

PARADOX IN DISCOURSE ON SEXUAL PLEASURE:
A FEMINIST PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

By

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To my parents, George and Rosanne, and my little sis, Rebecca,
For their love and support in scholarship and in life.

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INTRODUCTION

THE CRISIS OF SEXUALITY IN THE CHURCH

What is the content of the crisis of sexuality in the Church?¹ The answer to what constitutes the crisis depends on the individual, institution, clergy person, or scholar one asks. Many outside of communities of faith suggest that the Christian Church is repressed and out of touch with the changing times. Some reference the scandal in the Catholic Church concerning the sexual abuse of children by priests. Others argue that the crisis stems from denying homosexuals the right to partner, to marry, and/or to be ordained into positions of church leadership. The inability to even talk about sex and sexuality is yet another possible response.

Explicitly conservative positions target the influences of a wayward culture – influences that popularize recreational sex without the shelter of marriage, condone homosexuality, and destroy the lives of young people by encouraging sex before marriage. Explicitly liberal responses, especially those coming out of the academic context, point to the reign of patriarchy and sexism – both of which are implicated in racism, heterosexism, and other relationships characterized by domination or power over others. Still others suggest that the Church’s public and political life have failed to advocate for sexual freedom on par with the passion for religious freedom.² Thus, though there is a consensus among religious scholars and church leaders that a crisis of sexuality

¹ When I refer to the Christian Church in this paper, I am referencing the whole of the Christian

² Kathleen Sands, “A Response to Marcella Althaus-Reid’s Indecent Theology,” in *Feminist Theology*, 11 (January 2003): 179.

in the Church exists, there is not a consensus with regard to the nature of the crisis and what constitutes a faithful theological response.

Despite the polarities in positions, I suggest that over time the Christian faith as a whole has maintained explicit and implicit, spoken and unspoken concerns about sexuality – most specifically the restriction or liberation of the sexual behaviors of adherents. In our current cultural context, Christians retain a reputation for being prudish and sexually repressed amid a society that shows little shame in its flagrant commodification of sex. Michel Foucault, however, warns us that silence or the appearance of repression in regards to sexuality belies the proliferation of discourse concerned with sex.³ Thus, while some communities of faith appear to ignore addressing sex altogether, Christian theology has constructed its own discourse on sex. In terms of resources, the tradition relied on the Biblical text, whose scant mention of sex and culturally bound sexual injunctions necessitated deft exegesis and the wisdom of ancient and medieval philosophy. A virtually canonical discourse on sex has been passed down from Christianity's founding fathers and, with some modifications, it informs both Catholic and Protestant theological positions today.

This exploration focuses intently on the theological discourse on sex and, more pointedly, on the theological discourse on sexual pleasure. I contend that from the most influential historical Christian scholarship, to official denominational statements on human sexuality, to some of the most progressive Christian sexual ethics, sexual pleasure has significant import. I suggest that a *struggle with sexual pleasure* lies at the heart of the crisis of sexuality in the Church, and I will show that historical and contemporary

³ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 18.

Christian discourse on sex often hides a deep anxiety about sexual desires and the pleasures of sexual activity. Those reconstructing Christian sexual ethics are cognizant of the lingering devaluation of sexual pleasure and, subsequently, demand its reclamation. These scholars and institutions envision sexual pleasure as essential to a sexual ethic for our time. Ironically, across all of these attempts to provide moral guidance for the expression of human sexuality, sexual pleasure generates a degree of obsessive concern, embodying significant meaning as either the hotbed of sin or the key to liberation.

