

One

Sexual Positions

Twists and Turns

. . . once the erotophobic Christian ideologies were removed, the other resources were able to become powerful tools for recognizing the original blessing of sexuality.

—Robert Shore-Goss

Traditionalists Versus Sexual Liberation

Whenever the call for change includes reform to codes of sexual morality, there is almost always resistance. In our time we especially hear this resistance coming from particular and well-established traditionalist Christian leaders and institutions. Appeals to the Bible, to church teaching, and to nature have all been used to prop up the argument that sex is only for marriage, narrowly defined as between a man and a woman, with a strong emphasis on procreation. Christians who hold to this norm are convinced that it alone allows sexual activity to realize sexual virtue. Admittedly, it is not difficult for such Christian traditionalists to accessorize this view with examples and arguments from antiquity, attempting to show us that “this is the way it has always been.” Such Christians usually insist that the heterosexual and marital norm is a sacred and well-preserved tradition, warning that any departure from it is a dangerous step on a slippery slope toward sexual and social anarchy. When one listens carefully to their concerns, there is no question that these religious traditionalists appear ready to fight to keep this the norm not only for themselves or their given religious communities, but for all people.

With a particular view of sexuality and morality in mind, a confederation of resistance cells in this country (and elsewhere) wage a struggle that they call a “culture war.” They do so under the banners of “traditional morality” and “defending the traditional family.” This they champion, not only in their churches, but also in society through ballot measures or acts of legislation. They tell us that the heterosexual and marital norm was established by God, affirmed by Christ, and therefore is not only good for personal morality, but for the ordering of society through law. Never mind that American democracy is constitutional (not theocratic), this religiously informed norm, they say, is the standard of sexual morality (and thus virtue) for all people.¹

The facts, however, get in the way of their narrative.

The heterosexual and marital norm was actually *not* the preferred definition of sexual morality for many Christians. History clearly demonstrates that a number of the early Christian movements grew in the direction of sexual asceticism.² This fostered deeply negative views not only about sexual activity, but sexual desire as well—especially the desire for sexual pleasure. There is a certain irony, then, when some Christians (today) praise heterosexual marriage as the grounding of good society, or the place to fulfill “God-given” sexual desires. What many of them do not know is that they stand apart from a number of their Christian predecessors. To some early Christian leaders, today’s traditionalists would likely seem sexually permissive.³

For example, when St. Gregory of Nyssa interpreted the biblical Eden narrative (Genesis 2–3), the theologian argued that sexuality was alien to the human creature before the “fall” of humankind into sin. As Phil Sherrard describes it, Gregory believed that life before the fall was defined by “immortality and incorruptibility”; and thus St. Gregory assumed that “the presence of these two qualities [required] the absence of sexuality.”⁴ In Gregory’s view, the perfect image of God in the human being could not also include a sexual dimension. But this ancient Christian ideal is remarkably absent when we contrast it with many contemporary Christian views on marriage and family, including conservative Christian views. For example, Focus on the Family (a conservative evangelical American-based ministry) goes so far as to declare that God “made” sex for humans. In one advice column, Focus on the Family celebrates sexuality this way:

God created it—sex is remarkably sacred and ultimately about seeking that which God made us for. We must understand that God’s interest in human sexuality is so much more than

merely making sure people behave themselves. . . . God, and those who follow Him, take sex very seriously, and the Christian picture of sexuality is much more serious, vibrant, and well . . . sexy . . . than any other view held in the larger culture. As a result it's far more fulfilling.⁵

This conservative evangelical teaching is very far removed from St. Gregory of Nyssa. What is more, even contemporary Vatican teachings disagree with Gregory about the nature of human sexuality. What this example reveals, then, is that Christians (even conservative Christians) have a track record of revising views on human sexuality, given different theological or moral perspectives.⁶

And so, while many contemporary traditionalists claim to defend “Christian sexual morality”—as if it is one monolithic thing—it is more accurate to say that the definition of sexual morality has always been in an ongoing state of redefinition. That is not to say that longstanding views on sexual virtue failed to develop and remain in place. They did. However, it would be incorrect to suggest that Christians have only ever agreed on one definition of sexual morality. When we pull back the covers on just some of the sexual norms and practices in Christian history, what we find will likely encourage us to reassess our assumptions and expectations about sexual morality, as well as our definitions of sexual virtue. What is more, when we take a short look at what used to be prevailing Christian views on sexual morality it may very well give some people the permission that they need to ask critical questions about certain teachings today.

