

Sexual Ethics in a Time of AIDS: Implications for a Person-Centered Moral Education

Rose Uchem

Department of Arts Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

E-mail of corresponding author: rose.uchem@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

In a world where a woman is controlled on the one hand, by the social teaching tape 'you must submit to your husband,' and on the other hand, by the church's teaching on 'abstinence' and 'fidelity,' where at the same time many men neither abstain nor stay faithful to their partners; what might an authentic sexual ethics be like; one that does justice to the woman as well as the man; not just the man alone? To be able to meet the ethical challenges posed by HIV and AIDS especially with regard to sexuality and people's reproductive rights, conscience formation is essential. The formation of conscience involves more than knowledge of rules. Facts, values and skills are not enough for resolving a moral dilemma. A person's moral character as well as what and how they choose, also go into the formation of conscience. For this reason, the challenge posed by the reality of HIV to discordant couples requires a closer look and more empathetic responses than are available at the moment. The habits people have formed, the principles they have learned and relevant facts on all sides can contribute to making informed decisions in consonance with their faith, convictions as well as their situation. The current pattern of sexual submission needs to be revised toward equality in partnership.

Key words: moral education, conscience formation, HIV status, human sexuality, discordant couples, sexual ethics.

1.0 Introduction

Many married women are controlled by the social teaching tape, 'you must submit to your husband,' on the one hand, and by the church's teaching on 'abstinence' and 'fidelity,' on the other hand. The emerging question then is: in a world where many men neither abstain nor stay faithful to their partners, what might an authentic sexual ethics be like; one that does justice to the woman as well as the man; not just the man alone? To be able to meet the ethical challenges posed by HIV and AIDS especially with regard to sexuality and people's reproductive rights, conscience formation is essential. The formation of conscience involves more than knowledge of rules. Facts, values and skills are not enough for resolving a moral dilemma. A person's moral character, who we are as well as what and how we choose, also go into the formation of conscience. The Christian understanding of the place of sex in marriage has progressed from being solely for procreation to promoting the bond between the partners. For this reason, the challenge posed by the reality of HIV to discordant couples requires a closer look and more empathetic responses than are available at the moment. The voices of those more closely affected must be heard. If what some moral theologians say is anything to go by; that we make our decisions more out of the beliefs we live by and the habits we have formed than out of the principles we have learned; then let all the facts on all sides be provided for people and they can make informed decisions in consonance with their faith, convictions as well as their situation. The current pattern of sexual submission needs to be revised toward equality in partnership.

This paper therefore proposes a person-centred moral theology and sexual ethics with particular reference to HIV and AIDS. It also tries to grapple with such issues as conscience forming, condom use in relation to HIV and the case of discordant couples as well as pregnancy and HIV status. The paper offers an opportunity to gain new insights that are inevitable in the process of carrying out a very challenging research such as this; stretching one beyond comfort zones. The discourse is hinged on the question: Considering ethical issues relating to HIV prevention vis a vis people's human right to reproduction, what is a possible way forward in the case of discordant couples? To this effect, the paper discusses 'sexual ethics' from two main angles, ethics and sexuality. These are explored separately first, and then an ethics of sexuality in a time of AIDS is proposed. Some problems or core issues entailed are highlighted. Where necessary, perspectives that are specifically those of women are put forward; the outcome of their lived experiences, particularly highlighting aspects missing from mainline views.

2.1 Ethics

The term, 'ethics', refers to the study of the general nature of morals and specific moral choices; the rules or standards governing the conduct of a person or members of a profession. It is closely related to morality, which is that quality of being in accord, in tune with right or wrong conduct; a system of ideas of right and wrong conduct, a rule or a lesson in moral conduct.

An aspect of theology – the study of the nature of God and religious truth; a system of opinions concerning God and religious question – dealing specifically with moral questions is referred to as moral theology. In the words of St. Anselm, theology is ‘faith seeking understanding.’ Moral theology, therefore, “involves not only making moral decisions but also forming moral character” (Gula, 1989; 137).

Conscience is the sense of right and wrong conduct, including the inclination to prefer good to evil.