Research Question and Thesis

A critical reflection on sexual pleasure thus comprises the heart of this dissertation. From pleasure as sin to pleasure as ethical mandate, Christians interpret sexual pleasure as a force – positive, negative, constructed, natural, sacred, or profane – with which to be reckoned. How to reckon with this force has always been the dilemma. In other words, what shall we say is sexual pleasure’s theological significance, and what does this mean for our sexual activities and their role in life as a whole? With this problem in mind, I ask: *From a pastoral theological perspective, how has sexual pleasure been understood and misunderstood in Christian theology and contemporary culture, and how might it be reclaimed in a more responsible and complex fashion?*

In this investigation, I carefully analyze the origins of prevailing Christian interpretations of sexual pleasure, consider relevant cultural influences of the twentieth century, and survey some of the most radical theological proposals of the latter twentieth century, to affirm that sexual pleasure for all is important and valuable. Progressive, contemporary Christian sexual ethics also comes to these conclusions. Still, the answers

to my research questions above lead me to suspect that the addition of sexual pleasure to contemporary Christian sexual ethics has been uncritically accepted and promoted without thorough attention to and consideration of the valid critiques and suggestions of pertinent theological, social scientific, and cultural resources. *Thus, I argue that the current scholarship informing Christian sexual ethics 1) essentializes sexual pleasure in ways that are reminiscent of the tradition, 2) places an undue burden on sexual pleasure insofar as it must necessarily transcend the personal to the political, and 3) ironically reinscribes – albeit with a wider circle – sexual practices and pleasures that are acceptable, while delineating those which are not. Taken together, contemporary interpretations of sexual pleasure in contemporary Christian sexual ethics risk participating in the ongoing production of a sexual regime that regulates and controls specific sexual acts and pleasures, as opposed to the stated aim of focusing on the nature of the relationships in which sexual activities occur.*

My detailed understanding of the larger problem as it pertains to sexual pleasure motivates the questions and argument that drive my research. The remainder of this Introduction, therefore, expands upon the *problem* of how and why Christian theologians, ethicists, and church leaders have insufficiently attempted, both passively and actively, to reckon with sexual pleasure. An explanation of my *method* for addressing the problem follows. I conclude with a *brief outline of the subsequent chapters* and an *explanation of the overall significance* of the project, including some limitations.

The Problem

Everyday Sexual Suffering and Spirituality

While responding to the “crisis of sexuality” in faith contexts has become the domain of formal and informal Christian sexual ethics espoused by scholars, church leaders, and impassioned lay people, trusted caregivers like myself often bear witness to the *effects* of the proposed sexual values and expectations. As part of this role, we caregivers are in a position to assess the impact of the discourse on sex emerging from theological contexts and to evaluate its ends with respect to physical, psychological, and spiritual health. As a pastoral counselor in the community at-large, I find it obvious that individuals suffer in their “everyday” sexual lives as a result of the Church’s condemnations, confusion, and mixed messages in regards to sexual pleasure.⁴ This sexual suffering and frustration often have spiritual consequences.

In light of this dimension of suffering, my impulse was to consult pastoral theological resources in addition to the psychological materials that share space on my bookshelf. However, I was disappointed to find that pastoral theology, a theological discipline that focuses on the care of individuals – sensitive to human suffering, human flourishing, and pathways to healing – has few resources available to illuminate the complexities of human sexual experience. Those available were outdated, and none reflected significantly on sexual pleasure, a dimension of sexual experience that I found capable of generating both suffering and healing within the self and in relationships. My clinical experiences and the problematic dearth of attention to the sexual self in pastoral theology initially inspired my research and its pointed attention to pleasure.

⁴ By “everyday” here I mean to distinguish routine sexual life from the crisis of traumatic experiences like sexual assault, abuse, or rape. I do not, however, imply exclusivity, as often individuals suffer for prolonged periods in their “everyday” sexual lives as a result of these traumas. The caregiving to which I am referring is not immediate crisis care related to sexual abuse, assault, or rape.

