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Mark D. Regnerus
Forbidden Fruit

Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers

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in the LIVES of
AMERICAN TEENAGERS

Mark D. Regnerus

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CONTENTS

Introduction	3
<i>Chapter 1</i>	Fashioning New Stories from Old Wisdom 17
<i>Chapter 2</i>	Can Religion Cause Behavior? 43
<i>Chapter 3</i>	Learning Sexuality 57
<i>Chapter 4</i>	Motivating Sexual Decisions 83
<i>Chapter 5</i>	Sexual Experience 119
<i>Chapter 6</i>	Imitation Sex and the New Middle-Class Morality 163
<i>Chapter 7</i>	A Typology of Religious Influence 183
Conclusions	203
Unscientific Postscript	209
<i>Appendix A</i>	Regression Models 215
<i>Appendix B</i>	Research Methods 239
<i>Appendix C</i>	Interview Questions on Sex 251
Notes	255
References	269
Index	285

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INTRODUCTION

If there is a developmental trajectory for anything during adolescence, it is sex. Nothing—not smoking, drinking, drug use, nor any form of delinquency—compares to the rapid commencement of paired sexual practices during the latter half of adolescence. In an average day, at least 7,000 American teenagers experience sexual intercourse for the first time.¹ Nearly every human being finds his or her way to it eventually, but few have by age 13 and most have before the age of 20. Some do so unwillingly. Without analyzing any data on adolescent sex, it is obvious that something significant is going on developmentally, biologically, socially, and culturally to make sexual intercourse attractive enough that roughly one-third to one-half of all young Americans try it for the first time—in spite of its physical and emotional risks—within the span of about two to three years (between ages 16 and 18).

Numbers do not help us to properly interpret and understand adolescent sexuality today. Media accounts of teenagers' sexual attitudes, motivations, and behavior do not always clarify matters. One could conclude from several recent news features that today's adolescents are much more into oral sex than ever before (Halpern-Felsher et al. 2005), that abstinence pledgers are more likely to have anal sex than those who don't pledge (Connolly in the *Washington Post*, March 19, 2005), that there is a trend toward bisexuality among high school girls (Irvine on "CBS News," September 16, 2005), or that we have actually overestimated just how sexualized adolescents really are (Brooks in the *New York Times*, April 17, 2005). We are receiving mixed messages, for sure.

The entertainment industry, on the other hand, is largely unconcerned with what real adolescents are doing. Movie and television producers opt to stimulate youthful sexual expression and to glamorize emerging sexuality. Pornographic Web sites feature "just barely legal" teens supposedly bursting with pent-up, "forbidden" sexual desire. Video games come rated by how

much sex and violence appear therein. *Donkey Kong* and *Space Invaders* have given way to games like *Playboy: The Mansion* and *Grand Theft Auto*, programmed with hidden sex scenes. “Grinding” to sexually explicit hip hop lyrics is a popular dance form among young Americans. Skin is definitely in. America is becoming “sexier” while the focus of sex is becoming younger.²

Even the practice of social science is not exempt from this sea change. The terms that social scientists use to describe adolescent sexuality have undergone an evolution in recent years. “Losing virginity” has been subtly deemed too negative and “coitus” too scientific. Each has been increasingly replaced by the more impartial “first sex” or the positive-sounding “sexual debut.” Some even refer to “sexual onset,” as if the first experience of intercourse were somehow the beginning of a chronic medical condition (Browning, Leventhal, and Brooks-Gunn 2005).

At the same time, many Americans remain very ambivalent about sex. News reports abound about the high school teacher who pursues a forbidden sexual relationship with her own student and in turn is sentenced to prison “for love,” the public officeholder who is caught in a sexual dalliance and forced to resign, the pastor who admits a porn habit and is summarily dismissed by his “sexually pure” church council. Whether punishing or peeping, Americans are a gawking nation when it comes to sex. It captures our attention, our gaze, and sometimes our ire. We remain fixated on punishing the sexually deviant, even as “deviant” sexuality remains a moving target. As a society, we are caught somewhere between understanding sex as sacred and thinking it profane.

