

Sex and Religion: A Cultural History

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Introduction: Human Sexuality

Human sexuality is a fascinating and sometimes threatening subject. It is fascinating because of its ubiquitous presence in virtually every aspect of human behavior and interest; it is threatening because it is so personal that it is an integral aspect of the core of our identity and being. Human sexuality is also confusing. This is partially the result of the breadth and variable uses of the term "sex".

Initially, human sexuality refers to biology, with regard to the differences in DNA, and to physiology between males and females. It also refers to gender in the sense that we identify as men and women and play distinctive social, cultural, religious and family roles as a consequence of being male or female. In addition, human sexuality refers to the behavior, motives, emotions, and values which result in human reproduction and sensual pleasure. This powerful aspect of human identity and behavior is presently at the focus of the culture war raging in the institutions of American life. This article will attempt to briefly describe the historical and cultural context of the battle of sexuality in America.

Sexuality in the Ancient World

Because of the long-term pervasive influence of Judaism and Christianity in the West, it can be difficult for a Westerner to appreciate the idea of sex and religion as closely related. To some extent, the West has developed an idea that sex is evil or should be avoided in the religious context. While this is not universally held in the West, it is part of the confusion regarding sexuality within our culture. This is far from the reality of the ancient world. Sex in the ancient world was directly tied to religion and mystery. The ancient worldviews and religions were filled with sexual imagery and ritual. The religious art of New Guinea, Polynesia, Indonesia, Africa, and South America is as pornographic as that of the temples of India and Japan (Briffault p.31). The cosmologies of most ancient cultures tied sexuality and reproduction to the creation and birth of the universe. The gods and goddesses of the ancient world were sexual. According to ancient mythology, they engaged in seduction, jealousy, rape and brief affairs on a regular basis. Their sexual appetite included each other, mortals, and animals, both mythical and real. Their sexual activities were homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual. Temple prostitutes existed in every ancient religion. Sexual ritual assured fertility, prosperity, and peace between warring peoples by reenacting the myths of cosmology.

The sexual drive in the ancient world was focused in two primary areas:-sexual procreation and sexual recreation. Procreational sex was ritualized in religion because of its creative potential and was legitimized in marriage largely as a way to insure paternity, at least in patrilineal cultures. In many cultures, marriage was not about companionship. Therefore, a mate was not a romantic object or companion. For example, in the ancient

Greek world, wives were beaten and raped until they produced children, upon which time the role of mother was the primary role in their lives. This was particularly true in Spartan relationships. The husband used his wife for sexual reproduction and little else (Leslie / Korman p.157). Marital sex was seen as important for offspring, inheritance, and lineage. This sexuality was heterosexual for obvious reasons but did not necessarily involve companionship. Recreational sex was tied to companionship and was generally separated from marriage. Among the ancient Greeks, an ideal of companionship, which included sexual relationships, was between an older man and an adolescent boy.

Commonly, in the ancient world, a pattern developed that allowed a man to have a wife for procreational sex to insure his paternity, and a companion for recreational purposes. These extra marital relationships could be bisexual and involved prostitution and/or more long-term relationships. A married woman was less likely to be allowed such a relationship because of the need to guarantee the lineage of her children. A woman who took a lover would be beaten or killed at the direction of her husband. Thus there was a clear and meaningful double standard that allowed men to engage in procreational (marital) and recreational (non-marital) sex but restricted married women from all but procreational sex. This is not to say that the ancient world knew nothing at all of recreational sex in marriage, but it is clear that sexuality was seen in a very different manner than found in the later history of Western Culture.

Judaism and Sexuality

Into this orgy of ancient religious erotica, Judaism – as a light shining in darkness – arose. The God of Judaism was unlike any that had been seen. He was not sexual. He did not display any of the vices or passions of the pagan gods and goddesses. He was immaterial, eternal, good, and holy. He spoke the cosmos into existence and demanded righteousness and holiness of those who bore His name. This Holy God chose a holy people and a Holy Land to reflect His person and ways.

