the material, real, tangible world. A true heterosexual black male, full of God's love, takes a stand against a host of devious desires and damaging deeds. He speaks out against various discriminations as they pertain to race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ecological issues. The starting point and yardstick remain justice and freedom for all, beginning with the most oppressed communities in society and the poor. When he lives in the world with this type of talk and walk, he inevitably meets those who wish to maintain their privileges of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and human cravings over all of God's creation.

Again, good feelings and healthy conditions result from engagement in struggle for intentional self-development and collective transformation. Transformation requires work; work requires discipline; discipline requires sacrifice; sacrifice requires motivation from a higher calling; a calling requires a recognition of being loved; being loved empowers one to love oneself and thereby to free others from the external structures and internal demons in their lives.

For Christians, Jesus stands for this liberation love. God's work in and through Jesus did not depend on and had nothing to do with the fact that Jesus was a man biologically. And Jesus' own life in the Bible appears ambiguous about his own personal sexuality. However, the way Jesus developed his male gender gives us a model for the construction of today's new black heterosexual male. Jesus was so caught up in the mission of the sacred spirit who had anointed him to be with the poor on the divine-human journey to practice freedom, Jesus loved himself enough based on this spiritual vocation. This spirituality of love led to a self-love that energized Jesus' compassion for the outcasts around him. The most striking example is revealed in how Jesus talked to, spent time with, listened to, answered the questions of, healed, and empowered women to become their full selves. He accepted both male and female disciples. He commissioned women as well as men to carry out the work of justice from God. Women became the first preachers to proclaim the liberation revelation of Jesus as the risen Christ. Jesus ordained them to carry forth the good news that death caused by a political crucifixion no longer had the final word. In

fact, he broke the status-quo boundaries around and oppressive definitions of what it meant to be both male and female.

And from this story of a man who never married, never lived with a woman, and never had biological children, perhaps we can gain some clarity about the relation between homosexuality and the church.

