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Doing Asian Theological Ethics
in a Cross-Cultural and an Interreligious Context

Yiu Sing Lúcas Chan, James F. Keenan,
and Shaji George Kochuthara, *editors*



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Since theological ethics is so diffuse today, since practitioners and scholars are caught up in their own specific cultures, and since their interlocutors tend to be in other disciplines, there is the need for an international exchange of ideas in Catholic theological ethics.

Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC) recognizes the need to appreciate the challenge of pluralism, to dialogue from and beyond local culture, and to interconnect within a world church not dominated solely by a northern paradigm. In response to these recognized needs, catholic theological ethicists will meet to refresh their memories, reclaim their heritage, and reinterpret their sources.

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ontological impossibility, but as a failure in fulfilling one's *dharma*, because, achieving permanence in marriage and making it indissoluble is understood as the highest *dharma* of the husband and the wife.

4. Conclusion

We have seen that, as in the Christian tradition, in the Hindu tradition there is a deep awareness about the permanence of marriage. However, the Hindu tradition does not understand divorce as impossible. For them, achieving the permanence of marriage is a moral imperative for the couple. This imperative is deeply engrained in their religious consciousness, and their social and religious customs indirectly enforce this obligation in actual life situations. The present Catholic teaching holds that the dissolution of a consummated sacramental marriage is an ontological impossibility and claims that the Catholic Church has the authority to dissolve all other marriages. It simply makes no sense to a Hindu if the permanence of marriage is explained as an ontological impossibility of dissolution or that some marriages are less indissoluble than others. Telling a Hindu-Christian couple, that in the eyes of the Catholic Church, their marriage, being not sacramental, is not totally indissoluble, will not help them to understand the command of Jesus against divorce in its full meaning and with its full moral force.

Jesus gave his command, "what God has joined together let no one separate" to an exclusively Jewish audience and there is no ground to assume that he had intended his command only for his future Christian followers. On the contrary, the fact that he based his command on God's plan for humans as expressed in the Genesis passage (Gen 1:27; 2:24) that he quoted clearly, indicates that Jesus addressed his command against divorce to all humans. So, the correct way to teach that command of Jesus, in such a way that all can adequately understand and accept it, is not as a law of the Church which binds only the Christians, but as a Gospel demand which morally obliges every human person. Jesus has not given authority to anyone to dissolve marriages, but he gave the Church the mission to make his forgiving love manifest in our broken world.

Joseph N. Goh

Malaysia

"WHY IS IT WRONG?": CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF SEXUAL WRONGDOING AND SEXUAL ETHICS AMONG GAY-IDENTIFYING MALAYSIAN MEN

1. Introduction

In this essay, I discuss the conceptualisations of sexual wrongdoing and sexual ethics by gay-identifying Malaysian men for deeper considerations of Roman Catholic¹ theological sexual ethics concerning non-heteronormative subjects. My use of "non-heteronormative" refers to a diverse range of sexual subjects whose identifyings and expressions of gender and sexuality transgress normative expectations. I use "sexual wrongdoing" to describe the grapplings and negotiations of gay-identifying men with numerous perceptions in mainstream Catholicism that same-sex attractions and feelings are aberrant, and that same-sex expressions are sinful. Despite Pope Francis' pastoral quip that "if someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has good will, then who [is he] to judge him?,"² the fact remains that same-sex expressions are still doctrinally considered

¹Hereafter "Catholic" and "Catholicism." My qualified use of these terms acknowledges the diverse traditions and hierarchies of the Catholic faith throughout the world.

²Pope Francis, "Press Conference of Pope Francis during the Return Flight," *Apostolic Journey to Rio de Janeiro on the Occasion of the XXVII World Youth Day*, July 28, 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130728_gmg-conferenza-stampa.html.