The idea of holiness most foundationally addresses the notion of sexuality for Judaism. As a people chosen as God's possession, they were to adhere to a code of goodness and holiness that would make them unique. They were to be just and righteous, because these were attributes of the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were also to be holy for God, Himself, was holy. This holiness separated them from the gods and the rest of the pagan world. It also prescribed the food they were to eat. Kosher food made them distinct from the peoples around them. And in their sexual relationships, holiness was a requirement. Close relatives were forbidden as marital and sexual partners. Homosexuality and bestiality were forbidden. Non-marital sexuality was strictly limited the result was a holy people who were separated from the nations, their gods and their sexuality (Leviticus chapter 18).

Judaism placed great importance on companionship in marriage. The first husband and wife were created as companions (Genesis chapter 2). Sexuality was to be confined to the husband and wife relationship. This included both procreational and recreational sex. Prostitution, homosexuality, and bestiality – practices that were tied to the other gods,

nations and lands – were not to be allowed among the holy people, or by anyone in the Holy Land. Thus the Holy God, holy people, and Holy Land would be highly visible to nations and the Lord God would be glorified and sanctified. It is important to point out that the Israelites' call to holiness was not a call to place these requirements on the nations around them. They were to enforce them among themselves and in the Land given to them by God. Thus, this sexuality was a part of their identification as a separated people who belonged to the one true God.

Roman Christianity and Sexuality

The first adherents to the message of Yeshua of Nazareth (Jesus) were Jews. His disciples, mostly Galileans, established a sect of Judaism during the first century that included Pharisees, Saducees, Herodians, and Zealots. Called Nazarenes, this group competed with the other sects of Judaism for internal influence as the religion of the Hebrews battled external influences of Hellenistic and Roman assimilation. As a result of the ministry of Cephas (Peter) and Saul (Paul), gentiles began to join the ranks of the Nazarenes. First called Christians at Antioch, these gentiles became the cause of controversy among the early followers of Yeshua. Within the believing community, those from the Pharisees argued that these gentiles must become Jews (be circumcised) and obey all of the traditions *halakhah* in order to be saved. The apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem to discuss the matter. As a result, a distinction was made between the Jewish and gentile believers and specific observances became imperative, e.g. abstaining from blood and things strangled, and from idolatry and fornication. Each of these items are commanded in the book of Leviticus as forbidden to the native Jew and the stranger (gentile) who sojourns with Israel. Although each of these holiness commandments separated these believing gentiles from the nations, just as the holiness commandments did for Israel, they did not remove them from their status of gentiles.

For a time, the gentile problem seemed to have been solved. However, as a result of Roman persecution, the destruction of the Temple, and later the Bar Kochba revolt, plus the sheer numbers of gentiles who converted to the faith of this initially small Jewish sect, the idea of holiness started to become a source of confusion among the gentiles.

As the Greek and Roman Christians increased in numbers, the Roman Church Fathers, separated from Judaism in both worldview and history, began to interpret the scriptures in a new way. This Greco-Roman approach to thinking caused a shift in the thinking regarding sexuality. Several passages that would be understood differently from a Jewish perspective began to shape the church's worldview regarding sexuality.

Fornication was to be avoided. This was the clear teaching of the New Testament. But fornication had to be defined. For Judaism it was simple; fornication was a violation of the commands regarding sexuality found in the Torah. This primarily focused on homosexuality, prostitution, incest, and bestiality. But to the Greco-Roman mind it was recreational or procreational sex that was under scrutiny. So it must be, they reasoned, that recreational sex was forbidden. This meant only sex that retained the potential of reproduction within marriage was to be allowed and that anything else was sin. One need

only have an introductory understanding of the Roman Church to see this pattern. The prohibition on birth control is consistent with this Catholic view. But this was not the intent of the Bible or Judaism. Holy sex is not exclusively procreational; but it is monogamous and heterosexual within marriage. The Roman church missed this distinction because of its separation from the Hebrew context of the New Testament writings.