Determining sin is not a matter of examining isolated actions against a set of moral rules, but involves discerning the entire orientation and commitment of the person involved. The formation of conscience involves more than simply answering the practical moral question, “what ought I to do?” “What sort of person ought I to become?” It is insufficient to simply increase a person’s knowledge of facts and values, or skills for resolving a moral dilemma. It must also include the fuller texture of the person’s moral character. Gula (1989; 137) is right here: “Who we are, as well as what and how we choose, go into consideration of the formation of conscience.”

Conscience is properly formed in dialogue with several sources of moral wisdom. As humans we consult our own experience as well as the experience of family, friends, colleagues, and experts in the field, which pertains to rituals, and actions which the various communities in which we participate live the moral life. As Christians we turn to the testimony of scripture, the convictions of our creeds, the lives of moral (giants), and the informed judgment of theologians past and present who help interpret the traditions of Christian life (Gula, 1989; 137).

Following James Gustafson (1978), Richard Gula (1989) outlines four points necessary for formation of conscience, namely: the agent; beliefs; situational analysis and moral norms. He makes the point that moral choices are made on the basis of who we are as persons, our beliefs, including what we value in life; our context and how we see things (our vision). What we see sets the direction and limits of what we do; generates certain choices rather than others. The real world of our moral choices includes imagination, vision, habits, affections, dispositions, somatic reactions, and countless non-rational factors which logical generalizations never account for in the immediate moment of making a decision. We make our decisions more out of the beliefs we live by and the habits we have formed than out of the principles we have learned (Gula, 1989; 140).

Gula draws attention to the importance of the imagination in the formation of conscience. Properly to understand moral behaviour, then, we need to pay attention first to the images shaping the imagination, and the stories giving rise to these images, before we consider moral rules. We live more by stories than we do by rules (Gula, 1989; 142).

A moral vision is not so much chosen as it is inherited from our social worlds. Social scientists tell us that as we grow, the vision we acquire is in part the result of internalizing the beliefs and values, causes and loyalties of the community, which make up our environment. Our vision is almost wholly dependent on our relationships, on the worlds in which we live, and on the commitments we have made. As a result, the morality into which we are socialized is not a set of rules but a collection of stories and images of what makes life worth living (Gula, 1989; 142).

The implications of these insights into the process of conscience formation will be taken up later. Meanwhile, we shall move on to take a look at the meaning of human sexuality before picking up our discussion on sexual ethics.

2.2 Human sexuality

In elaborating on human sexuality, it is necessary to first explain such relevant terms as person, sex and sexuality. Traditionally, a human person is understood to consist of body and soul. More recently, however, this view has become enlarged through insights coming from the human sciences such as psychology and other disciplines to include at least five aspects of the human person, namely, the social, physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. Hence, when we speak of a person-centred morality, it is not that of a solitary individual but rather that of a person understood in the context of her or his web of relationships with other persons together with the universe and its other inhabitants. It is also about the person viewed from a historical perspective; one that unfolds, develops and grows and has the benefit of the cumulative experience and wisdom of their community both on a global and local scale. This provides the necessary backdrop for discussing morality and especially an ethics of sexuality.

Sex refers to the biological condition of being male or female, together with the associated reproductive organs. Closely related to sex but differing from it is gender, which is society’s expectation of how boys or girls, men

and women, in a given culture ought to feel, look or behave. Gender often finds expression in roles, which are socially and culturally determined; and vary from culture to culture and from one era to another. Gender roles are neither permanent nor universal. They are learnt, and being human-made, they are changeable.

Sexuality is the relational component of sex and is integral to human identity. It is expressed in a variety of ways, but finds particular expression in intimate human relationship. It drives one to move beyond oneself into encounter with another in relationship. While this aspect of human identity desires expression in the dimension of physical intimacy, it cannot be separated from its emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social dimensions. "A Christian understanding of sexuality seeks to take account of the fullness of all these dimensions, yet recognizes the mystery, which God has given to human beings in sexuality as a whole." (*Facing AIDS*, 2000, 30-33).

Christianity has traditionally understood sexuality to be a gift of God for the task of procreation. In some traditions this is linked with an understanding of human beings as "co-creators" with God. While the role of sexuality in procreation is clear, a broader understanding of sexuality also values its role in enriching partnership between persons and in bringing pleasure. Society has therefore come to recognize a diversity in the types of human sexual relationships and continues to face questions, for example, about the acceptance of non-heterosexual identity.