Joseph N. Goh, "'Why is It Wrong?': Conceptualisations of Sexual Wrong Doing and Sexual Ethics among Gay-Identifying Malaysian Men," *Doing Asian Theological Ethics in a Cross-Cultural and an Interreligious Context*, eds. Yiu Sing Lúcas Chan, James F. Keenan and Shaji George Kochuthara, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 347-360.

as “intrinsically disordered” and constitute “grave depravity.”³ My aim is to invite Catholic sexual ethics towards greater reflexivity and inclusivity by listening to the actual, lived experiences of gay-identifying men. Hence, I am trying to advance an understanding of how gay-identifying men actually attempt to construct sexual ethics for themselves.

My essay is grounded in the lived experiences of two gay-identifying Malaysian men: Pipa, a 40-year old Chinese-Malaysian who works in consultancy, and Raw, a 40-something Malaysian educator of mixed ancestry.⁴ I engage in a careful analysis of selected narratives from these men on their sexual identifyings and experiences that are related to ethical issues. Pipa and Raw are two of thirty men whom I interviewed in a larger qualitative research project on the sexual identifyings, sexual expressions and spiritual sensibilities of non-heteronormative Malaysian men. The narratives of these two men are not meant to be representative of all gay-identifying Malaysian men. Instead, these men provide epistemological vignettes from a larger reality. Both men are English-speaking, highly-educated and upwardly mobile urban dwellers, and display varying and ambiguous degrees of affiliation to and distancing from Catholicism.

In what follows, I offer an overview of the situation of religion and sexuality in Malaysia. Then, I discuss my analytical framework before explaining my research method, methodology, and researcher positionality. Thereafter, I analyse and theorise selected narratives of Pipa and Raw to describe the dynamics of construction and the conditions of possibility that give rise to their ideas of sexual wrongdoing and sexual ethics within their geopolitical, socio-cultural and religio-spiritual particularities.

2. The Broader Context of Sexuality in Malaysia

Topics on sex are generally regarded as taboo in predominantly Muslim Malaysia, and bear strong religious undertones, particularly for the Muslim population.⁵ Penalties are imposed by “Islamic

³Pope John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997, no. 2357, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catechism/catechism-of-the-catholic-church/epub/index.cfm>.

⁴Pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of these research participants.

⁵Beng Hui Tan, “Time’s Up! Moving Sexuality Rights in Malaysia into the New Millennium,” *ISIS International*, 2007, http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=564:times-up-moving-sexuality-rights-in-malaysia-into-the-new-millennium&catid=132:women-and-sexuality&Itemid=261.

officials [who police and prosecute Muslims] engaged in *khalwat*, or ‘close proximity’ between two unrelated and unmarried members of the opposite sex.”⁶ The Malaysian Penal Code criminalises oral and anal penetrative sex for Malaysians of all gender identifyings, sexual proclivities and (non) religious leanings.⁷ *Syariah* (Islamic) laws criminalise *liwat*, which is defined as “sexual relations between male persons,” through fines, imprisonment and/or flogging.⁸ Despite their best efforts to address issues of non-heteronormative sexualities, the majority of Malaysian Christian institutions continue to condemn non-heteronormative sexual expressions, perceive non-heteronormative sexual identifyings as somewhat distorted, and advocate lifelong celibacy and/or various modes of “counseling” towards the abandonment of “a gay lifestyle” in the name of “pastoral care.”⁹ The Catholic Church in Malaysia remains unequivocally disapproving of same-sex practices.¹⁰

3. Analytical Framework

My discussion on sexual wrongdoing and sexual ethics draws in part on Margaret A. Farley’s “framework for sexual ethics based on norms of justice,”¹¹ which includes the norms of harm avoidance, common consent, mutuality, equality (understood as non-coercion), commitment, fruitfulness and social justice.¹² Although Farley states that “experience is a necessary but not sufficient source for sexual

⁶Julian C.H. Lee, “Constructing and Obstructing Identities: Ethnicity, Gender and Sexuality,” Manfred Steger and Paul Battersby, ed., *The SAGE Handbook of Globalization*, ed. and Joseph Siracusa, London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2014, 688.

⁷The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia, *Malaysian Penal Code*, 1997, sec. 377A–C, <http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.%2012/Act%20574.pdf>.