As I contemplated this lacuna in my field and imagined a way forward, I realized that if pastoral theology aimed to offer a response to understanding the experience of (or lack of) sexual pleasure, exploring and critically analyzing the theological and cultural hopes and tensions surrounding sexual pleasure would be a necessary first step. I suspected that Christian sexual ethics needed a more critical understanding of sexual pleasure if it hoped to provide faithful sex education, combat sexual injustices, and improve how people of faith understand their sexual experiences from a psychological, physiological, and spiritual perspective. I was positive that pastoral theology, whose core tasks are to immerse itself in lived human experience, to interpret human brokenness, to contemplate avenues for healing and fulfillment, and to inform pastoral practice in communities of faith, pastoral counseling organizations, and the broader public, desperately shared this need to the same ends.

Classical Theology: Pleasure as Sin

The void that I originally found in pastoral theology prompted further investigation into how theology as a whole has (or has not) addressed sexual pleasure. I found that over the course of Christian history, sexual pleasure has been yoked to terms like sin, lust, procreation, and marriage. Nowhere are these associations more passionately articulated and systematized than in the work of Augustine of Hippo (354-430). Though his contemporaries in the Latin West, such as Ambrose and Jerome, rallied against the dangers of the body, railed against the sexual impulse and its pleasures, and argued for the superiority of virginity and the chaste life, Augustine's selective appropriations, compelling exegesis, pastoral response to his cultural context, and gift of

rhetoric commanded greater influence over the thought and practice of the early Church with respect to interpreting sexual desire and pleasure.

For example, Augustine theologized that God *originally* created man and woman for marriage, intercourse, and procreation. Sex in Paradise was primarily the means to a populous, not pleasure. He interpreted the post-Fall experience of lust and sexual pleasure – a definitive sign of the divorce between the will and the body – as a constant and powerful reminder of the punishment for the original sin of disobedience to God. In his theological system, Augustine could go only so far as to “pardon” sex and its pleasures in the context of marriage when it was procreative in its intent or necessary to prevent fornication. Reinforcing his suspicion of pleasure, Augustine stealthily undercut his support for marriage by his persistent insistence that a continent life, free from the pleasures of sex, was preferable.

Influential theologians who succeeded Augustine, like Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, only solidified and reaffirmed the theological grounding for the latent suspicion surrounding sexual pleasure and more tightly bound it to sin, lust, procreation, and marriage. For example, Aquinas (1225-1274), rooted in Aristotelian philosophy, focused on the application of reason and logic to sexual life. Sex needed to be guided by reason and, hence, should be aimed at procreation. While he suggested the possibility of “virtuous” sex that included the endorsement of pleasure, he also indicated that reason, which sets its sights on the higher things of God, would not tend in this direction. He concluded that to pursue sex for pleasure was sinful; the only sexual pleasure that Aquinas did not consider sinful was that of married people intending to reproduce.

The Protestant reformers Luther (1484-1546) and Calvin (1509-1564), although arguing ardently for marriage and against clerical vows to virginity and celibacy, maintained that the function of marriage was to contain lust and beget children. Both insisted that sex and its pleasures remained a cause for shame – a sin that was overlooked in God’s eyes by the covering of marriage. Although the writings of other historical figures, such as Spanish mystic and Carmelite nun Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582), have been reinterpreted in efforts to affirm the “erotic,” in their own contexts these works did not result in an affirmation of sexual pleasure in sexual activity.

In the course of Christian history, it was heresy for pastoral leadership to suggest that sexual pleasure could have positive value as a dimension of human sexual experience. For example, Augustine’s contemporary Julian, Bishop of Eclanum denied that the sexual impulse and sexual pleasure posed a problem for married couples.⁵ Sexuality was not problematic, and sexual pleasure was the “chosen instrument of any self-respecting marriage...acceptable in and of itself, and blameworthy only in its excesses.”⁶ Although Julian still argued that sex and its pleasures belonged in marriage and should not be indulged in excess, he severed their connection to sin. Nearing 70 years of age, Augustine continued to write *against* Julian and others, insisting on the *ongoing reality* of the lust of the flesh, which he maintained did not exist in Paradise. The “heresies” of Julian were ultimately trumped by Augustine’s assertions. Today, in some

⁵ Julian, Bishop of Eclanum, was eventually exiled from Italy around 419 because of his support of Pelagius’ views concerning freedom of the will. Pelagius contended that Adam’s sin had not irrevocably weakened the will, and that Christians possessed the abilities first granted to them to follow God’s commands to the fullest. See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 408-411.