Despite all of the mixed messages and confusion, and much to their parents’ relief, most youth make it through the teenage years alive and without the sorts of life-altering incidents or conditions that could significantly alter their transition into adulthood (pregnancy, childbearing, rape, a criminal record, etc.). All of which is not to suggest that adolescence ever was—or has become—less stressful. It remains the life stage of greatest and most rapid change. Teenagers have to get along with their parents and adjust to their divorces, battle their own blues, make and keep friendships, build a reputation, try to fit in, concern themselves with grades and college entrance exams, deal with the pressure to look attractive, come to grips with their own emerging sexual feelings, hope for a date, get over being dumped (Eccles 1999; Steinberg and Morris 2001). Some of the turning points of adolescence are inevitable, such as the onset of puberty or one’s first menstrual period, the transition from middle school to high school, and reaching the legal driving age. Other turning points are not inevitable but still common, including family relocations, high school graduation, the pursuit of higher

education, and—for a considerable majority—the loss of virginity³ and the commencement of paired sexual activity.

This book is about the last set of these voluntary turning points—the formation of sexual attitudes and motivations, and the initial and subsequent experiences of sexual intercourse and related sexual activities. In particular, I will consider how religion shapes the sexual lives of contemporary American adolescents: what sex means, what adolescents know and expect about sex, and what strategies adolescents use to negotiate the very mixed messages they receive about sex (Martin 2002).

There are numerous ways in which religion *might* affect adolescent sexuality and its practice, including their attitudes, beliefs about, and practices of contraception, masturbation, premarital sexual intercourse, oral sex, homosexuality, bisexuality, and the use of pornography, to name several. Religion might also indirectly shape these things through its effects on friendship choices, dating patterns, parental monitoring, and how adolescents choose to use their time (Wallace and Williams 1997). Yet how religion contributes to sexual values and behaviors *in reality* is not well understood. We should not presume that religion shapes how adolescents understand and express their sexuality simply by observing that some youth are religious. In other words, I want to know how *consequential* religion is among them (Glock and Stark 1965). Does religion matter when adolescents make sexual decisions and take actions? How so? If not, why not? Does Christianity—which is what most American adolescents practice—typically function as little more than a generally assumed cultural background, or does it really motivate the sexual choices of a significant segment of adolescent society? This book takes a solid step in the direction of deciphering the religion-sex association and pursuing explanations for the evidence that emerges from two nationally representative surveys and in-depth interviews with more than 250 adolescents across the country.

WHYRELIGION?

Evaluating adolescent sexual behavior never goes out of style. It just requires constant updating. Social forces that influence adolescent sexual behavior at one point are often found to have changed when reexamined just 10 years later (Joyner and Laumann 2000). As a result, studies on teenagers and sexuality crop up with regularity to appease parents', educators', and lawmakers' hunger for information.

So why ruin a good social scientific study of adolescent sexual behavior by focusing on religion? Wouldn't I be better off turning my attention toward

what scholars suggest *really* matters for adolescent behavior: influences like friendships, peer pressure, body image, educational ambitions, or emotional health? Or perhaps something more sociological, like race or gender? Or the current queen of influences on all things important—social capital?⁴

First, religion and sexuality tap basic drives. Sex concerns the pursuit of an intimate connection with another human being—to be known and to know someone else intensely. Religion concerns the need to make sense and meaning out of life, to connect with something or someone higher and purer than yourself, outside of the realm of the empirical. In short, both religion and sex are *elemental* life pursuits, not mere window dressing but close to the heart of what it means to be human. Perhaps their shared association is why beautiful women are sometimes referred to as “goddesses,” why companies like Victoria’s Secret dress their models in angelic garb, and why the phrase “forbidden fruit” conjures up images that are both religious and sexual (Yancey 2003).

Second, religion—together with peers, parents, and the media—remains a primary socialization agent of children and adolescents. Though often an understated influence in adolescents’ lives, religion as traditionally practiced nevertheless performs a variety of important social functions (independently of its varying particular content): it is both an internal and external social control mechanism; it explicitly and implicitly reinforces collectively held values and beliefs by forbidding some things and encouraging others; it provides social networks to individuals; it encourages trust, caring, and self-sacrifice (Wuthnow 1995); it has enduring faith in the possibility of individual transformation; it galvanizes and organizes moral indignation (Smith 1996); and its practitioners are committed to the next generation. Participation in religious institutions often provides adherents with functional communities (sometimes amid dysfunctional families or communities) and reinforces parental support networks and control. Organized religion establishes norms and reinforces them with its power as a formal institution (Regnerus and Elder 2003). The list could continue. Moreover, since religion often shapes parenting styles, the role of religion in many teenagers’ lives may begin at their birth, if not sooner (Bartkowski and Ellison 1995).