⁸The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia, *Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997*, 2006, sec. 2(1), 25, <http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.%2012/Act%20559.pdf>.

⁹Joseph N. Goh, “Reflections on the Play ‘The Third Way: Same Sex Attraction and the Catholic Church’ at Holy Family Church, Kajang,” Blog, *Queer Eye for God’s World*, (April 11, 2015), <http://josephgoh.org/?cat=17>; National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia (NECF), “Gay Church: A Response,” *Berita NECF Articles*, 2013, <http://www.necf.org.my/newsmaster.cfm?&menuid=2&action=view&retrieveid=930>.

¹⁰See Joseph N. Goh, “‘You Must Follow Our Belief or Else You Can’t Receive God’: Constructing a Sexual Bi/Theology of Eucharist,” *Dialog* 53, 2 (June 2014) 150–151.

¹¹Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, London: Continuum, 2008, 230.

¹²Farley, *Just Love*, 231.

ethics,"¹³ she also affirms that "homosexuality can be a way of embodying responsible human love and sustaining human and Christian friendship."¹⁴ Hence, my essay focuses on the "kinds of motives [and] sorts of circumstances"¹⁵ that are present in the experiences of gay-identifying men as they make meaning of their sexual attractions and sexual expressions in relation to their spiritual sensibilities. Furthermore, while I acknowledge that sexual attractions, feelings and expressions can take on destructive forms, my emphasis in this paper lies in the ways in which these men execute their sexual attractions, feelings and expressions "in ways that are good, true, right, and just."¹⁶ I believe that resources for sexual ethics can be culled and critically constructed from the dynamics of careful, loving, just and respectful engagements between non-heteronormative male subjects. My essay thus draws on these ethical standards.

As such, non-heteronormative male sexualities cannot assume a simplistic a priori status as unethical, sinful, disease-ridden or pathological.¹⁷ Sexual ethics need to consider the evolution of human thought and circumstance. Any ethical discussion on non-heteronormative sexualities must occur within what Shaji George Kochutara calls "an ongoing process of dialogue."¹⁸ Additionally, I believe that the true potency of sexual ethics emerges only when it has learned to suspend judgement in order to listen from the heart. I consider it deeply significant that for the most part, non-heteronormative Malaysians have not been consulted in religio-judicial pronouncements on their lives, and that their personal realities have not been taken into careful consideration. Instead, their sexual identifications and expressions have been automatically ignored.

4. Method, Methodology and Researcher Positionality

I use a Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology as a method and methodology to analyse and theorise the narratives of Pipa and

Raw. A Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology listens to knowledge "from the ground" and constructs theory from data, rather than unproblematically "fit" and interpret the meaning-making of actual lives solely based on existing theoretical structures. Furthermore, a Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology understands knowledge as the construction of meaning and interpretation rather than a "discovery" of information, and prioritises the researcher-participant collaborative relationship in generating epistemologies.¹⁹

I am aware that my own position as a queer-gay Malaysian academic researcher and ordained priest of the Old Catholic movement, namely the North American Catholic Ecumenical Church, is a significant driver behind the crafting of this essay. Nevertheless, I am striving for a critical rethinking of sexual ethics rather than an unproblematic rallying for theological and religious legitimacy on behalf of non-heteronormative subjects. To this end, I present perspectives of sexual wrongdoing and sexual ethics in the ensuing sections, based on the narratives of Pipa and Raw.

5.1. Sexual Wrongdoing and the Transgressing Ecclesiastical Notions of "Right" Sexuality

For men like Pipa, sexual wrongdoing is constituted by a transgression of ecclesiastical notions of "right" sexuality. At the same time, he interrogates the idea that being gay automatically elicits godly disapproval:

... growing up Catholic ... you always think about ... you believe ... you're taught that God made you in his own image and things ... if God made me in his own image, and this is who I am, then why is it wrong?... would God make someone defective? ... that whole feeling ... that you were defective ... And so then you got into more religion, because you wanted to be cured from that ... you want to be ... not ... defective ... a better Catholic ... But then you came to a point of ... I haven't done anything wrong ... it's just the way I am ... And stopped going to church helped me facilitate that sort of, helped my brain sort of get used to the fact that ... I am OK.