I invite us, then, to make a short side trip through history. It will be selective, and it will be brief. It will not include everything in the archives that one might include. But it will nevertheless demonstrate that amending religious and moral teachings about sexuality is not of itself alien to Christianity. In fact, when we take a closer look into these issues, I would wager that a good number of today's Christians (both traditionalist and progressive) will be glad that their predecessors went about the business of redefining sexual morality.

An Unfortunate Truth: Christianity's Legacy of Sexual Suspicion

Christian concern for sexual morality has been present ever since groups began organizing around the teachings of Jesus. For example, between

the years 55 and 57 CE, a convert to the way of Jesus wrote to a Christian community in the city of Corinth. His name was Paul. He told the Christians of Corinth that in light of some “impending crisis” and “the passing away of this present world,” it was best for them not to marry, unless they were aflame with sexual passion. He even told them that it was better to be a virgin, or become celibate, as he was (or had become).⁷ Within the same set of years, this Paul would write to another Christian community, this time to a group of Christians in Rome. He wrote that polytheism had disordered God’s creation. He cited the example of polytheistic men and women going “in excess of their nature” by engaging in unnatural sex acts (whatever those turned out to be) as well as same-sex activities (which in first century Rome often included rape and/or the instrumental sexual use of slaves and prostitutes).⁸ Within these letters (and others), Paul also warned Christians to avoid “sexual immorality,” but without ever providing a detailed explanation of what qualified sexual vice from sexual virtue. Centuries later, these letters were canonized as scripture and Christians were charged with the difficult task of interpreting them well.⁹

Paul was not the only early Christian to weigh in on sexual matters in an ascetic leaning way. As the religion and sexuality scholar Rosemary Radford Ruether has well documented: some second and third-century Christian leaders taught that marriage (and thus marital sex) was actually a threat to the Christian lifestyle. The theologian Tatian is notable. In 150 CE, Tatian converted and studied under the influential theologian Justin Martyr. In his own ministry, Tatian began teaching that true Christians must renounce sexual activity in order to be baptized and to walk best in the way of Christ. Tatian’s teachings were not out of place among his contemporaries in the various Christian sects. With Tatian, many other Christian teachers denigrated sexual desire and assigned sexual activity no place (or low place) in the Christian life.¹⁰

The early centuries of Christianity were certainly a peculiar time for Christian views on sexual morality. But they were also a tumultuous period in which a wide range of theological differences between the various Christian movements sponsored competition for legitimacy and authority. Some of these became recognized as “orthodox” (meaning, of the right belief). The “others” were labeled as heterodox or heretics, teaching outside of the authorized tradition. The scholarship of Ruether (and others) shows us that when we step into the third and fourth centuries, a number of “orthodox” teachers were addressing the moral and religious status of sexuality in the Christian life. One such theologian,

Clement of Alexandria, said that sexual activity did have a place in the Christian life, but only insofar as it was ordered toward procreation early in marriage, and then with “dignified motions” (whatever those turned out to be).¹¹ He even encouraged Christians to give up sexual activity as marriage progressed in years so that the spouses might better contemplate God.¹² The idea that sex—in and of itself—somehow disrupts a person’s relationship with God might seem unsubstantiated now, but its broad acceptance by early orthodox church leaders fertilized the ground that would grow the tradition of required celibacy for religious leaders.

Within this current of sexual asceticism the influential theologian Augustine emerged. As part of his legacy, Augustine solidified a low view of sex as the preferred Christian view. After engaging in a life of sexual hedonism in his early adulthood, as well as exploring a number of religious and philosophical traditions, Augustine converted to Christianity and pursued the life of a cleric and theologian. He too found sexual desire—and much about sexual activity—to be a thorn in the side of Christian living. In his authoritative role as a bishop, Augustine affirmed that the best Christian life was the one lived in virginity and celibacy. But he could not bring himself to deny that procreation was a natural good in God’s creation, and so he named it the “one worthy fruit” of intercourse, even if sexual activity was motivated by less than righteous sexual desires. Augustine provided space for the married-sexual life, but awarded it second place in the “kingdom of God.”