Unfortunately, some social scientists ignore religious institutions, organizations, and the power of belief not because they are blind to them (which may be the case for some) but because they remain convinced that religion is epiphenomenal. That is, they believe that religion is *only* about networks of social control, supervised peer groups, and organizational participation. Even when taken seriously, religious influence on human behavior is often mischaracterized and misunderstood in the academic community. Religion in general is often associated with sexual conservatism (if not complete ignorance),

repression, prudish behavior, and a tendency toward avoidance, abstinence, and generalized condemnation. But are such associations true?

Third, sex is a sphere of human behavior high in religious applicability. By this, I mean that it is a topic that has more religious relevance—or is more clearly addressed in most religious traditions—than many other topics. Few theologies or religious schemas attempt to sacralize all of life. Much more common is the division of human action into the religiously important (the sacred) and the religiously unimportant (the profane). Some spheres of life, like family and sexuality, are typically seen as more centrally related to religious faith. Other spheres, like employment, leisure activity, and personal finances, are often understood as less central to religious faith.

When roles or norms about what to do in a particular situation compete—for example, to obey your beliefs or to give in to your hormones and a willing partner's expectations—the behavior's religious applicability may affect which roles or norms are adhered to (Wimberley 1989). On the other hand, some classes of actions—like civic participation, sports, and education—employ much less religious applicability, since there are fewer religious teachings or guidelines about them. Failing geometry does not make someone a bad Christian. Quitting the basketball team may invoke guilt, disappointment, and some ostracism, but it is religiously irrelevant.

Sex is simply a sphere of life that has considerable religious import for many Americans. While sexuality falls outside the specific mandate of churches (which is to make Christians, to encourage worship of God, etc.), it does not fall far, since sexuality is tied to the institution of the family, and the family is often closely linked to organized religion (Ellingson 2004). Thus, evaluating the implications of religion for actual sexual decision making makes perfect sense. Remarkably, though, few attempts have been made to determine why exactly religion matters for some adolescents' sexual decision making and not for others' (Hardy and Raffaelli 2003).

THE PARAMETERS OF THIS STUDY

This book's primary purpose is to take an extended look into the real lives of American teenagers and to document whether religious faith affects—if at all—how they think about sexuality and the practices in which they choose to either engage or refrain. To accomplish this, I employ a variety of research methods and draw on several different data sources on American youth. My primary source is the National Survey of Youth and Religion (hereafter referred to as NSYR), of which I am a project co-investigator. From July 2002 to April

2003, we conducted a national, random-digit-dial telephone survey of a sample of all American household telephone numbers. Eligible households included at least one teenager between the ages of 13 and 17 living in the household for at least six months of the year. In order to randomize responses within households, and so to help attain representativeness of age and gender, we asked to conduct the survey with the teenager in the household who had the most recent birthday. There were 3,370 adolescents who completed the survey, and an accompanying parent interview was conducted with either their mother or father, as they were available (see appendix B for a detailed description of the research methodologies employed in the primary data sources I use).

The second phase of the data collection of the NSYR involved in-depth personal interviews with 267 teenagers from all around the country, drawn from the pool of respondents who had completed the telephone survey. The majority of the in-person interviews were conducted between March 2003 and August 2003, with a final few completed as late as January 2004. The purpose of the interviews was to provide extended follow-up discussions about adolescents' religious, spiritual, family, and social lives. The questionnaire followed closely and expanded upon the topics that were included on the NSYR telephone survey (see appendix B). The interview sample was selected from among the 3,370 adolescents who completed the NSYR telephone survey, and the pool of actual interviewees was drawn taking into account the following demographic characteristics: urban/suburban/rural, region, age, sex, race, household income, religion, and school type. We attempted to achieve a balance in each of these areas. Seventeen different interviewers conducted interviews in 45 U.S. states, each interviewer conducting between 10 and 20 interviews (see Figure I.1). Finally, I draw upon a small number of follow-up interviews with these same youth that were conducted during the summer of 2005, two years after we first spoke with them.

