



Sexisms & Phobias: The Emotional Valence of Sexual Variations

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Sexual Issues Generate Passion

- Sexual characteristics and behaviors generate peculiarly strong, visceral emotional responses
(Miller, 1998; Moll et al., 2005)
- Focus of response is mainly on sexual variations:
 - Transgender, intersexuality, esp. homosexuality
 - Affect ~5% population maximum
- Strength of response disproportionate to impact?



- Google searches:
 - Homosexual + Christian: 5.5 million hits
 - Divorce + Christian: 5.4 million
- Family Research Council (www.frc.org)
 - Homosexual: 500 pages
 - Divorce: 71 pages
- Focus on the Family (www.focusonthefamily.com)
 - Homosexual: 871 pages
 - Divorce: 690 pages



Emotionally Evocative Language

- *“the gay agenda”* (Evangelical Fellowship of Canada)
- *“disgusting practices”* (Fidelity magazine)
- *“bizarre fantasy”, “disease and deformity”* (various Christian news)
- *“If we don’t act now, counterfeit marriage will spread across America...Pastors will be silenced from speaking publicly against homosexuality. Schools will teach your children that homosexual behavior is normal and healthy. We have no time to lose! The crisis is so great that FRC has been given an urgent \$250,000 matching grant to help us protect marriage”* (frc.org home page)



- *“Your publishing of a photograph of two homosexual men kissing...will show to Americans how disgusting and repulsive homosexuality is.”*

(blogs.chron.com/aboutchron/archives/2007/09/post_63.html)







in the name of the father

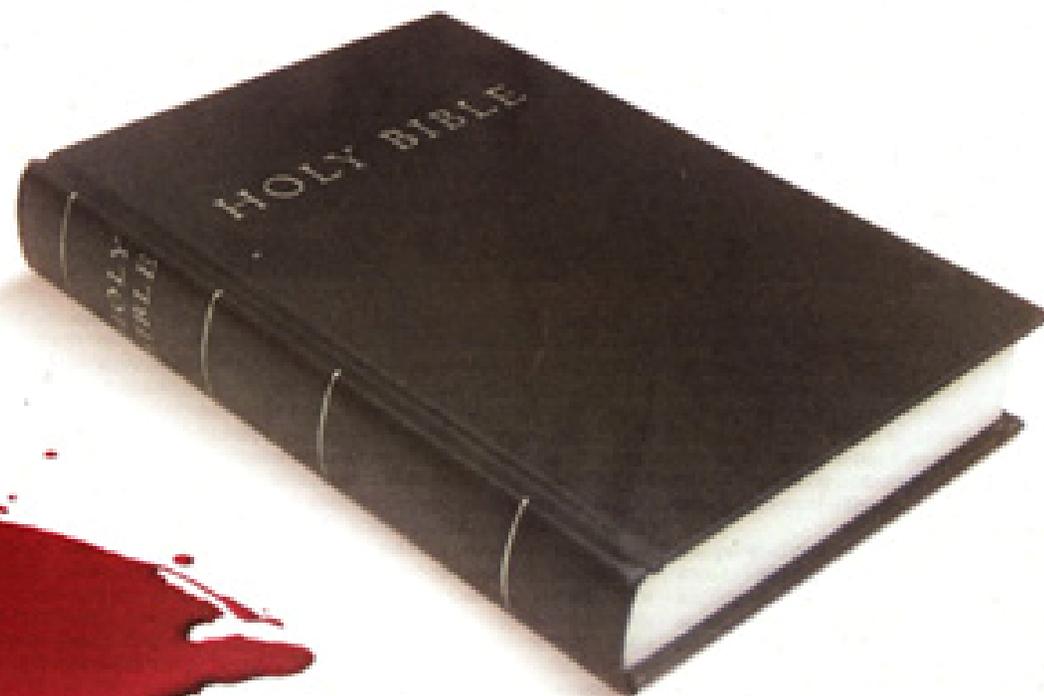
In the last 12 months, the Gay Police Association has recorded a 74% increase in homophobic incidents, where the sole or primary motivating factor was the religious belief of the perpetrator.

Verbal abuse and physical assault against gay men and women is a criminal offence and should always be reported to the police.

Discrimination against gay people in the workplace is also unlawful and should be reported to employers, who have a duty of care to prevent it.

Homophobia can never be justified and must never be tolerated.

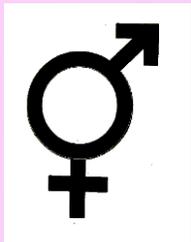
www.report-it.org.uk



gay police association

gay police association
in scotland

gay police association
in northern ireland



Why Does This Matter?

- Most reactions not so externally extreme but still strong
- *“there is the growing conviction that human sexuality is the test case for communities of faith in our time...the issue of homosexuality is probably the most divisive issue since slavery split the Church.”* (Regas, 1990; <http://www.beyondinclusion.org/GodSexJustice.htm>)



Why Does This Matter?