At the same time, Augustine evaluated marital *companionship* a very good thing insofar as it provided social order (albeit, patriarchal order) and mutual care between spouses. Nevertheless, the theologian still insisted that those who pursue marriage do so—in particular—because they cannot control their sinful sexual desires for sensual pleasure. Indeed, the writings of Augustine even imagine a world in which all are celibate: bringing the generations of the human race to an end and Christ’s return hastened. But this ideal, he realized, would not likely resonate with the lived experiences of most people. Therefore, Augustine maintained celibacy and marital procreation as the paradigm of sexual morality for the Christian community. His view was upheld as orthodox teaching among members of the emerging church hierarchy. Indeed, Augustine’s marital norm and procreative priority have been preserved in many Christian communities to this day.¹³

Drawing on the teachings of Augustine and theologians like him, the tradition of clerical celibacy was championed by many in the church hierarchy. Although it was resisted by many priests (and their wives!),

required clerical celibacy was formalized in the twelfth century.¹⁴ In 1139 the First Lateran Council established that priestly ordination was a sacrament that could be received only in celibacy.¹⁵ As a result, the belief was institutionalized in Western Christianity that the holiest people cannot *also* be sexual people. Yes, the church continued to allow for married, sexual lives among the laity, but such people were not regarded with the same measure of spiritual purity as those who remained virgins, or celibate. For them, sex was indeed *dirty*.

The medieval scholar and theologian Thomas Aquinas pushed back a bit on this enduring sexual asceticism by reframing sexual pleasure and activity as natural to the human condition—albeit as part of our “lower” nature. Sex (and sexual pleasure), Aquinas said, participated in our animal nature and required reason and church teaching to be well ordered.¹⁶ However, he could not deny his predecessors’ teachings that human sinfulness permeated all things, including sexuality. As a result, he taught that sexual desire was especially difficult to chastise, and that sexual virtue was practiced (when engaged in genital contact) only by married partners who ordered sexual desires and activity in such a way that procreation was not contravened. Aquinas’s fellow scholastic theologians agreed, and subsequent manuals on sexual morality further secured the procreative norm (or celibacy) as a matter of attending well to Christian sexual morality.

Thus, in its first millennium of formation, institutional Christianity was clearly dominated by an evolving synthesis of sexual asceticism and what we would now call *heteronormativity*. It fixed a notion in many Christian minds that sexual desire and activity are especially related to sin, potentially scandalous, and in need of severe restraint—whether by celibacy or obedience to the marital/procreative norm. In short, the Christian narrative for sexual morality idealized celibacy and tolerated heterosexual marriage, so long as the goal of procreation redeemed the “immodest” pleasures of sex. Apart from these options, all other forms of sexual expression and relationships were regarded (by the church) as unnatural and sinful. And by certain civil standards, “unnatural” sex acts were punishable by death.¹⁷

Against the celibate church hierarchy the Protestant Reformation would rise, but even the Reformation did not wrest sexual shame and suspicion away from church teachings. Sixteenth-century Protestant reformers such as Luther and Calvin were willing to challenge the tradition of clerical celibacy, and yet they largely preserved procreation as the moral norm of sexual activity. They would even retain a number of suspicions

about sex as spiritually polluting.¹⁸ In fact, it would not be until 1930 that certain Protestant denominations would begin to officially consider contraception as an exercise of prudence, freeing people to consider other valuable reasons for engaging in sexual activity.¹⁹ Where Protestants took the lead on contraceptive use, some Catholic theologians hoped to follow. In 1963, a special commission was appointed by Pope John XXIII to study contraception.²⁰ Many of those appointed to this commission came to the conclusion that the Catholic Church should also permit the use of some contraceptives by married couples, as a matter of family planning.²¹ But the hierarchy of the Catholic Church would ultimately disagree.²²