¹³Farley, *Just Love*, 194.

¹⁴Farley, *Just Love*, 286.

¹⁵Farley, *Just Love*, 207. Emphasis added.

¹⁶Farley, *Just Love*, 207.

¹⁷See Sajeesh Thrikodanmalil, "Union of Persons of the Same Sex: Moral Evaluation and Pastoral Care," Scaria Kanniyakonil, Dominic Vechoor, and Anto Cheranthuruthy, ed., *The Pastoral Challenges of Marriage & Family: Responses from India*, Vadavathoor: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies India, (2015), 139-52.

¹⁸Shaji George Kochuthara, "Editorial: Moral Theology in Asia," *Asian Horizons* 4, 1 (June 2010) 3.

¹⁹Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective: An Epistemological Account," Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2010, 31-57; Kathy Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in the 21st Century: Applications for Advancing Social Justice Studies," Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds., London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2005, 507-35.

Pipa's declaration of feeling "OK" after having stopped "going to church" suggests that ecclesiastical disapproval plays a major role in his conceptualisation of sexual wrongdoing and its attendant struggles. The question of "why is it wrong" alludes to Pipa's cognisance of the ecclesiastical disapproval that surrounds matters pertaining to his sexuality. In asking if "God [would] make someone defective" while concomitantly declaring his detachment from church services, Pipa portrays the idea of sexual wrongdoing as *the defiance of ecclesiastical prescriptions of "right" sexuality*. His reminiscence of earlier attempts "to be cured" by "[getting] into more religion" and "[being] a better Catholic" reflects a prevalent stand by Malaysian Catholic institutions that non-heteronormative subjects ought to embrace intense prayer, counselling and therapy in order to be manumitted from such sexual distortions.²⁰ "Church" represents possibilities for reparative therapy and consequent ethical approval, while also standing as *the totem of ethical disapproval* in matters pertaining to Pipa's sexuality. From this perspective, "church" dispenses endorsements through castigations.

A consequence of this formulation of sexual wrongdoing for Pipa is "that whole feeling ... that [he is] defective." The notion of defectiveness alludes to a self-perception of flawed existence and ontological inferiority. Yet, in "growing up Catholic," Pipa "always [thought,] believe[d] and was] taught" that "God made [Pipa] in [God's] own image." The reference to "growing up Catholic" is particularly significant. It suggests a theological reiteration of his dignity as an embodied reflection of the divine amidst an ethos of confusion and conflict over his sexuality in his earlier years. I suggest that Pipa's question of "why is it wrong?"—which forms the main title of this essay—bears particular salience for his interior negotiations on two levels. First, he introduces the element of doubt to interrupt what could otherwise be an automated flow of non-self acceptance as a gay-identifying man. Second, he expresses his inability to reconcile God's purposeful creation of himself as a gay-identifying man with ideas that 'undo' this purposefulness and declare it as somewhat "defective."

Pipa assigns his sexuality to God by stating that he is purposefully created in God's image as "who [he is]," including his sexuality. An

²⁰Joseph N. Goh, "Repent or Believe in the Closet: When Pastoral Care Is Anything But," Blog, *Queer Eye for God's World*, (November 16, 2013), <http://josephgoh.org/?p=125>; Goh, "Reflections on 'The Third Way.'"

appeal to the idea of being made in "[God's] own image" beckons the idea that divine creation is devoid of "defective[ness]" and imperfection, a quality that he suspects as filtering down to his own createdness. He advocates an "ontogeneric argument," or "assigning the responsibility of ... stigmatized sexuality to God [which] in turn put[s] the Church in the wrong."²¹ In so doing, Pipa overturns the perception of ontological inferiority by paralleling institutional condemnation of his sexuality with a condemnation of God's creative design. In performing a theological strategy of crediting God for his sexuality, Pipa restores both the validity of his sexual subject position and his faith in the Godhead, as he believes that his sexuality is bolstered by divine purposefulness.

