

No, this is not one more Thinksheet on gender language for God, though I admit to having that topic much on my mind as I'm about to complete a close study of the best backlash-book on feminine referencing of God (SPEAKING THE CHRISTIAN God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism, ed. by Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., Eerdmans/92). It's about the mostly-American crisis of clergy sex, which runs this range: (1) none (ie, clergy virgins), (2) virginal marriage + marital faithfulness, (3) virginal marriage + long-past adultery, (4) virginal marriage + recent adultery, (5) virginal marriage + present adultery, (6) nonvirginal marriage + faithfulness, (7) nonvirginal marriage + long-past adultery, (8) nonvirginal marriage + recent adultery, (9) nonvirginal marriage + present adultery, (10) promiscuity. Being myself in (2), I've counseled clergy over the whole range.

The Thinksheet's immediate occasion is a United Church of Christ conference on the subject, for those who have disciplinary responsibility for our clergy--in which I participated only in fore-&-aft conversations.

1 Jesus says angels don't have the problem of **genital control**: no sex, because nonsexual (M.12.25). Without the weight of genitals, they aren't tempted to take themselves too seriously, heavily. That is why, according to that old reifier of metaphors G.K.Chesterton, they can fly: they take themselves lightly. So there's our first clue as to why some clergy drift into genital violation of vows ecclesial or marital: *they put too much weight on their sexual feelings.*

2 The public (the media) makes cynical grunts over news of clergy venality (greed) but gives fascinated attention to clergy venery (lust). Since the expose of the sexual exploits of certain televangelists, especially Bakker & Swaggert, that fascination has somewhat abated: news run into the ground is no news. The trial of Henry Ward Beecher (d.1887) for alleged philandering with a counselee was big news because of his prominence & the rarity of the case, but now this aberration goes unnoticed except in the local press--except, again, in the case of prominent clergy.

3 Same-sex lust (homosexuality) & adult lust for children (pedophilia, including pederasty) are not unknown in clergy permitted to marry, but they're more common in churches forbidding clerical marriage & in monasteries, which are less attractive to heterosexuals, who must give up more.

Why do I use the pejorative "lust" for homosexuals & pedophiles but not for straights? Because the classical Christian position is that of the three, the only acceptable sexual desire is straight. Pedophilia remains unacceptable, indeed has become even more unacceptable since the Roman Catholic Church (facing tens of millions of \$ of claims) has tightened discipline. Sexually inactive out-of-the-closet homosexuals are increasingly acceptable in some churches, but sexually active out-of-the-closets are acceptable in few churches. The extent, if any, to which "Mother Nature" is responsible for homosexuality & pedophilia remains in dispute. All churches agree on the principle that *human beings are responsible for their sexual in/activity no matter which of the three orientations.* And almost all churches refuse the claim of some homosexuals to equal sexual status with heterosexuals. (Emphasis on "sexual": this affects no other equality-claims.)

The other answer to the question opening the ¶ immediately above is that I do use "lust" also for straights: for any nonmarital or nonconsensual genital activity except masturbation.

4 Jesus enjoins the most radical defense against wrong genital activity, viz the earliest possible intervention against it: *custodia oculorum*, ie inattention (Mt.5.28, looking "with lust"). What doesn't get your attention can't get you. Was he preaching against marriage? No, but he was preaching against taking Mother

Nature (who's all for the lustful eye) too seriously, in violation of Father God. It's a counsel of prudence. To call it a counsel of perfection, as have most interpreters through the centuries, is to dismiss it "for all practical purposes," on the illogical leap that since it's extremely difficult it must be impossible.

In a permissive time like ours, such dismissal gets extended. Children "can hardly be expected" not to fornicate (the original "f" word, now replaced by the positive phrase "practice abstinence").

Now, the clergy should live at a higher sexual level, closer to Jesus' logion, than the laity. (I didn't say "should be expected to": they shouldn't be.) When they fall into low sex, the devil wins more than when that happens in the laity. So the ecclesial discipline should be severe. But consider what militates against such severity:

...."unconditional **love**," which easily takes the form of low-conditional or no-conditional forgiveness. The classical Christian position is plainly expressed in an old classic on THE PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS by Albert C. Knudson (Abingdon-Cokesbury/43, p.125): "Moral love is necessarily conditioned love. If it were not, it would not be moral." God's love is "not unconditional," for "the severity of the divine judgment awaits" for those who refuse to "yield themselves to the divine *agape* to be transformed by it." A fundamentalist ethic? No. An evangelical ethic? No. Knudson was a personalistic modernist. Post-modernism has jettisoned the divine judgment &, with it, conditional love. The sexual sinner need not depend on cheap grace. Like judgment, grace is unnecessary.

....unconditional **forgiveness**. Marsha G. Witten, studying recent sermons on the Prodigal Son, found little weight given to the repentance side of the repentance/forgiveness transaction. The story's hyperbolic to show (as an old gospel song puts it) "grace that is greater than all our sin": it's not to be read as though the father had written "Come home, all is forgiven." Yes, all was forgiven when the son went home: the going home was repentance in action. But "unconditional forgiveness" perverts the story by claiming God's forgiveness *before* the return. Clipping off the first phrase, Ms. Witten titles her book ALL IS FORGIVEN: The Secular Message of American Protestantism (Princeton U.P./94). A more-tolerant-than-thou spirit pervades pulpit & pew, making repugnant the thought of disciplining either.

5 To this permissivism, which now pervades & pollutes "Christian love," suppressing Mother Nature (despite Jesus' bold injunction to do so) is oppressive. According to the Freudians, including sadomasochist Foucault, nature is oppressed by humanity's internalization of societal norms, which have behind & within them (not divine revelation) only custom, tradition-conditioned behavior. Society has reasons for proscribing certain sexual behaviors, eg pedophilia; but don't claim Mother Nature as support for such prohibitions. Father God may be, but Mother Nature is not against doing what (for any individual) comes naturally. Pedophilia, homosexuality, marital rape are not "sick" in themselves but sick only because society denies them the status of healthful behavior. Mother Nature, the Goddess, has a womb, & whatever comes forth from it is natural & in-itself good. And remember, folks: "You can't fight Mother Nature."

6 What a contrast to biblical ethics, which is affirmative of nature as God made it ("very good," Gn.1.31) & suspicious of what humanity makes of it! We Christians are baptized, if the old formula is used on us, against "the world, the flesh, & the devil." We are called to a moral-spiritual discipline which is (in a definition I devised $\frac{1}{2}$ c. ago & still hold to) *the systematic violation of our feelings in the interest of a higher order.*

7 The social context of present clergy sexual misconduct: for almost two generations, Americans have been taught that (1) we're individually on our own in moral decision-making & (2) we should be, of our feelings, "a little more careful than anything" (to paraphrase e.e.cummings on love). Contrast God's treatment of Jonah: the systematic violation of Jonah's feelings in the interest of God's higher order, viz concern for the city of Ninevah. As you read each of the four chapters, imagine how Jonah's feeling. Then, please, laugh. Laugh to be free!