The Roman form of Christianity also placed sexuality primarily in the mind rather than behavior. This came from a statement in the Gospels. "You have heard it said, Thou shalt not commit adultery; but I say unto you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27 – 28). To the Roman mind, this had to mean that if a man saw a woman and had a sexual thought, he was as guilty as if he had had sex with her. But this would not have made sense to a first century Jew. The work Yeshua used was adultery, not fornication. This statement is about desiring to marry another man's wife. This coveting of another man's wife and the prohibition against adultery are foundational to the Ten Commandments. Even in the same message, Yeshua states "everyone who divorces his wife, except for fornication, and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries her that is divorced commits adultery". Now, it is not to be taken that fornication with another man's wife is permitted, but these verses primarily relate to the marrying of another man's wife. It is important to remember that women were largely removed from the view of men and that the woman a man might most often see was his neighbor's wife. To interpret that "adultery in the heart" is a prohibition on sexual thought condemns every man, every day with almost every woman. This has created a neurotic view of sexuality within the Church. But the Roman Fathers were so sincere as to take literally the statement by Yeshua that if your hand or eye offend you, cut it off. Many early Church Fathers castrated themselves to fulfill this commandment. But sincerity is not an appropriate hermeneutic. To some extent, Modern Judaism later came to share this idea of 'thought sin', but the Greco-Roman mind is most likely to take this view.

Another mistake of the Roman Church with regard to sexuality effected male and female roles and caused a misunderstanding of Paul's statements regarding marriage. In the Corinthian letter, Paul argues for singleness during persecution as a better choice. But he in no way condemns marriage. The Roman view magnified singleness to the point of requiring it for Priests. The Biblical text had no such intent. The result of the separation of the New Testament from its Torah context, and the replacement of a Hebrew world-view with a Roman one, brought about a major change in the way sexuality would be viewed in the West for more than one thousand years.

Protestant Christianity and Sexuality

The Protestant Reformation period formed several additional traditions of Christianity in the West. The Reformed churches and Free churches were formed, in part, with marriage and divorce issues which were connected to the faith and authority struggles between Catholics and Protestants. The push away from the centralized authority of the Catholic church brought about national churches whose sex and marriage laws were tied more and

more to the national cultures they served. Religious marriage overlapped secular state marriages and divorce became largely a state matter. The priest or minister could establish a marriage but only the state could dissolve one. Thus eventually, churches could only ostracize divorce but not prevent it from taking place. Protestant theology moved from justifying divorce and remarriage only on the grounds of adultery, gross brutality or abandonment, to a mirror of the cultural attitudes of the time.

Protestant ministers were allowed to marry, and sexuality among Protestants included both procreational and recreational aspects. As long as the sexual activity was within the holy bond of matrimony, it was acceptable, though the subject remained publicly unspoken. This reintroduction of recreational (non-procreative) sex was enhanced by the development of romantic love as a major factor in mate selection.

Incest, adultery, homosexuality, pre-marital sex and thought sex (lusting) – with or without masturbation – continued to be considered immoral and grew to be seen as evil rather than simply unholy. The notion that these sexual practices are evil eventually brought them into the legal systems as criminal activities. In America, religious groups such as the puritans influenced the culture to see sexuality in right and wrong, rather than good and evil or holy and common categories. In many states adultery was grounds for divorce, punishable by imprisonment. Certain sexual behavior was illegal even for married couples.

As religion and secular state concerns separated, a new view of sexuality began to influence the American culture. This was the emergence of the behavioral sciences – psychology, sociology, and anthropology. These new sciences began to look at sexuality, not from a moral or religious perspective, but from a functional and cognitive perspective.