Pipa's cognisance of being "OK," or non-defective as a gay-identifying man occurs only when he "stop[s] going to church." Thus, the termination of church participation for him spells the termination of a *destructive sexuality script*. The cessation of church attendance equips him with a life-giving alternative in which he is able to "get used to the fact" that "[he hasn't] done anything wrong," "it's just the way [he is]," and hence, "[he is] OK." In so doing, Pipa undermines authoritative claims of sin by the official Catholic institution. In challenging an ecclesiastical perception of his sexuality as "wrong," Pipa constructs a *personal space of spiritual justice and liveability* in which he can separate religious proscription from theological benignancy, a space which cradles an interior conviction that "[he is] OK." This space speaks to an extension of social justice for all non-heteronormative men who ascribe importance to both their sexualities and their sense of faith.

Sexual wrongdoing is thus conceptualised as transgressing ecclesiastical notions of 'right' sexuality. Such transgressions induce feelings of interior discomfort and ontological defectiveness, yet stimulate strategies of validation through a deep conviction that non-heteronormative sexuality emanates from God.

5.2 Sexual Disregard for Others and Self

The conceptualisation of sexual wrongdoing for gay-identifying men is also linked to erotic practices that objectivise the sexual Other. As Raw shares:

²¹Andrew K.T. Yip, "The Politics of Counter-Rejection: Gay Christians and the Church," *Journal of Homosexuality* 37, 2 (1999) 55.

So the question is, is it right to treat that person as an object? If it's not, in my mind, I'm thinking, when I can stop thinking ... right now I just ... don't care what he thinks, I don't care what he feels, I just want that. If I can stop thinking like that for a little while (chuckles), and think OK he's a person and he ought to be respected, right, for who he is as a person, and not be used as an object, then I walk away from that sort of situation.

Raw paints a hypothetical scenario in which he is so overwhelmed by sexual desire that his intention for engaging in a sexual act is solely for physical gratification. Yet, he confronts an important question in the midst of these intense desires. In wondering aloud about his sexual activities, Raw is actually posing an ethical question to himself. The ethical quality of this question presents itself as an additional enquiry of whether "[it is] right to treat that person as an object."

For Raw, sexual wrongdoing is formulated as *a conscious disregard for the Other as a sexual subject*, because the other is little more than that which can "be used as an object." This is a form of sexual wrongdoing that subscribes to lust, which is "a craving for sexual pleasure without any real affective response to, union with, or affirmation of the other."²² Lustful objectification is a deliberate, blatant indifference towards, and negation of how the sexual Other "thinks" and "feels" in one's quest for sexual satiation. This attitude does not only relegate the sexual Other to an inconsequential outlet for sexual release. It is harmful because it de-humanises the sexual Other by denying this subject the right to be respected "as a person," replete with thoughts and feelings. Raw's reflexive ruminations reveal that the antithesis of objectivising a sexual Other lies in the recognition that the sexual Other is "a person [who] ought to be respected ... for who he is as a person, and not be used." Thus, sexual wrongdoing is *a debasement and dehumanisation of the sexual Other*. It dismisses justice, mutuality and equality, and obliterates the personhood, thoughts and feelings of a sexual Other.

Nevertheless, sexual wrongdoing is not only a disregard for the sexual Other—it is also a *disregard for the sexual Self*. Raw's reflexive reiterations of "when I can stop thinking" and "if I can stop thinking" of using the sexual Other purely for sexually-recreational purposes betokens a deeply-felt intuition that such a self-seeking trajectory is one that demands that he "walk away." An intuition that interrogates him with a self-confrontational question of whether "[it is] right to treat [a] person as an object" transforms that question into a

method of evaluating his own sense of sexual disregard. From this perspective, the treatment of the sexual Other with callousness harbours the possibility of a sort of *self-directed sexual degradation*, in which the sexual self is also objectivised and dehumanised. Raw's insights reveal a keen awareness that to act unjustly to a sexual Other is to abandon one's responsibility to act justly, both by advocating sexual harm and by being untrue to oneself in one's own sexual sphere.

