

Workshop Report: Sexual Diversity and Religious Diversity

March 31 – April 2, 2011 Queen's University

By Pamela Dickey Young

In recent years in North America, religious groups have been in the public eye when they have addressed a number of important issues concerning sexuality. These include: the ordination of members of sexual minorities, same-sex marriage, so-called “honor” killings where a woman’s sexual virtue is in question, and instances where religious officials are the perpetrators of sexual violence. In some of these cases, the relation of sexuality and religion is played out on the field of law and public policy through constitutional and criminal cases. Some religious individuals, for a variety of reasons, either explicitly choose not to or are unable to follow the official teachings of their religious group concerning sexuality. Individuals must construct their own religious identities in relation to religious positions on sexuality. For example, Roman Catholic women who practice birth control must construct their religious and personal identities in relation to a church that opposes their contraceptive choices. Thus, research on religion and sexuality covers a broad range of topics and approaches from looking at the positions of religious groups, to understanding how religious teachings on sexuality do or do not change over time, to seeing how individuals choose to construct their own sexuality in relation to their religiosity. The methodologies for studying religion and sexuality run a gamut of approaches: historical, discourse and document analysis, quantitative and qualitative studies. Queer theory is often used in studies of religion and sexuality. The Workshop on *Sexual Diversity and Religious Diversity* covered many of these areas of study.

In her keynote address entitled, “Moving Beyond Tolerance: Sexual Diversity and Economic Justice, **Janet Jakobsen** challenged us by asking “what are we moving toward?” She highlighted the suggestion that we move from religious tolerance to religious freedom, and finally that we move toward something we might call “economic justice.” Through recasting the “neoliberal coin” and accepting the seriousness of sexuality as an important, valid issue deserving of study and political attention, economic justice can be redefined to include all human beings living in a social world, with a reality of freedom and justice for all.

Under the heading, **Religion and the Construction of Sexual Minority Rights**, papers were presented by **Margaret Denike** (Dalhousie University), **Wing Hin (Vivian) Lee** (York University) and **Pamela Dickey Young** (Queen's University). Denike's paper “Homonationalism, Racism, Islamophobia” highlighted the productive capacity of sex in national identity and challenged the audience to question how we talk about international LGBT issues without lapsing into a nationalistic discourse, while also commenting on the commodification, codification, and illusion of ‘tolerance’ in the international political arena. Lee, in a paper titled “‘I’m not Homophobic, I’m Chinese’: Discourses of Multiculturalism, Colonialism, and a Christian Canada in Hong Kong Canadian Anti-Same-Sex Marriage Campaigns, 2003-2005,” traced the deployment of the language of multiculturalism, race, ethnicity and colonialism in the anti-same-sex marriage debate by Hong Kong Christians.

Troubling, from Lee's perspective, was the accompanying narrative which positions Chinese immigration to Canada as part of a divine plan, a narrative which denies the brutal realities of Canadian immigration policy of the nineteenth Century. Dickey Young, in a paper called "Religion, Sex and Politics: How do they relate in the Canadian Context? The Case of Alberta's Bill 44" argued that Alberta's Bill 44 helps to reinforce heteronormativity by reading sexuality and sexual orientation as problematic. She contended that this bill was meant to solve a political problem, not an educational or human rights problem, and as such could best be understood as an olive branch to religious people and conservative voters.

A second major theme was **Sexuality and the Construction of Religious Identities**. **Heather Shipley** (University of Ottawa), in a paper called "Connected Identities: Challenging Narrative Scripts about Identity Construction," focused on the recent proposed changes to the Ontario sex education curriculum, the ensuing controversy in the media, and the subsequent hold and impending further review, which was placed, on the proposed changes. While there were religious groups in opposition to the proposed changes to sex education, essentializing religion as opposed to queer sexual identities creates a false opposition, and disregards the diversity of options for both religious choices and sexual identities. In "When Religion Meets Sexuality: Two Tales of Intersection," **Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip** (University of Nottingham), drawing on primary research in the United Kingdom, emphasized the fact that identity politics is more than a human political strategy for resistance and change. Instead, Yip's paper challenged the apparent dichotomy of religious repression/secular freedom, and suggested that identity politics has salient spiritual significance and symbolism, because of the belief that these religious actors have God on their side, capable of encouraging individual and collective agency for change. **Catherine Holtmann** (University of New Brunswick), in "Women, Sex and the Catholic Church: The Implications of Domestic Violence on Reproductive Choice," emphasized the importance of exploring women's lived religion and described four strategies, used by women in her research, when considering issues of sexuality and social justice. The first was the notion of placing people before principles. The second was resisting the culture of silence surrounding sexual issues. The third strategy involved fostering ministries of caring. The fourth strategy was creating movements for religious change. In "A Cultural-Religious Framework for Reproductive Justice in Canada," **Rukhsana Ahmed** (University of Ottawa) highlighted the interplay of politics and ethnicity, and how reproductive health tied into the distribution of culturally mediated public services.

The next theme, **Sexual Bodies/Religious Bodies** was addressed by **Donald Boisvert** (Concordia University), **Rebecca Johnson** (University of Victoria), **Tracy Trothen** (Queen's University), **Nancy Nason-Clark** (University of New Brunswick) and **Susan Palmer** (Dawson College). In his paper titled "Catholicity, Pedagogy and Sexuality: The Use of Adolescent Saints in Religious Discourse" Boisvert built on the idea of the dangerous teenage body and argued that in North American Catholic culture these bodies were moulded and tamed through devotion to adolescent saints. Johnson, in "Religions Sexuality and Longing in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*" reflected on what the film can help us see about sexual and religious diversity, by focusing on the role and the place of longing -- of longing for something just out of reach (a lost lover, health, a relation with god, political power, family, friends, justice). Trothen, in "The Spirited and Modified Body in Sport: the construction of athletes, sexualities, and a way of being religious" examined the interplay of the overwhelming impetus to win in elite sport and the concept of authenticity and the authentic

body. She described developments in embodied normativity and its changing landscape, as well as the idea of transcendence both spiritually and in relation to gender and body transcendence. Nason-Clark, in "Strong Spirits, Abused Bodies: Social, Political and Theological Reflections," focused on her work on domestic violence within faith communities, and specifically on the website project she has created for the RAVe Project (religion and violence e-learning). The website seeks to promote the work of religious leaders within communities in cases of domestic violence, through equipping both the religious leaders and the community members with the tools and resources for collaboration and cooperation with shelter workers, advocates and therapists. In "Prophetic Sexuality: Experiments with Sexuality and Gender in New Religious Movements," Palmer suggested a number of hypotheses which have been used to theorize sexual experimentation in New Religious Movements which include "Divine Revelation," the "Leader's Lab," "Response to Social Change," "Commitment and *Communitas*," and "Oriental Import Traditions." Referring to three case studies (Winnifred Barton, Roch "Moses" Thériault and Eugene Richer dit LaFlèche), Palmer demonstrated the ways in which her theoretical categories can shed light on the experiments with sexuality in NRM's and the shifts in behaviour of leaders and of groups over time.

The final session of the workshop provided participants with time for some in-depth discussion of overlapping themes, theories and methods. The papers are being collected for publication in an edited volume.