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# Sex, gender and family – the Christian contribution to an ethic of intimate relationships

## ABSTRACT

“Among all the changes going on in the world, none is more important than those happening in our personal lives – in sexuality, relationships, marriage and the family. There is a global revolution going on in how we think of ourselves and how we form ties and connections with others. It is a revolution advancing unevenly in different regions and cultures, with many resistances” (Giddens, 2003: 51).

Sex, gender and family – that is the working title of a project that will be started within the framework of cooperation between the Faculty of Theology of the University of Stellenbosch and Kampen Theological University. This will be developed in one of the programme units of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, namely Anthropology and Identity. In this article I wish to make plausible the relevance of 1) the *public* discussion on this theme for both of our societies; 2) a *theological* contribution to that discussion, which critically scrutinises the deep rooted religious dimensions of our moral understandings concerning sex, gender and family; 3) an *intercultural* approach in the ethical perspective, in which we mirror in dialogue the moral presuppositions of our different contexts, knowing that we form part of the same globalising world, sharing the same ecumenical commitment to public witness of the churches.

## A SKETCH OF THE HORIZON

Let me start with a description or sketch of the problems related to our theme in both the continents we live in. After this I want to elaborate shortly on three different ethical models that are influential in the public discussion on intimate relationships today. I shall conclude with a short evaluation of the shortcomings and benefits of each of them, and shall propose a guideline that I think might be a genuine Christian contribution to the discussion, namely an intercultural ethic circling around the concept of friendship.

But let me start with a small reading of the relational landscape in which we live, in both our different contexts. And let me restrict myself, and limit my scope. My focus is men and women, and how they live with one another in the personal realm, in intimate relationships – in friendships, in marriage and family, in their daily companionship. I am not talking about equal rights in the political and economic realm, about sexual intimidation and harassment at the workplace, about homosexuality or about education. I limit myself to talking about men and women, close to one another, in daily life at home.

I will begin with the context I am living in: the Dutch, European society. Does sex, gender, marriage, family really represent a *problem* – even a moral problem – in the European context

today? At first sight, there is no reason for such a suggestion. To a superficial observer, Europe represents a liberal paradise of freedom and permissiveness in an affluent society, liberated from the burden of moralistic traditions. A plurality of sexual relationships and patterns of living together is possible and legally permitted, without authoritarian regulations and limitations from the side of the government or church. That premarital sex is prohibited, that the husband should be the head of the family, that homosexual relationships are a sin – these seem like phrases from a distant past. The traditional family still exists and remains the ideal of many young people. But it represents one option among many forms of living together. Marriage is no longer a social and economic community of need (*Notgemeinschaft*), the elementary social unit fulfilling the three basic functions of intimacy, procreation and economy. It is rather a personal affiliation based on emotional choice (*Wahlverwandschaft*) of two partners (Beck-Gernsheim, 1994). People live together or single, or – after a divorce or the loss of a partner – single again. They choose to have children or not regardless of whether they have a partner or not. They raise their children together or alone, or with new partners from a second relationship in a so called patchwork-family. Sexual relationships can be started and ended at wish, homo-, bi- or heterosexual, and the experimenting with them starts already at an early age. Thanks to the broad availability of contraception, sexuality is disconnected from procreation. Sex is associated with pleasure and play – and sometimes pain – but no longer with babies. Sexuality becomes an instrument of personal self-fulfilment – and a rather safe instrument: the rate of HIV-contaminations has been stabilised in the recent years. The position of women has been improved significantly by their emancipation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They no longer are sexually, financially and culturally dependent on men, but gained an independent and autonomous position in society by education and legislation. The emancipation of women is far from completed yet; there still is a significant difference between the legal and the factual – but we are on our way.

So, given its sexual freedom, equal gender relationships, loose and non-authoritarian family ties, one may ask, is Europe really a relational paradise? Far from that, as the less superficial observer can determine. The dynamics of the modernising process in highly developed countries puts personal, intimate relationships under enormous pressure and makes it difficult to use words like love, fidelity, respect, trust, in a naïve and uncynical way. *Sexuality*, especially for the younger generation, is a field of uncertainty and fear, where dependency and power is easily misused. Sex is unbound, being no longer embedded in marriage and disconnected from procreation. It is an instrument of personal self-fulfilment, yes, but also a frustrating biological impulse that has to be satisfied in any way possible. Concerning the position of *women*, legally they indeed have equal rights, economically and socially, however, they are in a weak and vulnerable position. The social pressure is heavy: often they have to combine care for children and the family with (necessarily part-time) jobs and (broken) careers. With a divorce, women with part-time jobs and children are often a short step away from poverty.