Sexual wrongdoing is constitutive of a conscious disregard both for the sexual Other and for oneself. In such situations, sexual wrongdoing spells the objectification, dehumanisation and depersonalisation of sexual subjects. It ignores the potentiality for sexual engagements to be erotically-affirming and life-giving, rather than tools for manipulation and instant gratification.

6. Sexual Ethics and Sexual Respect for Others and Self

Narratives that detail the performances of sexual disregard provide a valuable contrast with counter-narratives of sexual respect for oneself and others. For Raw, the self-respect that he accords himself also overflows to an acute sense of respect for the sexual Other, as he discloses in the following narrative:

... OK, I am a gay man, this is what I feel, this is what I need, romantically, affectionately, sexually. Even if it is a matter of a one-night stand, I'm gonna treat that person with respect. I will not treat another guy the way that I have been treated before. Where I have been enticed into someone's bed and the moment he had his orgasm he says OK, thanks, get out, right, I will not do that to someone else ... With the brand of Buddhism that I practise now ... it is gelling in how I try to live my life, it's gelling with how I want to treat people AND be treated in return, and it's about believing that, if I have sex with another guy, it's not sinful or wrong.

Raw makes no pretence that he sees sexual activities with other men as something which he "need[s], romantically, affectionately, sexually." Here, he refers to fundamental embodied dynamics of emotion and corporeality that emerge from the depths of his sexuality. Raw declares a guiding principle for his sexual encounters, including "one-night stand[s]," or casual, "more fleeting, nonrelationship liaisons"²³ of a sexual nature. This principle bespeaks a commitment

²³Wendy D. Manning, Peggy C. Giordano, and Monica A. Longmore, "Hooking Up," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 21, 5 (September 2006) 459.

²²Farley, *Just Love*, 171.

to “treat [sexual subjects] with respect” as a deliberate inversion of how “[he had] been treated before.” Raw’s assertion that he will not rehearse previous unpleasant experiences of being unceremoniously instructed to “get out” after having played into the sexual manipulations of a sexual partner suggests a mark of sexual reflexivity and agency.

What is important for Raw is not whether the sexual liaisons are constitutive of “one-night stand[s]” or relationships that manifest longer-term commitments. Raw’s insights depart from Farley’s vision of long-term commitments as “a shared life and an enduring love”²⁴ that forms “the heart of an ethic for sexual activities and relationships,”²⁵ including in same-sex relationships. Instead, Raw seems to suggest that sexual ethics should prevail in both fleeting and extended relationships. In his eyes, sexual ethics in both circumstances stem from a responsibility to ensure that each sexual encounter becomes an avenue for gifting the sexual Other with respect, integrity and affirmation. Raw’s sexual experiences challenge Farley’s notion that brief sexual encounters can “isolate us from others and from ourselves.”²⁶

I propose that Farley’s postulation of justice in same-sex relationships as requiring that both partners “[respect] their autonomy and their relationality ... to make human persons ends in themselves”²⁷ is equally true for justice in every instance of non-heteronormative sexual liaison. Sexual encounters between gay-identifying men thus harbour possibilities for ethical dynamics in which these men can be appreciated for who they are, within ongoing discernments of respect, freedom, mutuality and equality.

Raw’s sexual reflexivity and agency echo my previous analysis of his growing sense of sexual self-appreciation, and rejection of self- and other-degradation in sexual interactions. Hence, the correlations between the regard for self and others in sexual wrongdoing are intimately connected to the correlations between the regard for self and others in sexual ethics. I suggest that Raw’s sexual reflexivity and agency in this regard are signs of fruitfulness in sexual ethics. Farley acknowledges that the love which is engendered between sexual subjects does not necessarily culminate in the generation of offspring. “The new life within the relationship of those who share it,” she

posits, “may move beyond itself in countless ways.”²⁸ I wish to extend Farley’s notion of fruitfulness to include possibilities of both long-term and short-term relationships, including “one-night stand[s].” Thus, I argue that various exchanges of pleasure in mutual consent and equality that are laden with possibilities of greater sexual self- and other-awareness, as well as self- and other-gifting, are ways in which gay-identifying men constitute a kind of just and life-giving sexual fruitfulness.