- Impact of negative emotional responses to sexual variations is huge:
 - Parental rejection greatest problem & risk factor for gay youth* / similar for transgendered/intersexed

*(Armesto, J. C. & Wiseman, A. G. (2001). Attributions and emotional reactions to the identity disclosure ("coming out") of a homosexual child." *Family Process*, **40**(2), 145-161)

- Negative emotions lead to distancing, alienation, stigmatization
- Resources go to issues we *feel* strongly about: possible distortion of priorities
 - scripture references to sexuality: 56x (2x in the gospels)
 - to poverty & dangers of wealth: 485x (62x in gospels)



“Is Sex Morally Special?”

- *Should* we put this much energy into these sexual issues?
 - are emotions a reliable guide to moral priorities and moral values?
- many Christian traditions: sexual issues *no more* and *no less* morally significant than other issues (in theory)
 - Ignore emotional reactions in moral decision-making



“Is Sex Morally Special?”

- “ethics of autonomy”
 - Consent & harm criteria for evaluating morality
- “ethics of community”
 - Social cohesiveness
- “ethics of divinity”
 - Divine command
- View of sexual variations can depend upon which criteria are valued and how interpreted



“Is Sex Morally Special?”

- Intimacy, vulnerability, procreation:
 - Sexuality permeates, is part of the core of, our identities
 - Survival & self-identity formed and expressed in relationship, community
 - Consequences of sexual expression significant in multiple ways
- Sin: treating people as things (including oneself)
 - *Sexual* perversion occurs when we do not treat others with interpersonal intentionality: consent must be augmented with symmetry (equal power) and reciprocity.
 - Distinct from criteria for judging other acts

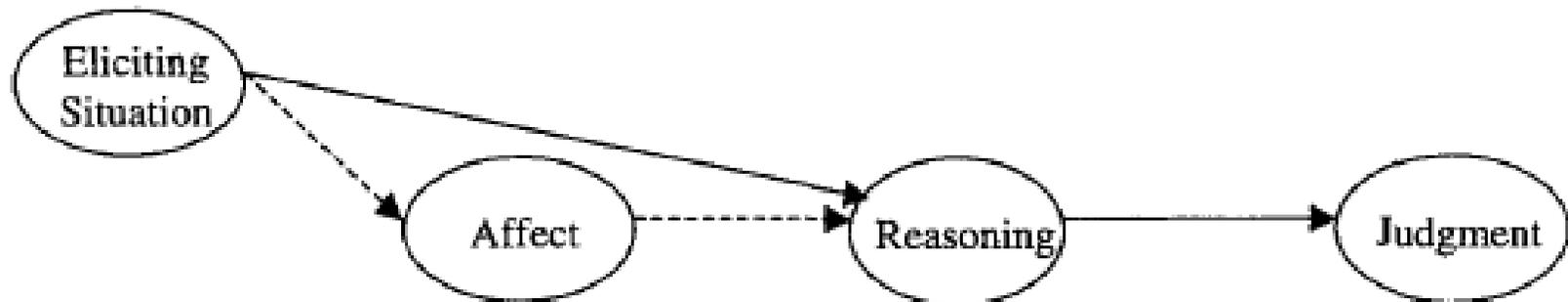
Benn, P. (1999). Is sex morally special? *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 16(3), 235-245.



“Is Sex Morally Special?”

- If morally special, justification for special attention.
 - Regardless, it *does* generate strong emotional responses

- But what is the *proper* role of emotions here?
 - Traditionally:
 - “emotions are always partial, arbitrary, and passive
 - “moral judgments should be impartial, well-grounded, and freely made
 - “therefore, emotions are detrimental to moral judgments, and are to be avoided in moral decision-making” (Pizarro, 2000, p.358)



From Haidt, J. (2001). *Psychological Review*, 108.