Furthermore, the exponential growth of large communities of Muslim immigrants – in the Netherlands especially from Morocco and Turkey – in the last decades has changed the mono-cultural landscape of the Dutch society considerably. Within a few years the population of our four biggest cities – Amsterdam included – will consist of more than fifty percent of non-European immigrants. In many of their communities, gender equality is a provoking and appalling ideal, a European moral standard not to be taken over. Instead, the subordination of women is religiously and culturally legitimised. In some of these communities – the Somalian and Sudanese, for instance – the mutilating female circumcision is still a common practice, though prohibited by law. The number of cases of domestic and sexual violence and the number of victims of honour revenge among the immigrant communities are so elevated, that the government had to take special measures in order to protect victimised women. Gender equality in Europe? One may raise serious doubts about that.

What about marriage and *family*? The model of the nuclear family, the standard ideal until the late fifties of the last century (where the husband was the wage-earner and the wife stayed at home with two or three children), has lost its normativity. More and more couples live together, without being married. Though marriage is still popular, every one of three marriages ends in divorce. The institution of marriage is legally open for homosexual couples too, with the right to adopt children. Many children are raised in one parent families. So what does it mean to live in a family today? This disarray might be the reason that the Dutch government only defines the family formally as: 'any pattern of living together of one or more adults who bear responsibility for the care and education of one or more children'.

In the seventies of the last century the American Christopher Lasch presented the family grounded in a monogamous marriage as a *Haven in a Heartless World* (Lasch, 1979). It was a safe place in a cold, hard world; the right place for preparing children for adulthood, the ideal educational environment for moral formation.

In today's individualising, competitive world of global capitalism the picture of such a family only seems to represent a romantic ideology from the past. The family has become a household of negotiation, intimacy and sexuality a battlefield. Intimate relationships are not a pressure-free space, where one can forget for a moment the demands of performance and competition, but the continuation of them with other means.

The traditional ideal of marriage fulfilled and integrated three functions: procreation, intimacy and basic economic unity. It seems a relic from the past. Liberal individualism seems to be the only alternative instead. It considers personal relationships as an instrument of personal fulfilment. Even with all its possible benefits – I'll come back to them later on – it looks like a rather poor alternative. In fact, liberalism has no language to offer that people can use to orientate themselves in the complex and conflict-ridden, but also exciting and joyful sphere of intimacy, sexuality and affection. 'I love you' – there is no expression more often used, and at the same time more emptied of meaning. Speaking about intimacy, liberal individualism displays a moral vacuum. It only seems to survive because it parasites on the richer vocabularies of other traditions, among which is the Christian discourse on love.

What about the living together of men and women, sharing their personal life and intimacy in South-Africa? I cannot forego the HIV-AIDS issue. In many communities, what should be the most private experience of man and woman, the sealing of their intimacy, has become a moment of fear for illness and death. The devastating HIV-AIDS pandemic not only kills millions of people and drops life expectancies, but also destroys societal infrastructure. Families, far from being 'safe havens in a heartless world', become communities of sorrow, of care, of mourning.<sup>1</sup> As an outsider, one can only be astonished by, on the one hand, the enormous scale and the ravaging impact this disease has on the South-African society as a whole, and by the determined will on the other hand with which it is combated.

The HIV-AIDS pandemic as such – this 'tragedy on a biblical scale' as Kofi Annan, the General Secretary of the United Nations, called it – is a complex, multi-layered phenomenon. I limit myself by just wanting to show how HIV-AIDS makes intimacy into a public issue. Though the HI-virus is also transmitted by blood transfusion and mother child transmission, sexual intercourse is the main source of contamination. The HIV-AIDS awareness and prevention campaigns demonstrate how sexuality is not just fun, play and pleasure, but also a matter of power

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1 'There are no longer any South Africans who do not know someone or of someone who has died of AIDS or is living with HIV' (Whiteside and Sunter, 2000).