⁶ Augustine, *Against Julian, Fathers of the Church*, vol. 35, trans. W. A. Schuhmacher (New York: Fathers of the Church Inc., 1957), 4.2.7: 739, quoted in Brown, 413.

theological circles, perspectives on sexual pleasure continue to reflect the weight of Augustine's legacy, a fervent distrust enduring nearly two millennia.

Feminist Theology: The Return of *Eros*

Systematic attention to the deeply androcentric character of the whole of Christian theology and its symbols began in the 1970s, when feminist theologians like Carol Christ, Judith Plaskow, and Rosemary Ruether exposed the pervasive sexism in Judaism and Christianity. Feminist theological methodology prioritized women's experiences in seeking to offer constructive alternatives to these traditions, including the doctrines of sin and God, the classic interpretation of Genesis 2-3, and the narratives of forgotten or demonized women in Scripture.

With respect to sex, a feminist perspective argues that the historical dominance of a male-centered, heterosexual perspective in the interpretation of sexual experience – sexual experience that was translated into theological assertions – is partly responsible for “the crisis of sexuality in the church” today. For example, Augustine argued that nocturnal emissions, unwanted erections, and instances of impotence signified one's inability to control sexual desire and tarnished the inevitable ends – orgasm. Implicit in these claims is the notion of an irresistible sexual impulse, the experience of ubiquitous lusting, and the necessary continuity and linear nature of desire, followed by physiological arousal, and then by sexual experience (penetrative sexual intercourse), culminating in orgasm.

From a feminist perspective, our theological legacy related to the interpretation of sexual experience is exclusively male-centered, heterosexual, and overwhelmingly

negative. Given the aims of feminist theology, one would expect to find a critical corrective to theological reflection on sexual experience and pleasure, primarily generated from the particularities of the diversity and multiplicity of women's voices. My initial survey of feminist theological resources (from the early 1970s through the late 1980s) came up short of identifying any one particular work that focused *exclusively* on sexual desire or pleasure; however, a number of works contained the opportunity for addressing issues of women's sexuality, and perhaps pleasure, via efforts to reimagine Christian love as *eros*.⁷ Proposing *eros*, commonly taken to connote sexual love, as a resource for more aptly capturing the nature of love as understood from the experience of women desiring and loving held promise.

Thick feminist theological reflections on *eros*, however, are not plentiful; Rita Nakashima Brock and Carter Heyward are the only two feminist theologians who undertake substantial, book-length redefinitions of the philosophical concept. Drawing on female experience, they suggest a new way of understanding *eros*, one that prioritizes being in relationship and valuing the other and mandates participation in justice and the healing of all beings. God is – and has always been – part and parcel of life, the flow of erotic energy in our pleasures, mutual relationships, and political action. *Eros* theology provides a foundation for and supports a feminist theological agenda that demands resistance to relations of domination. Erotic love, newly defined, transcends sexual love, though sexual love remains a valid instance.

Heyward, a lesbian feminist theologian, is the only one to delve further into sexual pleasure and the explicitly sexual dimension of erotic love. For her, pleasure is a

⁷ Women, as well as gay men, in theological disciplines more explicitly and pointedly address sexual pleasure in publications after 1990, most notably in the discipline of Christian sexual ethics. These scholars often bridge disciplines and may not identify themselves exclusively as theologians or ethicists.

hallmark of all erotic love and of the experience of tapping into one's erotic power. In addition to erotic love being pleasurable, Heyward emphasizes mutuality as the defining characteristic of all *eros*. *Eros is mutual power in relation to others*. This, she insists, is the essence of being human – made, destined, and capable of returning to our essential state of mutual relation with all of creation. Thus, the first problem that arises with Heyward's sense of *eros* is a premium on the natural and essential nature of sexual/erotic/Godly love. These essentialist claims about God and human being rub against other feminist critiques of essentialist claims to human nature, especially when it comes to sexuality.

