Christian Perspectives on Human Sexuality

Winter Quarter, 1999, MW 5:30-7:30 p.m.

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Office Hours: Tuesday, 1:30-3:30 p.m. Wednesday, 1:30-3:30 p.m.

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Description:

This course focuses on pastoral, historical, theological and ethical interpretations of sexuality within the Christian tradition. It brings into conversation four communities with diverse understandings of sexual issues and varying power relationships with one another: GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered), African Americans, womanist and feminist perspectives, and Evangelical-Liberal debates. Students are encouraged to identify key sexual issues from one of these perspectives and formulate adequate responses to these issues in church and society.

Objectives:

1. to attend to "context" as a primary issue in human sexual ethics by focusing on the witness of diverse communities in the United States;
2. to examine our assumptions and agenda about what constitutes "sexuality" and "sexual issues";

3. to explore the pastoral, historical, theological and ethical constructions of sexuality within Christianity in the United States;

4. to formulate ethical and pastoral responses to a variety of issues of sexuality in churches and society.

Method:

Designed as a seminar, the course's method is interactive, dialogical, and participatory, stressing student leadership. The course will include lectures, presentations, discussions and a public forum.

Reading:

The following texts have been placed on reserve at the library. Some are available for purchase at the bookstore. If class members would like to assign readings for the day they make presentations, they are invited to do so.

Required:


Fiction and Biography (read one)


Sexual Ethics. (Read one)


Anthologies (Read one)


Commentaries on sexuality (Read one)


Ragsdale, Katherine Hancock, editor, Boundary Wars: Intimacy and Distance in Healing Relationships. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1996.

Assignments:

1. Class attendance, preparation, and participation (10%). As students and instructors, we are all responsible for creating an environment where fruitful learn can occur. Active involvement in discussion is crucial to the development of this environment.

2. Reading: Read at least The Starr Report, Judgement at the White House, one novel or biography, one book on sexual ethics, one anthology, and one commentary. Demonstrate understanding of the reading through class discussion, presentation in class and seminary forum, and final paper.
3. Short paper (10%) Write a 5 page paper (typed, double-spaced) giving your personal response to some aspect of the debate about The Starr Report. See suggestions in appendix. Due: Feb 1

4. Short Report (10%) Write a 2 page (typed, double-spaced) giving a summary of one reference group’s response to the Starr Report. Due Feb 3

5. Class presentations in student teams (20%) Choose one of the four communities around which the course focuses and participate in a student team to present sexual issues of concern in that community, analyzing the issues according to pastoral, historical, theological and ethical disciplines. The date of your presentation depends on which community you choose (see course calendar below). See the outline in Appendix II for guidelines on what should be included in your presentation.

Depending on the community you choose, possible topics for the presentation include: AIDS, marriage and fidelity, sex and the unmarried, homosexuality, erotic and pornographic literature, masturbation, sexual violence, rape, child sexual abuse, abortion, birth control, adolescent sexuality, sexual dysfunctions, sex in advertising and entertainment, sex and the physically challenged, --the seriously ill, --the mentally challenged, --older adults, and other issues.

6. Public Forum Presentation in student teams. (10%)

Give a 5-7 minute presentation in an all-school forum on the Starr-Clinton debate, fairly representing one of the groups studied in this class, and analyzing the rhetoric and arguments of this group as they pertain to sexuality.

7. Final paper (30%) A 12-15 page paper on the topic of your presentation which includes the following: 1) pastoral, historical, theological and ethical perspectives on the issue, 2) your reflection on how this issue affects your understandings of sexuality, 3) the implications of your reflection for the churches’ ministry and community ethics, 4) a critique from the perspective of the community under discussion, 5) implications for public theology including the Clinton scandal. Write for two audiences: the church and the public. While you may discuss the paper with your team, it is an individual assignment. See Appendix for further guidance

Paper should include references to your reading

Late papers will be accepted only with permission of the instructors.

Due: Mar 12

Footnotes and bibliography are required on both short and long papers to demonstrate your ability to correlate practical learning and theoretical material. All papers will require additional reading beyond assignments in syllabus.
Schedule of Topics and Reading.

**Week # 1: Introduction to course and issues**
- Jan 25, Syllabus, Assignments, and Ground Rules
- Jan 27, Debate on Clinton, 3:30-5:30 p.m. Room ---
  - One hour class to debrief debate
- Read: The Starr Report, Judgment Day at the White House

**Week # 2: Sexuality in the U.S. church and society**
- Feb 1, Issues at stake in the course
- Feb 3, Reference Group Responses to The Starr Report
- Read: one book on sexual ethics

**Week # 3: Discussion of Reference Group A**
- Feb 8, 10, Issues of concern for this group
- Read: materials related to Group A

**Week # 4: Discussion of Reference Group B**
- Feb 15, 17, Issues of concern for this group
- Read: materials related to Group B

**Week # 5: Discussion of Reference Group C**
- Feb 22, 24, Issues of concern for this group
- Read: materials related to Group C

**Week # 6: Discussion of Reference Group D**
- Mar 1, 3, Issues of concern for this group
- Read: materials related to Group D

**Week # 7: Preparation for Public Forum**
- Read: Materials in preparation for public forum
- Mar 8 practice for forum
- March 10, 11:00-12:00, Public Forum, Dirty Talk: Starr, Clinton, and the Rhetoric of Sexuality.
  - 5:30-7:30 Class debriefing of forum

**Week # 8 Concluding Discussions and Evaluation**
- Mar 15, 17

Schedule for Student Presentations
Presentations in teams of three for 45 minutes or less plus 45 minutes of discussion. Each team will meet with Instructors Poling and Osgood before and after each presentation to plan and evaluate the session.