The Behavioral Sciences and Sexuality

The mid-1800s begins the classic period of the emergence of the behavioral sciences. Following the scientific revolution these new thinkers began to examine human behavior at individual, social and cultural levels. Freud, Marx, Durkheim, Darwin, and Weber suggested through their various disciplines that human behavior was describable, explainable, and predictable if examined in a scientific manner. Human sexuality, an aspect of behavior that shared much with animals, was a major part of the theoretic focus. Freud's unconscious motive for behavior was directly tied to sexuality in his psychosexual developmental scheme. Sexual variation by sub-groups and foreign (savage) cultures was part of the growing data developed by these infant sciences. Sex could no longer be viewed as simple procreation and recreation, or as good and evil. We now had to address Oedipal and Electra concerns. Strange and bizarre sexual rites were examined to unlock their mysterious and hidden meanings. And religion, particularly Judaism and Christianity, was seen as creating harmful "hang ups" in the development of the modern person.

By the turn of the century, the behavioral sciences had established their validity and claim to authority with regard to understanding human behavior. A new generation of psychologists and anthropologists took theory and experimental design into the laboratory of human behavior. Behaviorists like Watson experimented with human sexuality in university settings. Anthropologists such as Malinowski (*Sexual Life of Savages*) and Mead (*Coming of Age in Samoa*) gave us a broader view of human sexuality, development, practice and roles. Beyond the academic world, human sexuality was pushing the cultural boundaries in the "women's suffrage" movement and the "roaring twenties". Miniskirts, a flirtation with homosexuality, and mate swapping, phenomena generally associated with the 60's, were actually a significant part of this time period.

After World War II, the behavioral sciences continued their focus on human sexuality, borrowing from the medical research of the past and present. Kinsey's work, both lauded and condemned, pushed many aspects of human sexuality into a new discussion of what was "normal" human sexual behavior. The new scientific view of sexuality was about to challenge the traditional religious view. And the Catalyst for the battle was the civil rights movement and the 60's.

The Sexual Revolution

The 1960's brought many significant and sweeping changes in the worldview and values of the American culture. Foundational to these changes was a shift from the Judeo-Christian value system that had influenced American culture from its onset to a determined relativism that signaled an end to absolutes with regard to right and wrong. "Do your own thing" became the slogan of the time. This essentially meant that as long as one didn't hurt another, anything was permissible. Anticipating this, or initiating the mind-set, Hugh Hefner's Playboy philosophy argued that the old religious view of sexuality had to go. And the American culture took this new philosophy seriously. Sexuality began to be more explicit in movies and in public discussion. Sex education would begin to be introduced into public schools and the pornography industry won legal protection under the notion of free speech. Sexual laws regarding adultery, marriage, and divorce were changed, making marriage dissolvable for irreconcilable differences in most states. Gender roles were challenged, first in public structures, then in the home by the emerging feminist movement. Women's sexuality was professed to be as strong and as legitimate as men's. The new attitude toward sexuality and the development of the birth control pill brought back an emphasis on recreational non-marital sex. Homosexuality began its claim of being a valid alternative sexual orientation and swinging and open marriage became popular subjects of discussion. Medical technology became capable of transsexual operations and gender roles began to be perceived as culturally, rather than biologically determined.

The sexual revolution created a notion that sexuality was, more or less, a personal decision that was more about physiology and psychology than religion and morality. The behavioral sciences adopted the role as the guides of this new sexuality. The American Psychological Association, for example, dropped homosexuality as a perversion, and

non-marital co-habitation became an acceptable norm of American life. But values were not to be a part of this new sexuality. After all, as those from the sixties would say, "You cannot legislate morality." The new sexuality assumes that sexual orientation is naturally 10% homosexual, 10% heterosexual and 80% bisexual and that culture shapes this natural mix in the direction of heterosexuality. This allows the vast majority of people to be heterosexual but those with homosexual proclivities are left unable to conform to this social requirement. Tolerance for this sexual minority is the subject of many debates to the present, including the possibility of recognizing same sex relationships as marriage.