and powerlessness, of violence and vulnerability. HIV-AIDS reveals a radical gender<sup>2</sup> inequality that transcends frontiers of culture and ethnicity, but only comes publicly to the fore in the most affected continents like Africa and Asia, because of the conditions of extreme poverty that turns millions of people easily into victims.<sup>3</sup>

Especially women are concerned. In the literature on HIV-AIDS there are several reasons mentioned for this, all centred around gender relationships. A speaker at the Durban International AIDS Conference in 2000 mentions a number of reasons (Gupta, 2000:2-3):

First, in many societies there is a *culture of silence* that surrounds sex that dictates that “good” women are expected to be ignorant about sex and passive in sexual interactions. This makes it difficult for women to be informed about risk reduction or, even when informed, makes it difficult for them to be proactive in negotiating safer sex.

Second, the traditional *norm of virginity* for unmarried girls that exists in many societies, paradoxically, increases young women’s risk of infection because it restricts their ability to ask for information about sex out of fear that they will be thought to be sexually active. Virginity also puts young girls at risk of rape and sexual coercion in high prevalence countries because of the erroneous belief that sex with a virgin can cleanse a man of infection and because of the erotic imagery that surrounds the innocence and passivity associated with virginity. In addition, in cultures where virginity is highly valued, research has shown that some young women practice alternative sexual behaviours, such as anal sex, in order to preserve their virginity, although these behaviours may place them at increased risk of HIV.

This contrasts with the case of men: “[I]n many societies worldwide it is believed that variety in sexual partners is essential to men’s nature as men and that men will seek multiple partners for sexual release” (Gupta, 2000:3).

A third reason for women’s vulnerability is *economic dependency*. The wide spread of HIV/AIDS is inextricably related to poverty. Denise Ackermann writes, “Not only do people living in poverty suffer general loss of health but they are forced to adopt survival strategies that expose them to health risks. Families break up as men seek work in cities where they meet women, themselves under economic duress, who are willing to trade sexual access for a roof over their heads and some financial support” (Ackermann, 2004). “Poverty makes it more likely that women will exchange sex for money or favours, less likely that they will succeed in negotiating protection,

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2 Gender is not a synonym for sex. It is the social construction of a biological difference. It refers to the widely shared expectations and norms within a society about appropriate male and female behaviour, characteristics, and roles. It is a culture-specific social and cultural construct that defines the ways in which women and men interact with each other.

3 “It is no coincidence that 90 percent of people infected with HIV live in developing countries. Here, according to Lisa Sowle Cahill, 800 million people lack access to clean water and are wanting for basic health care and perinatal care, primary education, nutrition and sanitation, all of which grievously affect their physical well-being and make them vulnerable to disease. Not only do people living in poverty suffer general loss of health but they are forced to adopt survival strategies that expose them to health risks. Families break up as men seek work in cities where they meet women, themselves under economic duress, who are willing to trade sexual access for a roof over their heads and some financial support. Inevitably less money reaches families back in the rural areas and poverty spirals.” (D. M. Ackermann, “Seeing HIV and AIDS As a gendered pandemic”, in: Ned. Geref. theologien Tydskrif, deel 45, nommer 2, supplementum 2004, 214 – 220).

and less likely that they will leave a relationship that they perceive to be risky” (Gupta, 2000:3). And finally, the most disturbing form of male power, *violence against women*, contributes both directly and indirectly to women’s vulnerability to HIV.<sup>4</sup>

HIV positive women bear a double burden: they are infected and they are women. HIV turns the reality of intimacy inside out. To quote Lisa Sowle Cahill, a Roman Catholic feminist theologian and an expert on sex, gender and family issues: “The language of the sexual body for women in acutely deprived circumstances is not romantic mutuality, spiritual union, or a celebration of women’s reproductively oriented, nurturing psychology. It is submission, exhaustion, poor health, a continual struggle to provide materially for one’s young, and the probability of early death” (Cahill, 1996:215).

## A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH – THE CONTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS TO PUBLIC POLICY

Public policy therefore, should not focus only on sexual practices and partners. A more comprehensive approach is required in which the distribution of economic and social power is reconsidered, as well as the cultural conventions and religious traditions, that is, the deep anchored ways of thinking about sexuality, men and women, marriage and family. The HIV/AIDS problem should not only be treated within the public health prism. It is not only about safe sex that we should talk, but also about saving justice and love – vital values in most cultures and central symbols in Christian faith – from meaninglessness.