Raw attributes his sexual stance to “the brand of Buddhism that [he is practising] now” which “[gels with] how [he tries] to live [his] life [and] how [he wants] to treat people AND be treated in return.” The “gel[ling]” that he refers to underscores an abiding congruity between his spiritual sensibilities, sexual subjectivity and sexual relationality. His “brand of Buddhism” acts as a spiritual compass that enables him to navigate his sexual activities, and sets the framework for his own expectations of treatment as a sexual subject. I propose that the issue here is not one of religious affiliation or a tussle that determines the superiority of one religious system over another. Instead, Raw looks towards a *spiritually-guided corporeality*, and a *corporeally-guided spirituality* that bespeaks “a comprehensive approach to human flourishing, an approach that is necessary ... for an understanding of human sexuality.”²⁹ Thus, Raw’s ultimate interest lies in the appropriation of sexual ethics that speak of embodied empowerment, wisdom, right action and human thriving. He strives after a way of life in which a person becomes “the determiner of his or her own destiny—a destiny defined by the actions which he or she chooses to perform.”³⁰

Raw’s practice of his “brand of Buddhism” informs him that if an action “is intended to benefit beings, or is motivated by generosity, kindness or wisdom, it is wholesome,”³¹ irrespective of whether he identifies as gay or otherwise. Central to Raw’s conceptualisation of sexual ethics are the traits of justice and non-harm in any and every instance of sexual opportunity, rather than a slavish mindset that simplistically denounces same-sex activity as sin, and bestows sole validity on heteronormatively-sanctioned sexual arrangements. Raw’s

²⁴Farley, *Just Love*, 225.

²⁵Farley, *Just Love*, 290.

²⁶Farley, *Just Love*, 225.

²⁷Farley, *Just Love*, 289.

²⁸Farley, *Just Love*, 228.

²⁹Farley, *Just Love*, 117-118.

³⁰Peter Harvey, *Buddhism*, New York: Continuum, 2001, 67.

³¹Harvey, *Buddhism*, 67.

narrative prompts a rethinking of how sexual ethics can deepen its concerns “with the full realization of the human person.”³²

Pipa’s formulation of sexual ethics echoes that of Raw’s on many levels, particularly in an attitude of respectful other-regard:

“... I live my life based on a lot of the beliefs that I was brought up ... to the teachings, whether my family, or church. And I think those are just part of me ... My biggest thing with this whole belief and religion thing was just the whole connection of ... gays and damnation ... I believe in treating people with respect, equality, dignity. Be compassionate, those sorts of thing. I think those beliefs, which are very much ... from my younger days of learning Catholicism. Those things I think have impacted me then, so that’s very much part of me ...”

In responding to my enquiry on his present belief system “in relation to his sexuality,” Pipa acknowledges that this system is derived from “the beliefs that [he] was brought up [in].” He recognises that the “teachings” from his “family, or church” assume important roles in his current spirituality. I propose that Pipa’s mention of “church,” and subsequent references to the “whole belief and religion thing” actually allude to the Catholic institution, and its theological and doctrinal tenets. I further suggest that Pipa’s placement of “family” teachings on a par with “church” teachings is particularly important, as it suggests a cherished value-laden heritage of “in treating people with respect, equality, dignity” that has been interiorised and reiterated over time. This heritage “[has] impacted [him]” in that it has become “just part of [Pipa].” Pipa’s narrative manifests a sense of deep regard for all human subjects, a demeanour which he acquired from both family and church. I suggest that he continues to engage in the act of ‘*heritaging*’ by “treating people with respect, equality, dignity” and compassion as a gay-identifying man. I further suggest that this regard encompasses the sexual realm, as this narrative occurred within the context of his “beliefs ... in relation to [his] sexuality.” Thus, sexual ethics is *the treatment of the sexual Other “with respect, equality, dignity [and compassion].”*