My second source of extensive survey data is the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. "Add Health," as it is commonly referred to, is arguably the most comprehensive survey of adolescents and young adults ever taken. Designed to help explain the causes of adolescent health and health behavior, Add Health pays particular attention to sexuality, focusing on behaviors, motivations, risk perceptions, and attitudes. Add Health also includes information on the important contexts in an adolescent's life, namely, parents, schools, communities, friends, and romantic partners.

The NSYR and Add Health together comprise the best available nationally representative data to study the influence of religion on the sexual attitudes and practices of America's teenagers. Nevertheless, I occasionally draw on evidence from other national studies, such as the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, and Monitoring the Future.⁵



FIGURE I.1. Distribution of NSYR Survey Follow-up Personal Interviewees

While I report simple frequencies in the text, I also make use of multivariate survey analyses (detailed in the appendixes) as well as note the findings of a wide variety of published social scientific studies, including a number of my own.

For parents, youth workers, and educators, this book should prove enlightening and hopefully useful. Providing information for informed decision making is, after all, a key purpose of the social sciences. Nevertheless, this is not a recipe book for successfully reaching, mentoring, or parenting youth. Instead, I offer a thorough, factual portrait of modern adolescence. This is not a book about young adults, although I make occasional reference to them and to Wave III of the Add Health study, which was fielded during the respondents' early adult years. Thus, I make very few claims here about the sexual attitudes and behavior of persons older than 18. From my own and others' studies, young adulthood is a life stage where sex tends to be more prominent than during the teenage years. That is for another book.

THE SHAPE OF THE BOOK

By now, it should be clear that sex causes considerable ambivalence among Americans, religious or otherwise. We esteem it as sacred, forbid it, police it, yet often treat it as if it were profane. There is no doubt that the issue of sex has

religious ramifications. One need only note the headlines about priest sex scandals and homosexual ordination issues to quickly realize that sex matters for organized religion. Chapter 1 will briefly detail how the historical Christian tradition has thought about sex, culled from interpretations of the Hebrew Old Testament and the New Testament and from more recent religious writings and teachings. Following that, I move from ancient wisdom to the most contemporary of thinkers—adolescents themselves. I set the stage for a number of the book's key themes by offering perspectives from six teenagers, each of whom participates (to varying degrees) in organized religion.

In chapter 2, I briefly review and evaluate the various ways in which social scientists have come to understand how religion affects human behavior in general and adolescent sex in particular. In a nutshell, social scientific debate about the *real* influence of religion on human behavior remains intense. Some reasonable conclusions about it are in order, however.

Chapter 3 explores how adolescents learn sex and sexuality. I discuss various parental strategies for the socialization and education of their children about sex and contraception, focusing on distinctions between moral education and information exchange. We learn that religion matters for what parents say about sex and contraception, with whom they discuss it, how often, and with what ease. I also explore—though only briefly—the association between religion and developing homosexual and bisexual identities, attractions, and practices in adolescence.

Chapter 4 traces the development of adolescent heterosexual ethics and norms, including their motivations to avoid or engage in sex. There, I document what types of adolescents are likely to take abstinence pledges, how well they work, and the sexual and familial idealism they portray. I also explore the popular but vaguely defined theme of “emotional readiness” as a barometer of sexual preparedness.

Chapter 5 consummates the study by focusing on actual sexual behavior: teenagers' experience of “first sex,” their patterns of heterosexual behavior *after* losing virginity, and some adolescents' regrets about sexual activity. I also document their thoughts about—and differential use of—contraception. Several key stories emerge in this chapter—about race, evangelicalism, and what sociologists call “plausibility structures.” Chapter 6 evaluates alternate forms of sex, such as pornography and oral and anal sex. I explore in some detail the preference for replacing vaginal sexual intercourse with forms of sexual expression less threatening to future prospects for material success and conclude that there is evidence of an emerging middle-class sexual morality among some American teenagers.