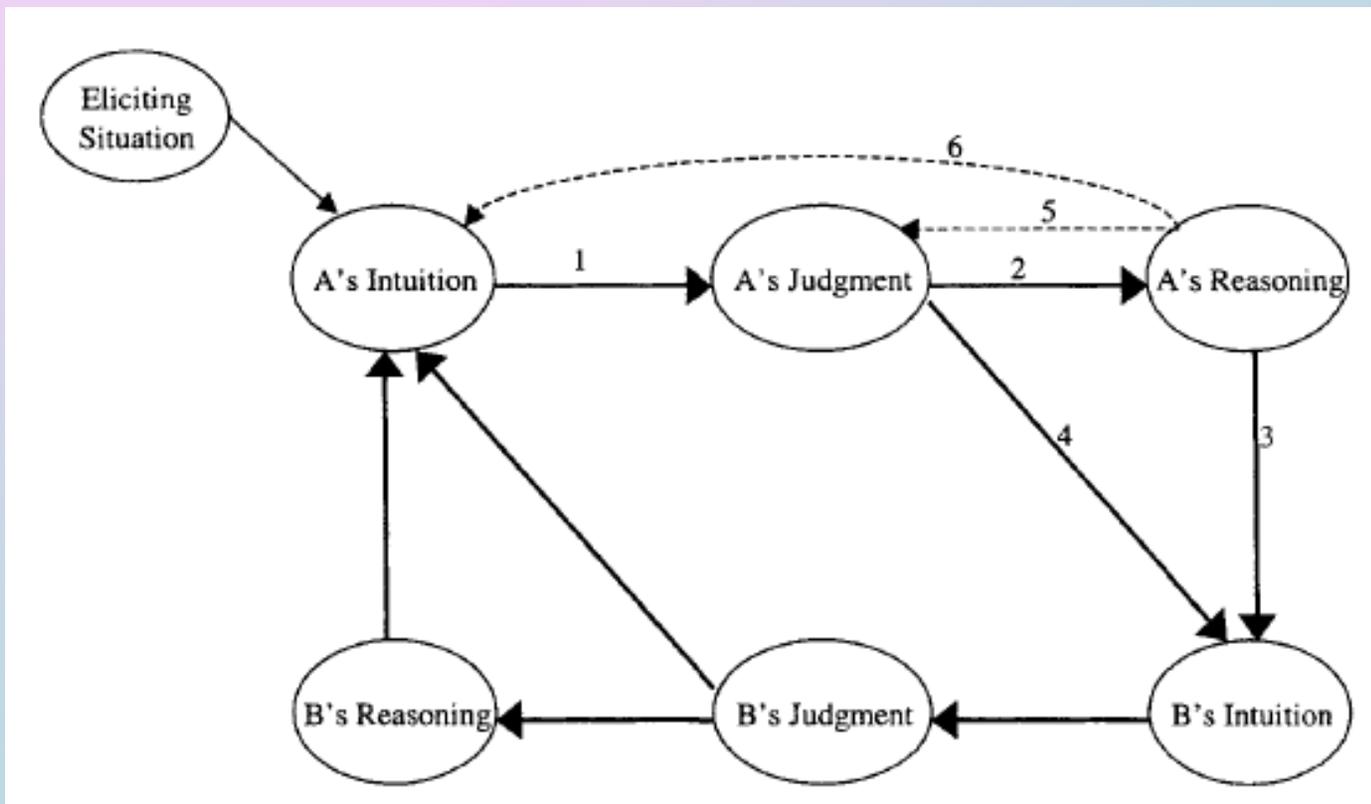
- Well-established: emotions *do* influence moral judgment
 - They give *value*
 - Emotional reactions predict moral judgments better than informational assumptions & beliefs (Haidt & Hershey, 2001)
- Further, emotions are *necessary* for morality & moral reasoning
 - “*the automatic tagging of ordinary social events with moral values [and related emotions] may be an important mechanism for implicit social behaviors in humans*” (Moll et al., 2002, p. 2730).
 - Moral judgments and decision-making become erratic and inappropriate when emotions are absent or disconnected from reasoning (Damasio)



- But: emotions are not always *good* or *accurate* indicators of moral status (Lobel & Loewenstein, 2005; Nussbaum, 1999)
 - Shaped by socio-cultural processes and context
 - E.g., Aristotle: *cultivating* and *training* your desires
 - “If you have trained your desires in the right way, you will be morally repelled, perhaps quite unreflectively, by the idea of perversion... This virtue-based approach may both explain and justify the aversion to certain sexual proclivities.” (Benn, 1999)
 - Deliberately manipulated by activists, media, etc. (Lobel & Loewenstein, 2005)

- Dynamic relations exist between beliefs about right/wrong, emotions, and moral judgment

(Haidt, 2001; Pizarro, 2000)





Responding to Sexual Variations

- Sexuality may be morally special
- It generates strong emotions
- Emotions influence moral judgments
- Emotions are influenced by beliefs and context

- Emotions also motivate and influence *behavior*, the ways we relate and interact
- Christians: responding with humility, mercy & justice



Responding to Sexual Variations

- Christians must *appropriately cultivate* moral beliefs and emotional responses (i.e., in harmony with God's will)
 - Attending to both *means* and *fruits* of our responses to sexual variation
 - Becoming aware of the power of emotions to influence our judgments and responses *and*
 - Of the power of rhetoric, images, to trigger and shape those emotions
 - Considering which emotions do & should motivate us (disgust, fear, love, awe)
 - Humble awareness of limits in knowing God's will: prayer, discernment, tradition, community
 - Drawing on good scholarship:
 - Theologies of sexuality
 - Social psychology, neuroscience: emotions and moral judgment
 - Psychological studies of moral development & reasoning
 - Etc.



Christians for Sexual Justice

- Witherspoon on the Web: News and Networking for Progressive Presbyterians
 - Issues of sexual justice http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/sexual_justice.htm
- The Center for Public Justice (U.S.)
 - Homosexuality and marriage <http://www.cpjustice.org/content/homosexuality>
- Citizens for Public Justice (Canada)
 - Legal Equality: A public justice response to discrimination against gays and lesbians http://cpj.ca/otherwork/More_Topics/index.html?ap=1&x=72541
- Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing <http://www.religioustheology.org/declaration.html>



"Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other."

John 13:34-35 from The Message