In discussing gender questions deep rooted values, symbols, narratives and religious myths are at stake. Here, theology – as a critical reflection on religious traditions and practices – has a significant public contribution to make.

In both the European and the African context, I mapped out earlier, sexuality, gender and family are contested and highly problematic issues. Or to put it in more daily vocabulary: men and women today have a lot of difficulties in living together at home, sharing table and bed. The ideal standard of a monogamous marriage and a stable family life, an ideal that prevailed until recently in our common Christian heritage, is disputed and esteemed to be no longer relevant in our modernising, global world. So let us ask what the constructive role of Christian ethics could be? How could theology make an adequate and relevant public contribution to the health and well-being of men and woman today?

In my vision Christian ethics is a critical hermeneutic of the moral meaning and relevance of the Christian tradition. It describes what the moral implications are of the Christian faith practice. Christian ethics however, also has a normative dimension, in being committed to the good that became visible in the vision and life practice of Jesus and his followers, who lived in the Spirit of the Kingdom of God. As a vision and practice, characterised by compassion and solidarity. Christian ethics puts Christian communities to the test to determine whether and to what extent they practice this vision. Therefore a descriptive, critical reconstruction of its traditions is required.

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4 “In many communities women can expect a beating and, not only if they suggest condoms usage, but also if they refuse sex” (Leclerc-Madlala, quoted by Ackermann, 2004:219). “In population-based studies conducted worldwide, anywhere from 10 to over 50 percent of women report physical assault by an intimate partner. And one-third to one-half of physically abused women also report sexual coercion ... And from other research we know that physical violence, the threat of violence, and the fear of abandonment act as significant barriers for women who have to negotiate the use of a condom, discuss fidelity with their partners, or leave relationships that they perceive to be risky” (Gupta, 2000:3).

How did the church think and teach on the topic of sex, gender, family? What are the different models to be distinguished in this plurality of traditions and how are they still vital and active today? How do they influence patterns of behaviour? Consequently, the critical normative question should be raised: do these visions stimulate the human flourishing, visible in the life practice of Jesus and his Kingdom, or do they frustrate human well-being? Christian theology should not be an uncritical defender of the so called Christian legacy. Religion, deeply anchored in society and in the heart of people, is an ambivalent fact; Christian religion is not excluded from this. Sometimes it threatens public health by consolidating the inequity against women or legitimating the 'culture of silence' about sexuality.<sup>5</sup> There is a dark side in religion, also in the Christian one. But it can also liberate people, and introduce them to practices of love, respect, care and fidelity. Precisely because it is rooted so deeply in the motivational structure of people, religion can serve as a helpful instrument of public health policy.

What I want to do in the remainder of my paper is this: I will make a global inventory of Christian thinking on intimate relationships, confining myself to the two traditions that are most powerful in the public realm today, the evangelical Conservative and the Roman Catholic. I confront them with a third model, the secular liberal one, dominant in modernising societies all around the globe. After some evaluating remarks on the benefits and weakness of these moral frameworks, I conclude with indicating the contours of – in my opinion – the promising perspective opened up by a Christian ethics of *friendship*, which could serve as the moral core of an – maybe intercultural – ethics of intimacy for men and women. That all these remarks are meant to be only tentative and programmatic are a matter of course.

### **1. Intimate relationships as a contract – the liberal model**

I start with the liberal model, which provides the moral legitimisation of the process of individualisation that touches also upon the personal life sphere in modern society. The guiding moral principle is the Enlightenment principle of *autonomy*. It concerns every individual, disregarding age, life stage, sex, or sexual orientation. Every person is free to live his or her personal life as he or she wishes, as long as he or she does not harm others in the employment of their freedom. A second fundamental ethical principle in liberalism is *equality*. Every individual is equally entitled to display its autonomy. This egalitarian principle is gender-irrelevant: between men and woman should reign equity, both in the public sphere (economy, politics), as in the personal realm. Sexuality is regarded as an individual quality, an instrument in service of personal self-fulfilment. Against this moral background a great variety of forms of living together is ethically legitimated. Marriage is just one among many others.