Sexuality and Pluralism


Along with the sexual revolution, another major shift in American thinking in the 1960's was the replacement of the melting pot ideal with pluralism. The rise of various ethnic, religious and ideological groups as valid American expressions, and the turning away from the centrality of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant default of shared American culture created a war of competing values systems that the public institutions must equally serve. For American Christians this has been problematic. Historically, the public institutions of America were, for all intents and purposes, Christian While minority ethnic, racial and religious groups maintained private institutions to teach and reinforce their own worldview and values, Christians were able to make full use of the public institutions to reinforce their worldview and values. But under pluralism and based on issues related to church and state separation, prayer, Christian symbols and values have been removed from public institutions. The Christian community has responded in two ways. One way is to politically organize to take back American institutions for Christian purposes. The other is to disengage from the larger society and view the Christian community as one of the competing groups within the larger American society. The problem with this second approach, although I subscribe to it, is that the Christian community does not have the private institutions to function as a community within a community. It is necessary for the Christian community to consider the Diaspora model developed by Judaism for learning how to be a Biblical community within a larger sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile community.


Return to Biblical Sexuality

Pluralism has increased the need for Judaism, Messianic Judaism, and Christianity to return to Biblical sexuality. In a post-Christian America, we may not be able to politically control the public institutions. Nor, indeed, do we have a Biblical mandate to do such. But we do have an obligation to live before God, according to His commandments as a holy people for His name. To do this we must re-examine sexuality, marriage, and gender roles from the Scriptures, considering the traditions, both of the Rabbis and Church Fathers, and reconstruct a Diaspora community of believing Jews and gentiles in pluralistic America.

Part of this reconsideration of Biblical sexuality must be a return to holiness. For the religious Jew and the God-fearing Christian, sexuality becomes a matter of God's intent. We are to be holy. This holiness is symbolized in behavior related to sexuality, marriage,

and gender roles. The idea of holy sex is a strong tradition within Judaism and Christianity. This prohibits the Jew or Christian from pre-marital sex, homosexuality, incest and bestiality. These prohibitions are part of the holiness code expressed to Israel in Leviticus and extended to gentile Christians in Acts Chapter 15. Holy sex is both recreational and procreational and the believing community must be clear as we teach our children and converts that this marital sexual behavior is, in part, what distinguishes us from the non-believer. As America becomes more pluralistic and less Judeo-Christian we will be seen as distinct by these very important personal and relational distinctions. After all, Judaism and Christianity both began by establishing holy communities within the ancient pagan cultures. The commandments allowed us to be different so that others might see God's wisdom in our obedience to His commandments and will.

Our family roles, particularly husband and wife, are gender specific roles prescribed by God Himself so that our marriages reflect a picture of the relationship between God and His people. For  reasons the ideal in Judaism and Christianity is no divorce. A husband is to be faithful to his wife as God is faithful to Israel. This continues in the New Testament in allowing the unbeliever to leave the marriage but forbidding it to the believer (I Corinthians Chapter 7). We must return to religious marriage and religious divorce rather than to simply accept within marriage and divorce whatever the larger society accepts. After all, America sets its standards according to the lowest common denominator, whereas we religious Jews and Christians must answer to a higher power.

The Biblical worldview will cause us to view sexuality in a different context. The Bible knows nothing of homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality as orientations, but solely as behaviors. It speaks of male sexuality, female sexuality, holy sexuality and common sexuality. I believe this is a superior view to that of the behavioral sciences. Male homosexual and heterosexual drives and behavior are more alike than different. This is true also of female heterosexuality and lesbianism. Perhaps we can address the  society with a better, wiser paradigm to viewing sexuality by understanding it in these categories rather than the ones propagated by the behavioral sciences. By viewing sexual orientation as male and female, and sexual behavior as holy and common, we can understand human nature in a more complete and accurate manner. Also, by reintroducing a Biblical holiness in sexuality and family, we can teach our children (and our converts) Biblical values and behavior that will identify us with the God who says "Be holy, for I am holy".

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