Along with its potential for bringing the richness of intimacy and joy to human relationships, sexuality makes people particularly vulnerable – to each other and to social forces. In connection with HIV/AIDS, sexuality increases vulnerability in two ways. First of all, as we have seen, many physical expressions of sexuality can bring one into contact with HIV infection. Second, the very fact that humans are sexual beings makes them vulnerable to the many and varied social factors which influence moral decisions and actions.

Like other aspects of creation, sexuality can be misused if people do not recognize their personal responsibility. Thus societies have always sought to protect people from vulnerability in this area. Through value systems, which classify certain behaviours as socially unacceptable or through more formal means such as the institution of marriage, the expression of human sexual desire has been regulated and directed in ways deemed necessary for responsible and safer community life. Churches have particularly affirmed the role of marriage in this regard. In spite of all these attempts to provide protection and encourage responsibility, the abuse of sexual power and relations remains a reality. This is particularly apparent in the growing commercialization of sex and in sex tourism.

2.3 Sexual ethics

Sexual ethics can be taken to mean the nature of morals and of specific moral choices, guidelines, rules or standards governing the conduct of people concerning sex-related matters and activities. The social context in which these discussions are held is such that relations between men and women are very far from being equal. As such, a woman has not much say in what transpires in the relations between herself and her male partner; whereby if she expresses her feelings, needs or views they are largely ignored, thwarted or judged obtuse. It is a cultural context also in which a woman has been thoroughly indoctrinated, brainwashed and pre-programmed to think and act secondary and subordinate to the man. This situation is reinforced by such scripture texts as the submission clause in the Letter to the Ephesians (5:22). The woman has been made to believe that she is living out a godly mandate, a mission. It is a context in which many women believe that sexual intercourse is a duty for them; a duty they have to perform towards the 'man' (to satisfy his sexual needs and urges) and of course, with no attention to her own needs or her own preferences. The man forces his own preferences on her. If she is in possession enough of herself as to express a lack of sexual satisfaction or to seek it, she risks being misjudged or worse still, labeled prostitute if she shows any knowledge of sexual matters. She is obliged to feign ignorance and indifference (mistaken for innocence) in such matters. It is also a situation whereby a lot of sexual violence happens within the matrimonial home and it is passed over in silence as a private family matter. It is really a world in which a woman is not expected to worry nor wonder about the possibility that her husband might be sleeping with another woman (she may be labeled jealous, possessive or controlling over the man). Yet the woman may not have any men friends, even if only platonic.

We are talking in a context in which some couples are living in what may be called emotional divorce even though they may be living under the same roof. Many marriages have broken up and some couples are struggling to stay together; and some of the youth are wondering whether it is worth trying or not.

Even when a woman knows that her husband has other sexual partners, or is infected, even if she wants to refuse, she may not be able; she may not have the will power to say no or refuse him sex. In a situation like this the

woman may find herself caught in a double bind whereby on one hand, she has grown up with the teaching tape that says, "You must submit." On the other hand, she has a human obligation to protect her life; but she has not been brought up to value her life, as a person in her own right whose interests are to be protected just as the man's. What does she do?

4.0 Some ethical dilemmas relating to HIV and AIDS

In a situation where one partner is HIV positive and the other is not, known as a case of a discordant couple, what can they do? How can the other partner who is HIV negative be protected from contracting the virus? How can the couple live their lives positively and most fruitfully? As already noted, in many cases, a woman has not much say in what transpires between herself and her male partner. Moreover, she is caught in a double bind. On one hand, she is controlled by the pervasive social 'teaching tape' "you must submit to your husband" which plays both in the cultural and church settings. On the other hand, the church's teaching is 'abstinence' and 'fidelity,' all this in a world where many men neither abstain nor stay faithful to their partners. In such a case what might an authentic sexual ethics be like; one that does justice to the woman as well as the man; not just the man alone?

I suggest that attention be paid to the contribution of some Catholic liberation and moral theologians, which can provide useful pointers to a way forward. Lisa Lowe Cahill (1993: 212) gives a reminder that Roman Catholic ethics as a whole has become more biblical, more historically conscious, and in some ways, more flexible. These changes have necessitated a revision of the theory of natural law, the moorings of ethics built by Thomas Aquinas (p. 212). One very significant turn in the catholic ethics, or moral theology, has been the inclusion of social and ethical perspectives that had been barely acknowledged in the dominant traditions, especially perspectives of economically marginalized peoples and classes of women. This inclusive move has also signaled the growing globalization of ethics, especially under the impact of liberation theology (212).