The obvious permissiveness and openness of liberal morality results not from the richness and complexity of its moral basis, but to the contrary, from its moral uni-dimensionality. Liberal morality is so effective and has so many sides precisely because of its poverty. The sociality of the personal life sphere can only be thought along the rules of the only grammar available, the language that also regulates economic and political relationships, namely the language of contract

5 Ackerman writes: "South Africa is a society in which cultural traditions of male dominance, bolstered by a particular understanding of the place of men in the Christian tradition, has resulted in continued inequity for women" (Ackermann, 2004:217). In a note (14) she adds: "This is illustrated by the fact that there are churches in South Africa which are part of the mainline denominations, in which communion is served in the following order: first the men, then male adolescents, then women and lastly female adolescents – as a confirmation of the headship of men, eg. refer 1 Cor. 11:3)."

Every intimate personal relationship is interpreted as a contract, from which both partners expect optimal satisfaction of their respective needs and desires of intimacy. For other needs and desires, other relationships. In late modern society, intimate personal relationships – Anthony Giddens has shown – become sorts of ‘pure relationships’: social relations which are internally referential, that is, relations that depend fundamentally on satisfactions or rewards generic to that relation itself. A pure relationship is a world on its own, existing just as long as both partners want it to exist. Love within such a relationship is a synonym for the satisfaction of mutual self-fulfilment, sexuality being one of its components - and sometimes its main component. Marriage is no longer a social institution that regulates the economic and juridical relationships within kinship and between generations. Its meaning is narrowed to a contract that lays down the emotional tie of two partners, as long as it lasts. The traditional value and meaning of marriage itself is bypassed, while the focus is on marriage’s more utilitarian benefits. We marry because (on average) marriage promises better sex, more money, longer lives and improved physical and emotional health. That is, for the time being, until further notice. A distinguishing mark of liberal society is that the wedding vow: ‘From this day forward / For better, for worse ... Till death do us part’, is difficult to make, because a so-called ‘open ended relationship’ like old-fashioned marriage does not fit a conditional contract.

Also the relationship between parents and children are judged by the principle of autonomy and equality. To have children or not is a personal choice, based on the individual decision of two parents, and depends on how emotionally rewarding they both regard parenthood. Procreation is not intrinsically included in the institution of marriage; it is a personal option. When there are children, their education should be aimed at their future autonomy and self-dependency. Parental authority never can be more than provisional and utilitarian, as an instrument serving the self-fulfilment of their children. One cannot choose one’s own family. But one can choose whether to stay with one’s family not. The family, like marriage, becomes a household of negotiation, in which children might say: ‘If – and only if – you provide what I need, you can stay my parent.’

## **2. Marriage as covenant – family as an order of creation. The evangelical conservative model**

The liberal ethos is so dominant, because it fits seamlessly into the individualising tendencies in modern society. It confirms the anthropology of market capitalism even in the private sphere of intimacy. A counter offensive however is opened by a conservative evangelical movement, effective and powerful in the US among the white middle class, and supported by the Bush administration. It explicitly appeals to the authority of the Bible and Christian tradition and aims at the realisation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois family ideal.

This version of conservative Protestantism accepts market capitalism, but wants to have the private sphere of family life freed from its mechanisms. The family is a market-free space, marked by male authority: the husband is the head of the woman, and responsible for representing the family in the outside world. With an appeal to Scripture (Gen 2:24, 1 Cor 11:3-12; Eph 5:22-28 and 1 Pet 3:1), it is defended that ‘a Christian man is obligated to lead his family to the best of his ability’; that ‘God apparently expects a man to be the ultimate decision-maker in the family’; and that the man ‘bears heavier responsibility for the outcome of those decisions’ (James Dobson, leader of the movement Focus on the Family, cited in: Browning, 1997:233). Though a part-time job is thinkable, the wife stays responsible for the household and the children. The core of the moral message of the conservatives is heterosexual, lifelong marriage. Sexuality is at the service of responsible procreation, and thus has no justified and legitimate place outside marriage. Whatever one might think of homosexuality, gay marriages represent a moral aberration.

Marriage is no contract, but – in the line of the Calvinist tradition – a covenant between husband and wife, without mediation, concluded directly before God. It is analogous to the

covenant of the biblical God with his chosen people. The liberal model only has a secular foundation; the conservative model on the other hand is religiously legitimised with a theology of orders of creation. God created marriage and family universally as relatively autonomous institutional spheres, independent from the other basic spheres of government, economy and religion. Each sphere has its own rationality and its respective responsibilities to God. The prevailing ethical principle in this intimate realm, it should be obvious, is not individual autonomy, not even love, but God's authoritative command.

