Sexual Orientation and Bisexuality: A Complex Reality

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"Bisexuality doesn't exist," said someone to me a number of years ago. I have heard other statements, too: Bisexuals just can't have stable relationships. Bisexuals live in a "no one's land." Bisexuals are really gay people who just haven't come all the way out of the closet. Bisexuals are really confused about their identity. Bisexuals are indiscriminate in their sexual partners. The only way to be "truly" bi is to be active sexually with partners of both sexes equally. Bisexuals are incapable of monogamy. Bisexuality "doubles your chances for a date on Saturday night."

Perhaps some of these statements are familiar to you. The reality of bisexuality is often denied by gay, lesbian, and heterosexual communities alike. And yet, to understand bisexuality and the complexity of sexual orientation might help make sense out of some of the claims of the "transforming" or "exodus" ministries.

My purpose in this article is to encourage a broader understanding of the complexity of sexual orientation, particularly as it is seen in bisexuality, and to encourage theological reflection which includes the experience of the range of sexual orientation.

Myths and stereotypes, like the ones listed above, are a problem for bisexual folk, just as they are for gay/lesbian people. Individual bisexual persons may fit or believe one or more of these myths and stereotypes. But just as there is not just one homosexual lifestyle, there is not just one bisexual lifestyle, but a whole range of possibilities from which each individual makes her or his own choices and decisions.

Looked at in the context of the whole of what we know about human sexuality, sexual orientation is much more complex than simply the two commonly used heterosexual-homosexual categories. It is even more complex than adding a third category of "bisexual;" yet, to talk about certain realities, labels sometimes make things a bit clearer.
Defining just what is meant by the word "bisexuality" is not easy. A definition that I like is, bisexuality is the presence of significant degrees of erotic attractions, erotic fantasies, and emotional preferences for members of both genders, with some recognition of their significance. Note that behavior is not a necessary part of the definition, and that recognition, or self-identification, is important. This is not a precise definition (if one were even possible), but it will do for the purpose of this article. It is important to note that bisexuality is not a discrete category, but roughly fits the middle range of scales that measure sexual orientation, such as the Kinsey scale and the Klein Grid.

The Kinsey scale is a zero to six continuum which was designed by the Kinsey researchers in the 1940's to describe the reality they were discovering, that there were not just "two kinds of people" (heterosexual and homosexual), but in fact a whole range of behaviors and "psychologic reactions" from homosexual to heterosexual and all points in between. The scale runs from zero, exclusively heterosexual, to six, exclusively homosexual, with three being equal components of both.

An affirmative approach to research on bisexuality or bisexual persons has been a recent development. Ron Fox has an excellent review of this research in an article in the exceptional text, *Bisexuality: The Psychology and Politics of an Invisible Minority*. [1] One early study not in his review I find particularly interesting. This study pointed out some of the ways bisexual persons are different from heterosexual and homosexual persons. Pat Saliba had self-identified heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual persons rank themselves on three separate Kinsey scales: physical sexual activity, affectionate relationships, and erotic fantasy. Saliba sums up her research: "Sexual orientation is complex, not simple."

[2] She found that people almost never rated themselves at the same point on all three scales. Within each self-identified group, there is diversity of ratings: all the homosexual persons and all the heterosexual persons weren't exclusively so, and all the bisexual persons weren't perfectly equal in gender preference.

She found that, among the bisexual group, affectionate relationships and erotic fantasies were "almost as important as sexual activity in their decision to self-identify as bisexual." This group also was quite diverse in the combinations of ratings among the three scales: some had only incidental sexual activity with persons of the same sex, some had only incidental sexual activity with persons of the other sex. While affectionate relationships were frequently ranked equally, "erotic fantasies were as diverse as those for sexual activity."

Saliba found "tremendous variability, in all areas" among all groups, "And yet the bisexuals are
much more like one another than they are either the heterosexual or homosexual groups, and the same is true for each group." She also found that the way sex and affection are dealt with is more related to whether one is male or female. "Sexual orientation is not only much more than who you sleep with . . . but it is also where your affections lie, and even more importantly, how you integrate those affections into your sexual identity."