By my interpretation, Heyward and her partner, lesbian feminist theologian Beverly Harrison, interpret the “sexual crisis in the church” as our inability to experience sexual desire and sexual pleasure in the context of mutual sexual activity. They argue that erotic experience has been co-opted by patriarchy and now, sexual arousal and sexual pleasure are contingent on the *tensions* generated by relations of domination and submission. They insist that in a patriarchal society, this paradigm of relating not only characterizes sexual relations, but all relations between the sexes, classes, races, etc.

According to Heyward and Harrison, mutuality *must* characterize sexual relations that are properly erotic (both sexual and spiritual); thus, they propose *the eroticization of mutuality* as the solution to the aforementioned problem. In other words, we are charged with unlearning the arousal and pleasure we experience as part and parcel of all our erotic encounters. In my analysis, this leap from reality to Heyward and Harrison's proposed solution is difficult to comprehend. In regards to sexual pleasure, their *eros* theology articulates a reality for which they offer no viable escape. Though they offer an

affirmation of pleasure, this scholarship begins to point to some of the *complexities* bound to the circumstances through which we experience sexual pleasure, namely through sexual practices that entail some arrangement of claiming or relinquishing power.

Christian Sexual Ethics: Pleasure and a Passion for Justice

A number of scholars in contemporary Christian sexual ethics make mutuality in sexual pleasure normative. Grounded in James Nelson's and Carter Heyward's premises, the most recent scholarship (from the 1990s into the new millennium) aims to leave behind a focus on the regulation and control of sexual acts and pleasures and turn its attention toward the nature of interpersonal relationships and the potential for pleasure to function as a guideline – if not *the* guideline – for gauging the health and potential of intimate relationships. For many of these scholars, personal sexual ethics must always motivate and concern social justice in our political life as a community. In other words, personal sexual pleasures should inspire a passion for social justice.

In progressive Christian sexual ethics, the affirmation of sexual pleasure is contingent on three interrelated themes. First, each text engages and affirms Nelson's insistence on the *importance of embodiment* to theological anthropology. Second, Heyward's assertion that *mutuality* function as a necessary quality of every relationship, including sexual relationships, is a cornerstone in Christine Gudorf's and Marvin Ellison's book-length proposals, as well as a feminist approach to women's pleasure by Patricia Beatie Jung. For Gudorf in particular, mutual sexual pleasure is an ethical mandate for having "good" sex. Also championed by Heyward, the third theme – *the necessary relationship between personal sexual experience/pleasure and a public*

commitment to social justice – is the core implication of contributions by lesbian feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen, Marvin Ellison, and “queer theologians” Robert Goss and Scott Haldeman. A move to recognize sexual pleasure as a pre-moral good, to demand it in all sexual relationships, and to firmly rid it of the angst generated by the Western Christian tradition spans all of these proposals.

In a number of these texts and articles, the voices of marginalized groups centralize their own experiences to more radically connect sexual ethics to social justice. This is evident in contributions by Heyward (a lesbian feminist theologian), Goss and Haldeman (queer theologians), and Kelly Brown Douglas (an African-American womanist theologian). Douglas’ work stands apart, as it exemplifies the difficulty with affirming sexual pleasure when an explicit association with lust and sexual pleasures has maligned the humanity of black individuals. In addition, her use of Foucault to explain the disciplinary and productive nature of power, as well as the power of sexual discourse, *begins to raise critical questions* for me about the discursive power of the new claims in Christian sexual ethics – claims in which sexual pleasure is radically affirmed. In other words, the insistence in sexual ethics on sexual pleasure, mutuality in sex, or social justice in relation to our sexual activities may actually *limit* some of the sexual freedom for which many of these proposals so passionately advocate.