We need not pay so much attention to the conservative model, if it only reminded us of the time of our parents or our own youth. Organised in the Christian Right movement however, it is not only an important political force inside the US, but also a frustrating factor in the struggle against HIV-AIDS. Immediately after taking office, the conservative Bush administration put a global gag rule into force, which decrees that American donor money may not go to awareness and prevention campaigns, like those of the World Health Organisation and the European Union. These campaigns give a priority to the propagation of the use of condoms. Instead, faith based movements that sustain monogamy, marital fidelity, and sexual abstinence should be supported (the so-called A(bstinence) B(eing faithful) C(ondom)-method is often preferred). The US government does not want to bear financial responsibility for UN affiliated organisations that struggle for gender equality, and work among homosexuals, drug users and sex workers.

### 3. Roman Catholic model

A second Christian tradition, vital and influential in large parts of the world, is the Roman Catholic Church. As the White House, also the Vatican plays an important role as political factor in the struggle against HIV-AIDS. The Roman Catholic vision on intimate relationships stands in a long tradition, going back to the Church Father Augustine, in which sexuality is interpreted and judged exclusively in function of procreation. Marriage has three goals: 1. the mutual companionship of husband and wife interpreted as a sacrament (*sacramentum*), 2. marital fidelity as a remedy for the sin of sexual lust (*fides*), but 3. and most importantly: the creation of offspring (*proles*) (Gustafson, 1984:156; cf. Cahill, 1996:188). Nature is a teleological, goal oriented order, according to the teachings of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Procreation, not pleasure or play, is the main goal of sexuality, ordered by the Creator as a law of nature, discernable by human reason. And even if modern natural sciences heavily doubt that presumption, this doctrine is upheld in the Catholic tradition from the Middle Ages on, up to John Paul II, in his recent, more personalistic philosophic writings. It implicates that homosexuality and the use of contraceptives is contrary to nature, and therefore a sin against divine law. Celibacy and sexual abstinence is the best way to live out your divine calling and to dedicate your life completely to God. Marriage as a second best, is not a contract, not a covenant, but should be interpreted as a sacrament in which husband and wife in bodily union participate in the divine mystery of love. God takes part in the flesh; he is present in the vital centre of creation. The marital union of male and female, according to John Paul II's 'Letter to Families' written at the occasion of the United Nations International Year of the Family (1994), "rather than closing them up in themselves, opens them up toward a new life, toward a new person. As parents, they will be capable of giving life to a being like themselves, not only bone of their bones and flesh of their flesh (cf. Gen. 2:23), but an image and likeness of God – a person' (cited in Browning, 1997:239). Love is interpreted as self-sacrifice, an act of mutual self-giving. "The total physical self-giving would be a lie if it were not the sign and fruit of a total personal self-giving" (John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, Apostolic Exhortation On the Family, 1981, cited in Cahill, 1996:202f).

The Catholic tradition as a whole, just as the conservative evangelical one, is characterised by male dominance. In the complementary union of man and woman, the primary responsibility

belongs to men; in marriage, in the family – interpreted as a ‘domestic church’ – and in the institution of the Roman Catholic Church. Women, as pointed out critically by Catholic feminists, should identify themselves with Mary, with her virginity and motherhood, not with the seductive Eve. Different from the conservative Protestants, Catholics do not stress male authority within marriage and family in a formal juridical way, with the help of a – no less masculine – divine command ethic. The recent Vatican teachings, on the contrary, stress the mutual consent and the intersubjective dialogue between the spouses and their dedication toward one another.<sup>6</sup> They accentuate their equal dignity. It’s rather the Catholic vision on sexuality that is male dominated. Men and women have to fulfil different gender roles, which are derived from the natural order; the active role is played by men, the receptive and passive by women. A woman – see note 6 – is defined by her “capacity for the other”, which is her ability to persevere in adversity and to sacrifice for others. Sexuality is the locus of moral danger, of uncontrolled passion. Women are the embodiment of seduction.

The public relevance of the Roman Catholic teachings is obvious. They play an obstructive role in AIDS prevention by only focusing on awareness and prevention campaigns on sexual abstinence, and resisting the propagation of condom use. But even more important seems to me the fact that within this model for intimate relationships no voice is given to women in their struggle for equal gender power. In confirming the passive and receptive role of women, and in its masculine vision on sexuality as uncontrolled passion, the Roman Catholic doctrine offers them no support.