There are different kinds of bisexuality, as well. One typology, identified by Fritz Klein [3] identified transitional, historical, sequential, and concurrent types. Transitional bisexuality can be understood as a stage in coming out homosexual, and is primarily a behavioral reality, though attractions and fantasies can shift. Historical bisexuality is seen in the long sweep of a person's life, with greater or lesser mixes of heterosexual and homosexual components. Sequential bisexuality is also seen over a period of time, with relationships being first with one and then with the other gender. Concurrent bisexuality is the maintenance of relationships with persons of both genders at the same time.

In my experience and that of others who self-identify as bi, bisexual persons often feel some confusion at sometimes being attracted to one and then the other gender. The either-or myth contributes greatly to this confusion. Sometimes the confusion is simply the changeability of their attractions from day to day, or week to week.

It is the homosexual part of being bi that usually gives the most difficulty, so bisexual people usually need the support of gay/lesbian people, and so often are reluctant to identify as bi in gay/lesbian circles. This seems to be changing somewhat, at least in some gay groups, but homophobia will continue to make it difficult to "come out" bi in the general society, and biphobia will make it difficult to come out in both groups.

Bi people are often particularly sensitive to the importance of self-identification, growing out of the common experience of others denying their existence or defining sexuality for them. Bisexuals may come for counseling to be more comfortable with a wide range of sexual options. They may want to be more comfortable in fantasy or behavior or both, with men and women. They may want to be monogamous. They may want to be nonmonogamous and still have a viable primary relationship with either a woman or a man. They may want to be comfortable with multiple relationships (and practice safer sex). They may want to be more comfortable defining their own sexual options, apart from partner, peer, or society pressure. They may want to be comfortable not being sexually active with both sexes, and have feelings and fantasies about both.
Bisexual persons are often more concerned about relationships than gender. The daughter of a friend of ours said she couldn't imagine using the shape of a person's genitals to decide whether to have a relationship with the person. This expresses well the perspective of bi people I have known.

Bi folks are concerned, too, with the capacity to express relationships genitally if it is fitting, desired, and mutual. Bi persons are also often concerned about managing these relationships not only in caring ways for their partners, but also in ways that honor their own self-understanding.

Bisexuality is a complex reality, and highlights the complexity of sexual orientation itself. In my opinion, the experience of bisexual persons helps illumine the wide range of the gift of sexuality, and will continue to challenge our understandings and assumptions about sexuality.

Christian faith communities and theological traditions, with a few exceptions have been ambivalent about affirming that sexuality is a good gift of God. Even while affirming its goodness, they have usually attempted to silence the testimonies of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Christians. And they have largely ignored emerging scientific consensus in their theological and ethical reflections.

If people of faith were to commit to hearing the voices of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered Christians, and to honor insights and understandings of scientific research, what would be some useful possibilities for Christian theological reflection? There are some really fine treatments along these lines which often focus only on gay/lesbian voices and experience. When the reality of bisexual and transgendered people is included, the picture of human sexuality immediately becomes more complex. What resources are there for this kind of breadth in theological reflection?

There are a number of publications that could be useful for theological reflection from a perspective that includes the reality of bisexual and transgendered persons. Some of these references are listed in the bibliography.

One approach to reflecting theologically on bisexuality could be to focus on the community of the church, the silencing, the judgments, the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, and the call
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for just and humble actions, such as Marilyn Alexander and James Preston do in their book *We Were Baptized Too*.

[4] The emphasis of this approach is God's inclusive grace, known through creation (the image of God),
[5] welcome of the stranger,
[6] and the sacraments of baptism and holy communion.
[7]

Another approach is in James Nelson's landmark book, *Embodiment*. It is to do "sexual theology," that is, a two-directional movement that takes seriously the embodied human experience, that recognizes the religious dimension of sexual questions and the sexual dimension of religious questions.

[8] This approach emphasizes the constellations of meaning around sexuality rather than the acts, the wholeness of human embodied selfhood, rather than the dichotomous spiritual and sexist dualisms.
[9]

A third approach is to use a central concept of theology such as the *imago Dei*, the "image of God." As an illustration of this approach, I have chosen a recent work that focuses on lesbian and gay persons.