These women liberation and moral theologians maintain that: "Human nature is not adequately understood without full attention on the personal and social experience of women. It advances scriptural arguments in favour both of models for Christian women and of the affirmative inclusion of other oppressed groups" (Cahill, 1993; 212). They also insist that "issues of so called personal ethics, such as sexuality, cannot be understood apart from their social institutions, like male and female gender roles, have direct and deep influence on individual decisions and actions" (Cahill, 1993; 212). Moreover, "justice for women means to regard women as the moral and social equals of men and to support their equal participation in the social roles that contribute to the common good, as well as their equal share in those benefits comprised by it". (Cahill, 1993; 212).

This point of view "emerges from women's experience of exclusion from social opportunity and power; constrained by narrow gender-derived definitions of human identity" (Cahill, 1003; 212). It traces its origins to "women's growing awareness of the disparity between received traditional interpretations of their identity and function and their own experience of themselves and their lives" (Cahill, 1003; 212). As such it, also claims a special "vantage point in a focus on women's experience precisely as disadvantaged". The moral test, from women's point of view, is the effect of an ethical position, moral decision, or policy on the actual lives of women. The moral ideal from the perspective of women theologians is "to transform persons and societies toward more mutual and cooperative relationships between women and men, reflecting their equality as human persons" (Cahill, 1003; 212).

This position is underscored by the theology of "Aquinas who combined the theology of Augustine with Aristotelian philosophy to locate morality within creation and redemption, and he also gave great importance to reason and human experience is discerning specific moral values and actions." He defined the natural law in terms of human's "innate inclination toward what promotes human fulfillment; it has been instilled in the creature by God and is knowable by reason." (Cahill, 1003; 214).

Aquinas himself took an inductive and flexible approach to natural law, taking great caution not to absolutize any specific conclusions from the general principles. However, some of his Neo-Scholastic heirs (under the influence of Cartesian and Kantian philosophy, with their ideals of clear concepts and absolute norms) turned the morality of nature into a rigid, a historical system, which functioned to control and sanction experience rather than reflect it. (Cahill, 1003; 215).

Cahill notes that this process of derivation, as well as the formulation of the starting principles, always takes place within a historical setting in which the perspectives of some will be privileged over those of others and in which the perceive need to address social and moral problems can result in distortions of ostensibly universal

values. Yet both Aquinas and his more recent interpreters allow that objectivity is attained historically and inductively and therefore always partially. The natural law approach is of lasting value for today in that it grounds and experiential morality while holding to an ideal of shared human truth, and manifests a confidence of that God's will for persons is revealed in creation as an ongoing process of discovering God in human life (Cahill, 2003; 215).

In relation to the set of questions posed at the beginning of this section with regard to a discordant couple, it will be recalled that the surest prevention measure is sexual abstinence. However, many HIV/AIDS activists and government agencies actively promote the use of condoms as a preventive measure. A World Council of Churches' publication had the following to say:

The use of latex condoms to prevent the exchange of body fluids during sexual intercourse is an essential element of all HIV prevention efforts. The strategy of safer sex essentially rests on the regular and proper use of condom.

The advocates of this position draw attention to the practical reality of the actual sexual lives of many people as different from the ideal that should have been. Thus, the emphasis is really on 'safer' sex.

They claim that "in many countries, especially in North America and Europe, HIV transmission rates have been reduced with the aid of widespread campaigns promoting the use of condoms. In Thailand, too, a large-scale action to promoting the use of condoms made an essential contribution to reducing HIV/AIDS (p. 63).

Weinreich and Benn (2004) state as follows; "Several problem areas have to be distinguished here. First of all, question arises as to the scientific facts about the effectiveness of using condoms to prevent HIV transmission. The most comprehensive study on the matter was published in 2001. After examining all of the published data, an experts' workshop came to the following conclusions." (NIAID/NIDS/DHHS 2001):

- Regular and correct use of latex condoms can exclude the transmission of HIV between an infected and an uninfected sexual partner with almost 100 percent certainty. The argument that condoms often contain pores which are larger than the virus itself is inconclusive since it is exclusively the exchange of fluid which is decisive, and this is almost entirely prevented.
- In reality, however, one cannot proceed on the assumption that a condom is always used correctly, that condoms always possess a constant quality, etc. Therefore, effective protection is not 100 percent, but 85 percent. This means that couples where one partner is HIV infected and condoms are always used run a risk of infecting the other partner with HIV 85 percent below that of couples who never use condoms (Weinreich and Benn, 2004, 63).