Does the Conservative evangelical and the Roman Catholic model for intimate personal relationships represent a reliable and adequate Christian alternative to liberal individualism? I think they both have their advantages and weaknesses, as the liberal ethos itself. All the three models should be evaluated critically, in order to obtain a more satisfying ethical frame of reference.

#### SOME EVALUATING REMARKS

The first thing I want to say is that in my view the liberal ethos rightly stresses equal gender dignity, to express a balance of power in personal relationships. This moral position deserves theological support. Against the one-sided conservative appeal to Scripture, the other, more egalitarian line in the – it is true: ambivalent – Bible should be stressed as the more authoritative one. It gets visible in the vision and life practice of Jesus and his preaching of the reign of God, in which women played a prominent role. Jesus’ ministry and the early Christian community

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6 On 31 July 2004 the Vatican published a Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and the World. I quote the South African *Sunday Times*, dated August 1, 2004: “The document identifies the two ideological challenges feminism holds for Christianity: that women, in a bid to be themselves, must view men as enemies; and that in order to avoid the domination of one sex over another, deny differences between men and women. This tends to ‘call into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent,’ the letter reads. To counteract this, the letter – which is littered with references to the book of Genesis – says that men and women should be considered equal, but as having different roles. It says that the relationship between men and women is ‘complementary’ and that women should be able to contribute to society without being penalized – whether they work or are housewives. It also says a woman is defined by her ‘capacity for other’, which is her ability to persevere in adversity and to sacrifice for others.”

represented a counterculture within the patriarchal culture of that time. They embodied – or tried to as far as possible – the vision that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal 3:28). The Jesus movement was characterised by an ethic of mutuality and inclusivity, instead of gender hierarchy and the exclusion of women. ‘Jesus’ preaching of the reign or kingdom of God represents a new experience of the divine presence in history, an experience which transforms human relationships by reordering relations of domination and violence toward greater compassion, mercy, and peace, expressed in active solidarity with “the poor” (Cahill, 1996:121).

In this respect, the liberal tradition, in restoring the dignity of women as individuals created in the image of God, deserves Christian support. I think that this effect of European Enlightenment – the struggle for women’s emancipation, the ideal of gender equality – should be interpreted as a late fruit of revelation, a sign of God’s grace.

Once this is stated, a double task emerges for Christian ethics in the public area. The first task is a critical one: the religious – also Christian – legitimisation of the power hierarchy between men and women should be contested. Here, Christian ethics plays the role of a critic of ideology. A second task, however, is more constructive: Christian ethics should develop an enriching moral vocabulary of love and intimacy, in order to compensate the moral speechlessness of liberal ethics, when the private sphere is concerned. The liberal ethos speaks only with a juridical and political language about intimacy. But what happens between men and women cannot be expressed fully in the terminology of rights and duties. Furthermore, as a secular newcomer in the history of mankind, it has no myth, no narratives, no motivating symbols available. The liberal ethos displays a rather poor and uni-dimensional moral discourse. Especially conservative marriage and family ethics has an open eye for the differences between the private and public sphere and the pluralism in moral vocabulary therefore required. This needs to be noted. It has developed a certain sensitivity for the moral complexity and subtlety in different realms of life. One should acknowledge this, without – as the conservatives do – subsequently ontologising these spheres.

Christian communities, experiencing the love of God in Jesus Christ, developed a rich tradition in speaking about love. In the moral reflection on intimate relationships, so acute since the HIV-AIDS epidemic, theology could make a relevant, public contribution. In the end, in those relationships there is more at stake than safe sex; it’s about saving the good of love from meaninglessness and cynicism. In the Christian tradition love has always been interpreted along two basic lines of interpretation: love as self-sacrifice and love as equal regard. In the first interpretation, dominant in the modern Roman Catholic ethics of marriage, the self-sacrificing lover gives him or herself totally away as a gift to the other. I think this total self surrender is indeed an ultimate possibility, just as Jesus gave himself away completely for others. But in my opinion it should stay an ultimate, an extreme action of fading oneself away, in order to restore the broken balance, the lost reciprocity in a relationship. Self-sacrifice never should be a goal in itself. The act of love should aim – here I follow Don Browning – on ‘equal regard’. In an ethic of equal regard, the self and the other are taken with equal seriousness, according to the love command: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (Mt 19:19). “Equal regard means that the selfhood and dignity of the other is respected as seriously as one expects the other to respect or regard one’s own selfhood. One also works for the good – the welfare – of the other as vigorously as one works for one’s own” (Browning, 1997:153).