I am unaware of a book that deals with bisexual persons that is comparable to Larry Graham's *Discovering Images of God*.

[10] Though there is bisexual experience related in some of the interviews, there is no awareness (except in one important parenthetical remark)
[11] ) of anything but a dichotomous view of sexual orientation in the book, due largely, I suspect, to his ethical accountability to those he interviewed who had this view. However, his discussion of the theological issues can be very helpful in theological reflection from a broader perspective. Out of many rich interviews and experiences, he concludes:

We have seen how the intensity of erotic love in relationships of mutual sharing and commitment have healed deep wounds and opened hearts in gratitude to God for such a
wonderful gift of life. [12]

Further, he saw something that could be said of the experience of some bisexual Christians:

A sense of God’s gracious participation in life has emerged through involvement in novel forms of partnerships and families that in turn have contributed to fuller personal experiences and to richer communities. [13]

Graham suggests that the doctrine of the *imago Dei* (the image of God) is "central to developing a theological foundation for positive care with lesbian and gay persons." He brings considerable insight to a position which he says "appears to represent the current prevailing position of American Protestantism toward lesbian and gay persons." [14]

The main point of this position is that the image of God is heterosexuality, even as it also affirms the key place of relationships of mutuality and intimacy. [15]

His critique of this tradition is extensive and convincing. He notes the exclusion from consideration of "Christian tradition beyond the Bible" as well as "the concrete experiences of lesbian and gay persons," [16] to say nothing of scientific research.

He outlines five inadequacies of this statement of the "current prevailing position":

First, it assumes that the materials from the tradition are given rather than creatively constructed by the best (and worst) judgments of human individuals and communities over time. Second, it assumes that its interpretations of the biblical texts are unassailable and accurately represent the self-understanding of the original writers. Third, it assumes that the church has always held the position they represent, rather than offering diverse interpretations of the same materials they so confidently draw on. Fourth, it assumes that the contemporary experiences of real persons cannot challenge, correct, and expand inherited traditions. Finally, it tends to "proof text" specific biblical passages for its authority, rather than placing the discussion within a larger theological horizon or context of meaning within the Bible and beyond. [17]
Graham discusses four additional "plausible alternative interpretations of the *imago Dei.*" These include the image of God as "an asexual disembodied status," an embodied male/female existence with the male dominant, a sexless spiritual existence of male/female equality with male-dominance, and "an egalitarian partnership and fellowship" based on Phyllis Bird's thought.

None of these, he says, fits directly the experience of the people whom he interviewed. Instead, the work of John Douglass Hall provided the most attractive and appropriate understanding. Hall found "a subordinated strand of reflection . . . that sees the *imago Dei* as a quality of relationship instead of an essential human trait or characteristic."

He goes on, using this part of Hall's work:

To be in the *imago Dei* means to be fully ourselves--rather than living according to something externally imposed--in relationships characterized by God-like involvement in all the dimensions of our relational web: with God, our ground and source, with our fellow humans, and with the natural order. Full, authentic humanity in the *imago Dei* means to be with, for, and together in communion with all of these dimensions of our relatedness.

Graham concludes with this summary:

It seems to me that these insights apply as well to the experience of bisexual people of faith who, perhaps more than others, may be able to love fully without regard to gender. Contrary to the stereotype that bisexual people cannot commit to relationships, there are many who have the kinds of relationships Graham says are "reflective of the *imago Dei.*" There are marriages and extended marriage-like relationships in which at least one of the partners is bi. And there
are intimate friendships where these qualities exist.

Just as the experience of gay and lesbian people is calling the church and culture to broaden understanding of sexuality, so too is the experience of bisexual and transgendered people calling for a similar enhancement of understanding of God's gift of human sexuality.

(An earlier version of this article was originally published in *The New Voice of Nebraska*, Vol 4, No. 3, May 10, 1987.)

This article was published in the Summer 1998 Issue of *Open Hands, Resources for Ministries Affirming the Diversity of Human Sexuality*

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