A more critical look at contemporary Christian sexual ethics also reveals an implicit grounding in *feminist eros theology*. Thus, mutuality is the standard for right relating and the key to eliminating all relations characterized by domination and submission, including sexism, racism, heterosexism, ageism, etc. Many of these proposals uncritically adopt Heyward and Harrison’s solution to eroticized relations of

dominance and submission: the need to *eroticize mutuality* – to make “power-sharing” in sex both arousing and pleasurable. Because many of these scholars claim that the nature of the power exchange in sexual activity can and does translate into how one handles power in other relationships and, more, that the joy of power-sharing in sex ignites a passion for mutual relating with all of humanity and creation, justice is ultimately the larger framework for interpreting sexual pleasure. The relationship between mutual sexual pleasure and justice-making becomes an ethical expectation. This expectation brings me back to questions about the *limits* on sexual freedom these proposals reassert.

Looking for a theologically grounded affirmation of sexual pleasure, I find these proposals radical and compelling; however, I am wary that where idealism abounds, subtle *tensions* fall to the wayside, and theory fails to address the lived realities of the here and now. For example, the whole of the discourse with respect to mutuality is confusing at times. There is a conflation between egalitarian relationships in which mutual sexual decision-making takes place and mutuality in sexual activity itself, where these authors argue that power differentials in this context should cease to exist and titillate participants. As a result, the eroticization of mutuality forgoes the possibility of mutual relationships in which partners agree on using power differentials to maximize their pleasure.

In addition, given the analyses of prominent secular feminists, I question the eroticization of mutuality as *the only way* to affirming sexual pleasure. More so, does mutuality in the context of erotic desire and pleasure always involve the elimination of tensions? What I would call an *idealized mutuality* seems to arise from the uncritical appropriation of feminist *eros* theology in Christian sexual ethics. Also, the elimination

of tensions in the eroticization of mutuality rightly aims to thwart violence and abuse; however, it also attempts to eliminate risk. From a pastoral theological perspective, this move seems to misunderstand the complexity of our theological anthropology. Is all human suffering a product of social sin? And to what extent does a degree of risk increase sexual pleasure?

Finally, without resisting the claim of the goodness of pleasure, I am skeptical of the burden placed on sexual activity and its pleasures to motivate and inflame one's passion for justice. While I do not negate this possibility for some, I am not convinced that it should be true for all. I also think that justice-making in the context of love-making can take many forms some that would not be supported by Christian sexual ethics as they currently stand. In sum, though sexual pleasure is finally embraced in theological scholarship, this shift compels a more rigorous, critical analysis.

Communities of Faith in a Culture of Commodities and Confusion

Over the course of the twentieth century, America has had its share of discourses focused on sexuality and its expressions. It would seem that if the Church aimed to stay relevant amidst the shifting sands of modernism and postmodernism, it would have to respond to the “new” discoveries molding and shaping the understanding of sexual desire and pleasure emerging from beyond its walls.

For example, in the mid-1910s, Sigmund Freud shared his ideas with large American audiences. Nuances and the complexity of his theories aside, Freudian concepts permeated the middle-class imagination, including the idea of infantile sexuality, family drama laden with sexual conflict, neuroses in women as a consequence

of repressed sexual desires, and the notion that sexual instincts permeated human life and affected the development of civilization.⁸ Historians John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman argue that Freud’s writings “perhaps best symbolize the new direction that sexual theorizing took in the twentieth century.”⁹ Jeffrey Weeks adds that Freud’s work represented “a high point of a would-be-scientific sexology.”¹⁰