Christian ethics as love ethics, as an ethics of equal regard, continues an important characteristic of the tradition of Calvinist covenant theology, in which the covenant between God and human beings might be initiated and/or restored one-sidedly, but essentially is reciprocal, dialogical and symmetrical in its aim. In line with this tradition, which is my own, also the personal relationship between man and woman might be interpreted as a ‘covenantal dialogue’ (Browning, 1997).

But I wonder whether the concept of 'covenant' might be capable of functioning as a bridge between the language of Christian theology and public discourse. Is the normative kernel of what happens in the intimate turn towards one another of man and woman sufficiently grasped in the juridical idiom of covenant? Therefore I end this paper with an invitation to rethink another concept in the Christian tradition, central from Augustine until Thomas Aquinas: the concept of friendship.

An ethics of intimacy might be based on friendship, as the inner moral core of good interpersonal relationships. As important as it may be, an intimate relationship cannot be based solely on sexual passion. That is the central misconception in the modern idea of 'pure relationship'. When passion fades away, a pure relationship has to be ended. Neither can the mystery of an intimate relationship be grasped by marking it juridically as covenant or religiously as a sacrament. An intimate relationship has its justification in itself. When there's no intimacy between two spouses anymore, marriage becomes a prison, even though it may be called a covenant or sacrament.

Perhaps with the concept of friendship one can approach the moral centre of an intimate personal relationship more closely. An intimate relationship is neither an instrument of self-fulfilment, nor a sign of a reality that lies somewhere outside itself. It has its meaning in itself. Ever since Aristotle two people are called truly friends, "who desire the good of their friends for the friends' sake [...] because each loves the other for what he is, and not for any incidental quality" (Nicomachean Ethics 1156b12, 247). Friendship is an ethical attribute that can neither be ascribed to individuals, nor can it be institutionalised. Friendship is voluntary and based on free consent. It is informal, and particular though not exclusive. Friendship requires equal respect and dignity and does not tolerate hierarchy. It demands the mutual commitment of both partners, who keep one another in balance. Friendship is based on spiritual affinity, like-mindedness; friends share the same ideals. Finally, friends enjoy the companionship of one another. They like being together unconditionally, sharing one another's sorrow and joy.

I would like to consider friendship, understood in this way, not as a form of relationship next to marriage or family, but as their very moral basis. An ethic of friendship may even provide us with a normative model for intimate relationships in modernising societies - a model that even transcends cultural contexts. Whatever people share with each other when they have an intimate relationship - physical passion, emotional trust - and where ever they might live, if they are not friends they don't share the ultimate good of being together. Friendship is a complex and sometimes conflict ridden relationship in which one's individuality is transcended towards a mode of being that supersedes the frontiers of our self. The Church Father Augustine, himself a virtuosi in friendship ("Without a human being who is our friend, nothing in the world appears friendly to us", he wrote), was the first to interpret the relationship between husband and wife, parents and children as a union of friendship (cf. Burt, 1999: 86ff). Augustine thinks of friendship as a participation in the life of God. He experiences in the gift of friendship the grace of God, as he discerns in the companionship with God the model for human togetherness.

With an ethic of friendship as its vital centre, there might be a Christian theology of intimate relationships possible that takes seriously both the Christian traditions and the difficult challenges facing intimate relationships today. In Western liberal societies it can do justice to the existing plurality of forms of living together, next to traditional marriage, and function as their moral touchstone. In non-western cultures it can contribute to gender equality. Whatever men and women intimately may do with and to one another, it is no good if it is not born out of friendship.

## Table: Ethics of intimate relationships

Models: **Critical Theological** **Secular Liberal Catholic Conservative** *Root symbol* Covenant of dialogue Contract Sacrament Order of creation *Gender* Mutuality Individuality Male orientated/ Complementary Male dominance / hierarchy *Ethical principle* Friendship Passion and emotion Law of nature Biblical command *Moral ideal* Love as equal regard Love as self-fulfilment Love as self-sacrifice Loving patriarchalism

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