The official Catholic position on this matter is 'no condoms.' The same document cited above puts it this way.

In many countries, however, there are religious and cultural reservations about promoting the use of condoms. Often, churches argue that encouraging condom use will increase and condone promiscuity. They argue that this is morally unacceptable and also does not contribute to containing the HIV epidemic. There are no empirical studies, however, which support this thesis.

The problem, as I see it, is twofold. One is that some of the prohibitions people are offered appear not to give attention to their actual lived experiences as highlighted previously. Secondly, it forecloses possible lines of dialogue on the issues with the persons most affected, say the couples themselves. If what some moral theologians cited earlier have said is anything to go by, what I would advocate is for people to be facilitated toward adequate forming of their consciences so that they can make their own decisions; instead of taking over people conscience by simply issuing directives. Let all the facts on all sides be provided and they can make informed decisions in consonance with their faith, convictions as well as situation. Kevin Kelly (2000) recognized this when he stated:

The process of change will not be properly tackled if we give in to the temptation always to be looking for absolute certainties. Human decision-making is not like that. It involves balancing the different values at play in a situation, assessing various possibilities and probabilities, being prepared to take prudent risks (62).

He went further to say:

To a large extent our ethical knowledge is drawn from human experience and consequently needs to be reassessed in the light of further experience. William James even went so far as to say: There is no such

thing as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance... there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man (woman – author's insertion) has had his/her experience and said his/her say' (Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry* (University of California, 1988), p. 282 as cited in Kevin Kelly, 2000, 67)

5.0 Conclusion

On the whole, this paper has tried to look at some of the ethical challenges posed by HIV and AIDS especially with regard to sexuality and people's reproductive rights. To be able to meet this challenge, conscience formation is essential. The point has been made that the formation of conscience involves more than knowledge of rules. Facts, values and skills are not enough for resolving a moral dilemma. A person's moral character, who we are, as well as what and how we choose, also go into the formation of conscience.

The Christian understanding of the place of sex in marriage has progressed from being solely for procreation to promoting the bond between the partners. For this reason, the challenge posed by the reality of HIV to discordant couples requires a closer look and more empathetic responses than are available at the moment. The voices of those more closely affected must be heard. Moreover, the unequal power relations existing between women and men ought to change. The current pattern of sexual submission needs to be revised toward equality in partnership. On the basis of the equal dignity of men and women, people need to be re-educated toward a partnership of equals.

Reference

- Cahill, L. C. (1993). *Feminism and Christian Ethics. Moral Theology*. In. M C. LaCugna. (Ed). (1993). *Freeing Theology. Essentials of Theology from a Feminist Perspective*. 211-234. NY: Harper San Francisco.
- Gustafson, J. (1978). *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Gula, R. M. (1989) *Reason Informed By Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality*. NY: Paulist Press.
- Jonsen, A. R. and Toulmin, S. (1988). *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.
- Keenan, J. F. (2002). *Catholic Ethicists on HV/AIDS Prevention*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Kelly, K. T. (2000). *New Directions in Moral Theology and The Challenge of Being Human*. London, UK: Geoffrey Chapman.
- Weinreich, S. and Benn, C. (2004). *AIDS: Meeting the Challenge; Data, Facts, Background* Geneva: WCC Publications
- World Council of Churches. (2000). *Facing AIDS The Challenge, The Churches' Response: A WCC Study Document*. Geneva: WCC Publications

The author is a Missionary Sister of the Holy Rosary and a senior lecturer at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where she teaches Christian Religious Education as well as Comparative and International Education. She obtained her Ph.D in theological studies from the Graduate Theological Foundation, Indiana, USA, and MA in religious education from Fordham University, New York, USA. She became a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS), in 2004. She is a contributing editor of *Mission Studies*, the academic journal of IAMS, and chief editor of *African Journal for Mission in Context (AMC)*.

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:
<http://www.iiste.org>

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page: <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Recent conferences: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/>

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