Chapter 7 returns to “big picture” themes, giving attention to the stated and implicit motivation behind adolescent religious discourse about sexual

decision making. Are devout youth really distinguishing themselves in the sphere of sex *because* of their faith, or is religion a pragmatic and strategic tool to help them reach their goals of avoiding pregnancy and retaining virginity until closer to (or at) marriage? I introduce there a typology of religious influence, which should help us to make sense of the ways in which religion actually affects teenagers' sexual behavior. I then conclude with a summary of the book's key findings and contributions, followed by an unscientific postscript—a series of my own reflections about adolescent sex and the social scientific study of it.

SUMMARIZING ADOLESCENTS' RELIGION

Before I move forward, however, a short introduction to adolescent religiosity is in order. By "religiosity," I am referring to a person's religiousness, as measured several ways, typically in the form of how often they attend religious services, how involved they are in religious activities, how religious they consider themselves to be, and whether they think religion actually matters for their lives and decisions. Since the book is about sex more than it is about religion, I want to steer clear of long descriptions of religious practices, beliefs, and traditions. But a brief overview should help to orient us to what contemporary American teenagers are like when it comes to religion.

Adolescence is the most religiously unstable period of the life course. And how religion affects 13-year-olds may be very different from how it shapes 18-year-olds. Physical, emotional, and moral development occurs at a rapid pace during this period of the lifespan. Such instability provides fodder for some interesting media claims about new religious trends, all the way from spirituality to evangelical revivals and Wicca (e.g., Curran and Estes in the *New York Times*, April 29, 1998; National Public Radio, May 13, 2004; Leland et al. in *Newsweek*, May 8, 2000; Van Biema, Grace, and Mitchell in *Time*, May 31, 1999). Nothing interests media producers and consumers so much as the abnormal, atypical, hypersexual, and paranormal.

So what do social scientists know about the religious lives of adolescents—their beliefs, practices, and affiliations? Most reliable survey research suggests that substantial change happens slowly and that traditional, predictable forms of religion (and sex) are alive and well among American adolescents. To be sure, trends always have their pacesetters, and religious entrepreneurs are adept at attracting a following, but unusual religious practices invariably remain at the cultural margins of American adolescents' religious expression.

According to the NSYR, just over 30 percent of American teenagers identify with a denomination typically considered evangelical (sometimes called conservative) Protestant. By this classification, evangelical Protestant youth outnumber mainline Protestant youth by a ratio of nearly three to one. Slightly more adolescents affiliate with a historically black or African-American denomination⁶ (10.7 percent) than with the historically white mainline. The largest single religious denomination in the United States remains Roman Catholicism, claiming about 23 percent of teenagers. Mormon youth comprise just under 3 percent, about twice the number of Jewish adolescents. American youth who are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or another religious tradition together comprise about 3 percent of all American adolescents. About 16 percent of adolescents identify as not religious. Real atheism—adamant conviction that God does not exist—is much rarer than most people think and nearly absent among American teens. Less than one-half of 1 percent report never having believed in God (Smith and Denton 2005).

By and large, most teenagers—even the oldest ones—retain the religious affiliation of their parents (Smith and Denton 2005). And despite the steady flow of immigrants to the United States, the number of Muslims remains small. There are more Mormon adolescents in America than Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus combined. If the media want to know what is going on religiously with American teenagers, they are likely to get close to the truth by asking an average evangelical Protestant or Catholic 16-year-old. Together, these two groups constitute almost 6 of every 10 American youths.

According to Table I.1, slightly over 40 percent of American adolescents say they attend religious services at least once a week. Roughly the same number attends less frequently. About 18 percent say they never attend at all, but nearly this many attend more than once a week. Although public religious practices *can* be coerced during childhood and adolescence, this is not often the case. The vast majority of adolescents (84 percent, not shown in the table) report that if the decision were up to them, they would still attend their current congregation or congregations (a significant number attend more than one, often due to the religious intermarriage of their parents or stepparents). However, we have not detected considerable enthusiasm about religion among the majority of adolescents, which suggests a generalized religious apathy among many. They can take it or leave it. It's not bothersome, and it doesn't ask too much of them.