**Date**: GLBT Communities

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**Date**: Womanist and Feminist Communities

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**Date**: African-American Communities

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**Date**: Evangelical and Liberal Euro-American Debates

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Appendix I: Guidelines Short paper

Here are some questions that you can use as guidelines for the short paper about the Starr Report

1. What happened? Describe the part of the narrative and analysis that was most painful, poignant, or powerful for you. In this section give a prereflective account of the situation you want to understand better. Tell the story in everyday language. Who was present? What was said? How did the story unfold? When did you become emotionally involved?
2. Why did this happen? In this section identify the issues that first emerged for you. What is there about this story that draws your attention? What is the discrepancy or problem you are trying to understand better?

3. Where is the evil or oppression? In this section be specific about what is wrong in this story? What are the systems or structures that give the context for such an event to occur? Where is the individual responsibility? Where is the responsibility of the larger community or society?

4. What is your role as interpreter and participant in similar events? How are you personally affected by the issues you have raised? In what ways, perhaps, do you contribute to the maintaining of oppression or status quo?

5. How could this situation be different so the oppression/suffering would be corrected or redemptive? What implications are there in this vignette for the formation or articulation of a liberational praxis or ministry?

Use footnotes to connect your reflection to the assigned reading.

Appendix II: Guidelines for Final paper

I. Introduction of the topic:
   A. Historical and pastoral importance of the topic
   B. Personal interest in the topic

II. Summary of the research you conducted through reading, class discussion, public forum, additional conversations.

III. Reflection:
   A. What are your initial reflections and intuitions about sexuality after the research you conducted?
   B. What are the theological, ethical, and historical perspectives which help you understand this topic?
   C. What are the pastoral issues and practical implications for religious leaders and congregations that emerge from this research?
   D. How was your own faith and perspective changed by this research, and what difference will it make in your future ministry?
   E. Critique your conclusions in light of the community of discourse and practice most affected by this research.

Use footnotes to connect your reflection to the assigned reading.

January 25, 1999
James Poling
Ground Rules for Quality Group Interaction

1. Support, trust and safety. One goal for our class must be safety, that is, our group will strive to be a safe place for each of us to be vulnerable with our stories of suffering and hope. When we actively support one another, trust begins to develop, which increases our spiritual and academic growth. Safety and trust are processes that develop slowly over time as we engage in quality interaction and live within the realistic boundaries of the time, energy and commitments we have. Self-disclosure is optional.

2. Honesty with sensitivity is a gift of good group interaction. As our trust in one another grows, we will be able to be honest with our own suffering and hope, and give honest feedback to one another. Honesty will often test the civility rules of the class, but it should never be used as an excuse for insensitivity or harmful criticism.

3. Fairness and taking turns: Everyone in the class is important. There will be rhythms of talking and listening depending on the topics and needs of individuals. However, over time it is important for all group members to participate in the way they want to. We need permission to ask more active persons to listen more, and to ask the quieter persons to express themselves while respecting our different needs and styles.

4. Confidentiality. This is a class of persons in professional ministry who are expected to respect the highest ethical standards. Confidential materials discussed in class therefore must be protected from public disclosure or other inappropriate use. For that reason participation in this seminar requires a covenant of confidentiality that no personal information from the class will be divulged outside the classroom or used unethically or inappropriately.

5. Taking Responsibility for ourselves. We will touch on important issues of faith and life that are tender and may trigger anxiety and needs that go beyond the ability of the class to meet. Our support for one another is limited by time, energy, and the covenant of being a class in a school. We each need to be responsible for ourselves by actively engaging in friendships, support groups, and professional spiritual direction and/or pastoral counseling as needed because of the issues raised for us in the class.

6. Inclusive Language: We are encouraged to use inclusive language to refer to people in all possible life circumstances including gender, race, class, culture, disabilities, sexual orientations, etc. We are encouraged to use diverse images of God based on the principle that God is incarnate in human life wherever there is love and justice regardless of historically and constructed social categories.

7. Disclosing and confronting racism and sexism. We must have the freedom to discuss racism and sexism as it occurs in our conversations. Racism and sexism include forms of unexamined personal prejudice that are injurious to others. But racism and sexism are also economic, political, psychological and linguistic power systems that function in our conversations in complex and subtle (and unsubtle) ways. We need to be skillful in
identifying racism and sexism in all its forms and learn how to sensitively confront one another when necessary. Working with racism and sexism is complicated by historical forms of male dominance and white supremacy within this particular setting. Homophobia is one form of prejudice that needs to be critically examined by every member of the class.

8. Multicultural sensitivities. We represent diverse cultures and subcultures that influence our values and behaviors. We need to take time to understand and interpret these differences among us. Cultural sensitivity is complicated by the fact that European American culture is dominant at Garrett, Northwestern U., and Evanston, IL.