The Vatican reacted strongly against contraceptive-using Christians, declaring through papal encyclicals (and other official statements) that procreation was still the finality of sexual union that had to be respected and pursued only in sanctioned marriages.²³ But even as official Roman Catholic teachings on sexual morality rejected artificial birth control, the Catholic Church did accept that marital love is a valid end to pursue in sexual relations—but only as an indissoluble end with procreation.²⁴ The Catholic Church would even learn to accept natural family planning (i.e., the rhythm method) as a way for couples to enjoy sexual intimacy at a time when conception is not likely. Namely, the church (now) accepts that God designed the natural rhythms of fertility and infertility, in the ovulation cycle, such that heterosexual spouses can plan *when* to enjoy sexual activity for its contribution to marital intimacy (and not reproduction), while at the same time avoiding a “contraceptive will.”

But contraception would be just one of many disputed liberties.

In the face of almost two thousand years of narrow Christian teaching on sexuality, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries yielded new moral and theological discourses on gender roles and human sexuality.²⁵ First-wave feminism inspired the campaign to secure women’s right to vote and to acquire property rights too. This, in turn, illuminated moral and social questions about the autonomy of women, especially matters having to do with reproductive choice and socioeconomic equality.²⁶ As second-wave feminism gave voice, and fight, for women’s moral, social, reproductive, and political rights, and third-wave feminism advanced critical analyses of essentialist views on “femininity,” so too a variety of social movements and organizations began to give voice, and fight, for the acceptance of homosexuality, and in turn, acceptance of diverse sexual/social identities.²⁷ Given the prolific sexual asceticism in the churches,

a spotlight on women and gay and lesbian issues was destined to ignite schism, if not scandal too.

And it did.

Twentieth-century Catholic and Protestant churches were forced to wrestle morally and theologically with constructions of gender and moral anthropology. They also had to face (sometimes begrudgingly) new understandings about sexual orientations that were emerging from the social, medical, and psychological sciences. They also had to contend with a multifaceted women's' rights movement, which worked tirelessly (though unsuccessfully) for a constitutional Equal Rights Amendment. At the same time, the churches could not hide from the growing "gay rights" movement in the United States and elsewhere.²⁸ It included lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people—as well as straight allies—brought together in order to resist the discrimination suffered by the LGBT community.

The fight would not be a purely secular or political one. When the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) was organized in 1968 by the Rev. Troy Perry, it was an effort to give LGBT people a welcoming spiritual home. With the rise of the MCC it became impossible to say, as some wanted to, that the LGBT movement was opposed to the things of God.²⁹ Theologically speaking, God found a home among the LGBT community through churches and groups like the MCC. As a result, a number of LGBT people found that the struggle for acceptance need not be conceived as a battle against religion. This was a realization that would become all the more pronounced, especially as the Unitarian Universalists, Reform Judaism, and many mainline Protestant groups and churches would come to find that one need not reject the divine to embrace sexual diversity.

As social and moral norms were being challenged in the churches and in the public square, scholars of religion, ethics, and sexuality emerged more boldly, investigating the integrity of the traditional sexual norms in Christianity. Feminist philosophy exposed patriarchal privilege. The Augustinian tradition of sexuality and marriage came under severe criticism. Careful study of the Bible punctured "certainties" that the churches had been holding about sexual morality. Between the 1980s and the turn of the millennium serious questions about sexual ethics were reiterated or given new voice. Greater numbers of scholars, clergy, and theologians emerged who challenged the narrow procreative and marital norms in both Catholic and Protestant churches.³⁰

But in spite of these critical insights, a number of Christian churches advancing conservative, or traditionalist, views on sexuality would strike back. For example, in confrontation with cultural acceptance of homosexuality, the Catholic Church advanced the position that homosexuality is an “objective disorder”—a disorder that inclines people toward “intrinsic moral evil.”³¹ In the same document that condemns homosexuality this way, the Vatican author went on to write these haunting words:

[W]hen homosexual activity is consequently condoned, or when civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the Church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground and irrational and violent actions increase.³²

The author was none other than Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