About one in every five teenagers, however, says that religion is *extremely* important in shaping how they live their daily lives. These are what I call the "truly devout." Their patterns of behavior are often distinct, even from those (31 percent) who say that religion is "very important." The same can be said

TABLE I.1 Religious Practices and Attitudes of Adolescents (in Percentages)

<i>Church Attendance</i>	
More than once a week	16.2
Weekly	24.3
1–3 times a month	18.8
Several times a year	22.5
Never	18.1
<i>Currently Involved in a Youth Group</i>	37.6
<i>Frequency of Private Prayer</i>	
Many times a day	16.1
About once a day	21.6
Once–few times a week	27.1
At most 1–2 times a month	20.3
Never	14.7
<i>Frequency of Personal Scripture Reading</i>	
Many times a day	2.3
About once a day	6.3
Once–few times a week	17.2
At most 1–2 times a month	33.0
Never	41.0
<i>Importance of Religion in Shaping Daily Life</i>	
Extremely important	19.6
Very important	31.0
Somewhat important	31.2
Not very important	10.8
Not important at all	7.2
<i>Spiritual but Not Religious</i>	
Very true	8.4
Somewhat true	46.4
Not true at all	43.0

Source: National Survey of Youth and Religion

for the 16 percent of youth who attend religious services *more* than once a week, as opposed to once a week (24 percent).

The phrase “spiritual but not religious” has garnered considerable attention lately, though primarily among adults for whom the term is personally appealing. Only about 8 percent of American adolescents (in the NSYR)

confidently self-identify as spiritual but not religious. When we asked adolescents in interviews about this phrase, we often drew blank stares. Even most adolescents who fit the label of spiritual but not religious tend toward answers of “I don’t know,” or “I never heard of that,” or “Huh?”

Religious moderation is a common, important theme among them. While being entirely devoid of religion is odd, if allowable, being too religious can be worse, and such extremes should be avoided. This mentality is consonant with the religious individualist approach that is prevalent among contemporary adolescents. As Christian Smith and Melinda Denton (2005) note, most American teenagers have been well socialized to tolerate the religious and the nonreligious alike. Indeed, most nonreligious youth are not *antireligious*. None of the 267 teens with whom we spoke openly attacked organized religion. This group of Americans is simply not as religiously rebellious as many have made them out to be.

Among the majority, then, religion tends to be personal, private, and largely immune to criticism. Asserting only one tradition as true borders on overconfidence, if not overreligiousness. Many youths, extensively socialized into the digital age, find historical religious traditions outdated, open to spontaneous alteration, or simply too challenging to adopt. Many of the adolescents with whom we spoke in person hold low opinions of other people’s personal morality, but high views of their own. When asked whether they had been involved recently in anything that was “wrong,” adolescents typically reply with a simple answer: no. Most, however, said they *have* opposed their friends’ actions at some point. Few could articulate why some things (like murder) may be absolutely wrong. Granted, many adolescents have never been asked such pointed questions about religion and morality (which is too bad). But even beyond this, their generalized inability to discuss morality underscores the thin moral education so many of them receive (Hunter 2000). As Smith and Denton (2005) note about religion—and the same could be said for morality in general—it is like any other language: to learn how to speak it, a person must first listen to “native speakers” and then practice speaking it herself. Few parents, even among the devoutly religious, are native speakers.

In sum, religious *passion* is not the norm among American teenagers. Many youth pray regularly and find it easy to do so. They read the Bible (or the Torah) less regularly than they pray, as the time it takes to read is subject to fierce competition within their busy lives. Most youth are not spiritual seekers, and recent media attention on spirituality has clearly overestimated its popularity among this demographic. Morality matters to adolescents, but they are a tolerant group and typically avoid evaluations of their peers that could be construed as judgmental. People are deemed good or bad because of their

actions, not their religion. For this reason, there is little systematic religious bigotry among adolescents. They are well versed in tolerance. Even those we might suspect otherwise, such as evangelicals, tend to give voice to the American language of individualism: “I think my religious views are true, but others may see the world differently, and that’s OK.” For most, God is more gracious than demanding and serves to help them out when they’re in a pinch (Smith and Denton 2005). While this description is not true of all American youth—there are both irreligious and devout minorities on either side of the spectrum—it certainly captures the middle majority.