Sexual desire (the instincts) and pleasure (satisfaction of the instincts) played a significant role in Freud’s shifting theoretical perspective. The sexual impulse, or *libido*, had its aim in gratification, the reduction of tension and the sensation of pleasure. But “sexual,” insofar as it qualified an impulse, merely meant that it arose from any number of bodily needs. The connections between the sexual instinct and heterosexual genitality were the culmination of a process, not a starting point for Freud.¹¹ Still, D’Emilio and Freedman argue, “Americans absorbed a version of Freudianism that presented the sexual impulse as an insistent force demanding expression.”¹² Although many of Freud’s ideas rattled Christians, his interpretations of the sexual impulse resonated with Western Christian traditions that viewed sex as an irresistible force in need of social, moral, and/or medical restraints.

As pastoral theologian James Poling indicates, the mid-nineteenth century found Christian communities floundering to make sense of and process sexologist Alfred Kinsey’s research. Kinsey’s work in the late 1940s and early 1950s appealed to sexual science, providing “facts” that demonstrated the gap between moral codes and the actual

⁸ John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 223.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths & Modern Sexualities*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 127.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 133-134.

¹² D’Emilio and Freedman, 223.

sexual activity of Americans. By the 1960s, sexologists William Masters and Virginia Johnson, who studied the biological bases of human sexual response, joined Kinsey in identifying the clitoris as the source of female orgasm. Did this bode well for women's erotic pleasure, but also the feminist implications of these findings suggested the demise of the heterosexual imperative; sexual pleasure was attainable from sexual activity with either a man or a woman.¹³ In addition to these scientific contributions, political movements in the latter half of the twentieth century, including the sexual revolution, the women's movement, and the gay and lesbian rights movement, put churches in a position to respond to the changing times and to perhaps rethink, or re-theologize, their official positions on matters related to sexuality, including sexual pleasure.

Pleasure and Culture Today

If the Christian church appears anxious or mute when it comes to affirming sexual pleasure, U.S. culture markets sexual pleasure in excess. If you were an alien from another planet and your spaceship crash-landed in New York City, it would never occur to you that sex and the pleasures it promises are a threat. Based on popular music and images, you would be amazed at all the things available that would give you the opportunity to experience these pleasures – anything from toothpaste and shampoo, to motor vehicles, razors, clothing, beer, even chewing gum. The more sexually explicit images in Times Square of scantily clad lingerie models advertising for Victoria's Secret would pale in comparison to the images available (in number and content) on the World Wide Web. You might hear murmurings that the sale of pornography is a multi-billion

¹³ Ibid, 313.

dollar industry in the U.S., some arguing that there are more adult book stores in America than McDonald's restaurants.¹⁴

The point is that we are hard pressed not to conclude that the majority of Americans work and love in a sex-saturated culture. The commodification of sex – of its pleasures and powers – serves desires as assuredly as it creates them. Scholars and industry debate the direction of this causality, but neither would deny the explicit principle motivation: capital. In any case, I argue that the debates in our society revolve less around these realities and more around the *impact* of this kind of marking and the promotion of pleasure, especially because much of the time we are not even conscious of the sexual messages, images, and discourses to which we are being exposed and those to which we are not.

To be sure, television, movies, advertisements, and music provide a venue for implicit and explicit information about sexual pleasure. Sometimes these media maintain a hyper focus on sexual pleasure. Sex scenes are perfectly choreographed. Risk, emotional and physical, is a non-issue. Examples are almost exclusively heterosexual. Black bodies are highly eroticized. Stereotyped, gendered sex roles abound. In these readily available public forums, where sexual pleasure is permitted, many are exploited. These images are highly criticized by Christians of all stripes, as well as secular academics. This cultural reality, in the guise of affirmation and sexual liberation, opposes the vision of life-giving sexual pleasure that Christian sexual ethicists want to embrace.