Ratzinger was elected pope in 2005 and is now well known as Pope Benedict XVI. As Mark Jordan noted about this Vatican statement on violence against gays, Ratzinger seemed to be saying that “it is only to be expected that gay activism will reap its own reward in gay bashing.”³³ While Ratzinger acknowledged (in the same document) that nothing *justified* violence against LGBT people, his expectation of such violence left an enduring mark on LGBT folk, especially those of Christian faith who have been exposed to his teachings. Perhaps in an attempt to tend to the wound of Ratzinger’s sting, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expressly denounces violence against gays, and calls all Catholics to treat gay and lesbian people with care and justice. Indeed, the church’s recognition of “gay and lesbian persons” is notable. It represents a significant shift in the Catholic hierarchy’s recognition of sexual orientations. Even so, the church has not yet reversed its negative teaching about the moral status of homosexuality, except to call some forms of it innate, albeit as a pathological condition.

According to the official teachings of the Catholic Church, the origin of this moral pathology can be traced to the fall of humankind into sin. Because of this diagnosis, LGBT people were (and are) told to “unite to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross the difficulties they may encounter because of their *condition*.”³⁴ And according to the church, if one should lay down that cross of sexual solitude for connection with another person, such an act exchanges the virtue of chastity for mortal

sin—a weight so heavy it can drag a soul to hell. Indeed, even Pope Francis’s more pastoral tones about sex and sexuality have not reversed the official teachings of the church.

Protestant traditions have fared better and worse in various ways. With the rise of the Religious Right among conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists in the last quarter of the twentieth century, gay and lesbian issues became a favorite moral, religious, and political target. But so too were feminists, single mothers, and straight nonmarried sexual partners.³⁵ Even so, some Protestant denominations rejected the theologically charged invective of the Religious Right and reformed their positions on sexual morality. Such churches came to articulate inclusive moral teachings, which now affirm a wide variety of sexual practices and relationships for people who are straight or LGBT.³⁶ Where this has happened, however, division has often followed, especially when the issue has concerned the inclusion of the LGBT community. When the Episcopal Church accepted its first out gay bishop, Gene Robinson, parishes broke off and allied themselves with conservative Anglican dioceses in Africa. When denominations such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the United Church of Christ opened their doors to LGBT people for church membership, ordination, and marital blessings, congregations broke away.

But let me not paint the picture too darkly. As I have been alluding all along, progressive-thinking churches have flourished. Insights can be taken from their successes. However, it is in light of the long and imposing history of narrow sexual morals onto Christian communities that many Christians (and churches) still struggle. Within this struggle there is a sense held by many people that Christianity could have included—and still might support—sexual liberation (at least of some kind). This is a view held not only by some of those who identify as Christian, but also by those who study Christian ethics professionally.³⁷ As we shall see in the next chapter, a number of influential Christian ethicists argue that the (now) traditional norms of conservative Christians need not persist as the standard of Christian sexual ethics—especially in light of new knowledge about sexuality, as well as new insights about scripture and church teachings.

Of course, the suggestion that we can revise ideas about sexual morality will strike some people as a matter of radical thinking, because it calls into question one’s faithfulness to established religious principles. Proposals of reformation and change often elicit such concerns (remember the Protestant Reformation, and even the II Vatican Council!).

Some people simply like their religion “old,” assuming that antiquity bequeaths truth and authority that couldn’t possibly be present in new religious ideas. And yet, the history of Christianity itself suggests that Christians have always been about the business of revising codes of sexual morality. Thus, the question that Christian theologians, ethicists, and lay people must ask (now) is whether particular religious teachings about sexual morality are worth preserving.

Given the incredible pain, anxiety, and alienation experienced by so many people around matters of sexuality and religion, there is little question that we need fresh approaches to sexuality that genuinely uplift people as sexual and moral beings. We need this not only in communities of faith, but also in the wider society where religious narratives still hold serious moral weight. One way we can suggest new approaches to sexual morality is by engaging the field of sexual ethics—which, as we will see, requires both traditionalists and progressives alike to account for the moral proposals we make.

In the next chapter, I invite the reader to consider the field of sexual ethics in order to better understand *how* sexual ethics can help us to analyze Christian proposals about sexual morality. We will do so by looking at a selective sample of contemporary Christian sexual ethicists who, in some way, have offered challenges to traditional Christian norms. From these insights, we will then be able to launch into a more detailed exploration of sexual virtue.