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Chapter 1



FASHIONING NEW STORIES FROM OLD WISDOM

*Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage
bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and
all the sexually immoral.*

—Hebrews 13:4

A good place to formally begin a book on religion and sex is with what organized religion has had to say about sex, the traditions upon which contemporary youth are able to draw. Religious commentary on sexual behavior is plentiful, yet confusing and seemingly contradictory at points. Yet knowing what religious traditions have said about sex gives us a more intelligent benchmark against which to evaluate what contemporary adolescents both *say* and *do* about their emerging sexuality. And, as I discuss at length in chapter 7, there are a variety of possible say-and-do combinations. Since this study is of Americans, and the vast majority of them are either Protestant or Catholic, I largely confine my report to what these historic traditions have had to say about sexual matters.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY ON SEX

Biblical sexuality begins in the Garden of Eden, at the start of it all in Genesis 2 and 3. There, Adam and Eve live naked and unashamed. The serpent—thought by some to be a sexual symbol—comes to tempt Eve to eat the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Hebrew term for *knowledge* can itself imply sexual intercourse (as in Gen. 4:1, where Adam “knew” Eve, after which she conceived a son). She eats the fruit and gives some to Adam, who likewise eats. Subsequently, their eyes are “opened,” they are no longer “innocent,” and they become aware of their nakedness. Adam defends himself before God by accusing Eve of giving him the forbidden fruit. Such a sexual interpretation of the account of the Fall—though not a widely held one—is nevertheless clearly not without evidence (Bandstra 2004).

Most biblical references to sex are far less symbolic. Sexual “immorality” or “impurity” is widely and consistently reviled in biblical texts. In at least 11 of its

27 books, the New Testament denounces πορνεία (*porneia*), a Greek word for sexual immorality from which we derive the term *pornography*. Its meaning in historical context, though, had nothing to do with sexual images but rather had to do with behavior. References to lewdness, things that are sexually immoral or “licentious,” are found at several points in the Old Testament—especially in the prophecies of Ezekiel—but only sparingly in the New Testament. According to Paul of Tarsus, the well-traveled New Testament missionary who penned 13 letters within the biblical canon, sexual sin is a serious matter, more grave than most transgressions. A person who sins sexually has “sinned against his own body,” a reference to defiling or degrading what Christ has purified through his atoning death (1 Cor. 6:18).

Biblical accounts favor monogamous marital sexuality as a gold standard of sorts. But the matter is more complicated than it might first seem. Marriage is defined in the Old Testament, but many aspects of the Old Testament law are no longer practiced by Christians (such as animal sacrifices and a man’s responsibility to marry his sister-in-law in the event of his brother’s death).¹ Hence, most popular Christian references about sex tend to draw upon the New Testament. Still, the Old Testament commandment “you shall not commit adultery” is often used as a blanket reference to all forms of nonmarital sexual conduct.

In the biblical era, marriage involved both an agreement between a man and his betrothed wife’s father or family, and the sexual consummation of the marriage. While formal marriage ceremonies were common, they were not required to validate a marriage. In the earliest set of instructions, God states, “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh,” implying sexual consummation as a criterion of marriage (Gen. 2:24). No mention is made yet about permission to marry or virginity conditions.

“Fornication,” or sex between unmarried partners, entailed a subsequent relational commitment. The Old Testament also makes reference to the term *concubine*, or a secondary sexual relationship between a married man and an unmarried woman, who in turn enjoyed familial protection but had little household authority. Old Testament Hebrew culture tolerated—but did not actively advocate—the practice of having multiple wives and concubines. Thus the penalty for sexual relations between a man and an unmarried woman—one who was not pledged to be married to another man—tended to be light, involving payment to the woman’s family. A woman’s virginity was—and, to some extent and in some subcultures, remains—a valued commodity (González-López 2004). While certainly subject to considerable measurement error, only female virginity could ever have been documented (by an intact hymen).