Pipa’s uneasiness with Catholicism rests with the manner in which the Catholic institution insists on “the whole connection of ... gays and damnation.” This agitation obviously stems from the fact that he feels implicated in this (con) “damnation,” and is rendered as a sexually-disapproved subject. Ironically, while Pipa accords the

values of “respect, equality, dignity” and compassion to others, he is not himself accorded such values as a gay-identifying man. The very institution that was instrumental in imbuing him with such values now denies him respect, equality and dignity through total and unconditional acceptance. It is this dismal disjuncture that contributes to his ongoing discomfort, frustration and disillusionment with the Catholic institution.

Sexual ethics consists of a stronger and more meaningful sense of self-respect and integrity, which entails a concomitant resistance towards demeaning oneself as a sexual subject. To engage in sexual ethics is to impart respect, equality, appreciation, affirmation, dignity, justice and compassion to the sexual Other. Such perspectives of sexual ethics draw on forms of spirituality that support human flourishing and empowerment.

7. Conclusion

The narratives of Pipa and Raw can pave the way for a critical discussion on the formulations of sexual wrongdoing and sexual ethics by gay-identifying Malaysian men. Sexual wrongdoing is conceptualised by gay-identifying men as transgressing ecclesiastical notions of ‘right’ sexuality that are accompanied by feelings of ontological defectiveness. Confrontations with perceptions of sexual wrongdoing have incited a critical appraisal of one’s relationship with church authorities. At times, more affirming and constructive elements of ecclesiastical teachings are appropriated for personal spirituality in relation to sexuality. At other times, a detachment from the ecclesiastical structures proves to be necessary. Sexual wrongdoing is also conceptualised as disregard for the sexual Other and the sexual self in the forms of sexual objectification, manipulation, depersonalisation and dehumanisation.

Conversely, the standards of sexual ethics are formulated by gay-identifying men as a purposeful affordance of respect to the sexual Other and the sexual self through the conveyance of respect, integrity, affirmation, dignity, freedom, compassion, respect, mutuality, justice and equality. In this regard, the conscription of a spirituality that fosters human thriving and empowerment proves to be particularly helpful. The lived experiences of gay-identifying men challenge simplistic, knee-jerk reactions that dismiss their sexual identifications and expressions as deviant, sinful and pathological by default. The sexual attractions, feelings and expressions of gay-identifying men are

³²Kochuthara, “Editorial: Moral Theology in Asia,” 4.

not a result of unbridled lust or a post-lapsarian state of iniquitous existence. The lived realities of gay-identifying men neither automatically beckon tyrannical theological denunciations nor well-meaning but destructive conversion therapies. There must also be departure from an “it’s wrong because the church/bible says it’s wrong” attitude that demonstrates an uncritical approach to sexual diversity, and which occludes possibilities for a greater understanding of non-heteronormative subjects.

In his discussion on Asian public theology, Felix Wilfred calls on Christian ethics “to move from an ethics of conformity ... to an ethics of refusal” which “challenges the injustice of the established order and legitimation of institutionalized modes of conduct.”³³ Wilfred’s words are helpful in reconsidering sexual ethics from non-heteronormative perspectives by re-examining existing doctrinal, theological and ecclesiastical structures that have hitherto remained largely unchanged in relation to non-heteronormative subjects. There must be respectful and sincere spaces for gay-identifying men—and indeed all non-heteronormative subjects—to speak on their own behalf and on their own terms on the struggles they face and the connections they forge between their faith and their sexuality. It is thus imperative for both parties to continue in dialogical engagements as equal partners by adopting a mode of listening from the heart that is careful, attentive, and radically loving and just.

³³Felix Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times*, Delhi, India: ISPCK, 2010, 222.

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