Married women, on the other hand, were always off limits. In the Old Testament law, sexual relations between a man and a married woman were punishable by the death of both partners (Deut. 22). Enforcement of the law, of

course, varied widely. How often adulterers escaped the death penalty or went unnoticed is unknown. King David has sexual relations with the married Bathsheba, then orders her husband's death. Yet he escapes capital punishment for his actions. Instead, God is said to have struck down the child produced by their liaison. God even appears to buck his own rules for the sake of making particular points. For example, God tells the prophet Hosea to take as his wife an "adulterous" woman, in order to signify God's anger with his people (Israel), who are "guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord" (Hos. 1:2). Indeed, Israel's relationship with God is often portrayed using sexual imagery. The prophecies of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah accuse Israel of consorting with "prostitutes"—people of neighboring countries who worship other gods. At the same time, God often perceives Israel—and in the New Testament, the Church—as his "bride."

New Testament writings on sexuality are less fraught with imagery, less concerned with laws and penalties, and much more commonly cited in contemporary Christian writings about sex. They also increasingly recognize the inappropriateness of polygamy and the importance of sexuality within marriage. Jesus makes disparaging references to the popular interpretation of Jewish law that allows a man to divorce his wife for any reason. Instead, Jesus suggests that only sexual unfaithfulness constitutes grounds for divorce. He also criticizes the use of the death penalty for adultery (John 8:7). Thus, the person of Jesus has come to be associated both with forgiveness of sexual sins and a greater emphasis on the "heart" than on external behavior. This shift in perspective is evident when he tells his followers to focus less on adultery *per se* and more on lust—the mental (or heart's) desire to commit adultery (Matt. 5:28). Lust, he suggests, is equivalent to adultery in God's eyes, since it reveals the sinful condition of a person's will, even if unaccompanied by explicit action. Jesus refers directly to the connection between sexual sin and heart commitment: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, [including] sexual immorality . . . adultery . . . lewdness" (Mark 7:20–22).

Nevertheless (and, some would say, unfortunately), the words of Jesus are neither extensive nor detailed on sexual matters. Paul of Tarsus is more vocal, often responding in writing to particular sex-related crises in early Christian congregations. If a single biblical passage could characterize the hopes and aspirations of devoutly religious American parents for their adolescent children, it would probably be found in Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, a Greek city synonymous with sexual permissiveness:

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know

that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. (1 Cor. 6:18–20)

The author of Hebrews (13:4) argues that “marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”² Such texts sufficiently warn about the spiritual dangers of sexual immorality yet lack details or practical advice.

Not all biblical references to sex concern immoral practices. Shortly after arguing that the body is a “temple” (i.e., holy), Paul admonishes married couples to consider each other’s bodies as belonging to the other and commands husbands and wives to “not deprive each other [of sex] except by mutual consent and for a time. . . . Then come together again” (1 Cor. 7:5). The Old Testament’s Song of Solomon is widely regarded as a sensual read and a model of ideal marital sexuality, though the identities of the lover and the beloved and the exact nature of their relationship is not explicitly disclosed (and it is well documented that King Solomon himself had many wives).

Biblical commentary on masturbation remains unclear. Passages concerning homosexuality (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:3–4; Rom. 1:24; and 1 Cor. 6:9) have been used to condemn masturbation, but the link is suspect. The one account that appears to involve masturbation—or else the contraceptive practice of withdrawal—details God’s fatal ire at Onan for “spilling his seed” on the ground rather than attempting to conceive children with the wife of his dead brother (Gen. 38:8–10). However, this is now widely interpreted as a story about God’s displeasure with Onan not so much for his particular sexual act but for failing to fulfill his lawful obligation to his brother, a law no longer recognized as valid by most Jews and Western Christians.

Practices like oral sex are not addressed in the Bible at all. Popular Christian writer Lauren Winner (2005: 106) humorously attends to its absence while still advocating against its use outside marriage:

OK, readers. Does St. Paul say anything explicitly about oral sex? No. Could one make a tortured, literalistic argument that one was having oral sex and not breaking the letter of biblical law? I suppose so. And yet most honest and right-thinking Christians recognize, at least intuitively, that oral sex constitutes sex—that if a husband . . . had oral sex with someone other than his wife, he would have committed adultery; and that a single person’s having oral sex would constitute a trespass of chastity.

While tomes have been written—and will continue to be published—on the topic of homosexual practice and the Christian tradition, the practice of