Politicians, clergy, caregivers, advocates, and scholars analyze and evaluate the contemporary scene. Is it harmless? Does it deform our sense of expectations when it

¹⁴ Dan Ackerman, "How Big is Porn?" Forbes, May 25, 2011, <http://www.forbes.com/2001/05/25/0524porn.html>, (accessed July 24, 2011).

comes to sex and intimate relationships? To what extent does it normalize? To what extent does it liberate? To what extent does it discriminate and exploit? Is it all destructive or can it be creative? Does it constitute societal progress or demise? And, from a faith perspective, how does it square with or oppose how Christian sexual ethics understand sex and pleasure?

The dominant portrait of sexual pleasure in America is undoubtedly the antithesis of what Augustine was imagining as he worked out the relationship between sex and society at the start of the fifth century. Today, significant tension remains between the Church and culture. As I will demonstrate, although many mainline churches have adopted qualified affirmations of sex and sexual pleasure, heterosexuality, monogamy, and marriage reign as the safe and sanctified context for sexual expression. The media, however, including television, music and music videos, magazines, movies, and the Internet (I would add social networking and social networking tools), send confusing messages. For example, sex is plentiful, not always occurring between married partners, potentially occurring with multiple partners, with few if any allusions to contraceptive use or safer sex methods, and almost exclusively depicted between heterosexual persons.¹⁵

On one level our culture seems remarkably comfortable, if not overt, with its sexuality. But on another level it resists and restricts. We can see a commercial for shampoo that portrays a woman in the throws of orgasm while she washes her hair, while ads for contraception – like condoms – are few and far between, if not entirely blocked. Pepper Schwartz adds, “Our society...injects sexual content into everything from baby food ads to weather reports, yet sees no contradiction in our collective blanch

¹⁵ Jane Brown, “Mass Media Influences on Sexuality,” in *The Journal of Sex Research*, 39 (2002), 42-45.

at the idea of a sex toy being sold on the home shopping network.”¹⁶ Thus, it is not so simple to conclude that society is necessarily sexually liberated or sexually repressed. There are much larger and less obvious forces at work that contribute to what Schwartz calls “our sexual schizophrenia.”¹⁷

As a caregiver, I saw first hand the tensions that exist for persons of faith – especially youth – trying to balance the varying messages about sex coming from the Church and culture. I had a teenaged counselee who made an impromptu decision to have sex. The religious school she attended insisted on abstinence until marriage – an approach that left her confused about what to do with her budding sexual desires. At the same time, she was convinced that everyone her age was having sex. Music, television, rumors at her school, and social media increased the pressure to “do it!” She felt that there were no viable options for her between total restriction and the extreme - intercourse.

Some communities of faith set themselves over and against culture when it comes to sexual values. Thus, the fear and angst generated about sexual matters, in addition to lingering faithfulness to the Christian legacy, may also be a product of cultural confrontation or resistance to confusion, pervasive, indiscriminant permissiveness, and indulgence on the part of the powers that be in society. Some faith communities (typically the more conservative) concentrate on the corruption of personal sexual morals, marriage, and family values, while other faith communities (typically the more liberal/progressive) focus on the sexual exploitation and abuse manifest in late capitalism’s commodification of sex and pleasure. Still, while those in the Church may fear where culture has taken us with respect to sexual pleasure, it behooves them to

¹⁶ Pepper Schwartz, “Creating Sexual Pleasure and Sexual Justice in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Contemporary Sociology*, 29 (January 2000), 214.

¹⁷ Ibid.

recognize that these *powerful cultural influences* contribute just as much to the shape of their fear and anxiety as the sex-negative Christian legacy.

Sex and the Church: Official Denominational Positions

James Poling points out that by the end of the 1960s every large progressive church denomination had formulated and affirmed statements on sexuality. Although these statements criticized moralistic approaches to sex and appealed to relationships characterized by commitment and love as the appropriate context for sex, they maintained fears regarding pre-marital and extramarital sex, as well as homosexuality.¹⁸ Forty years after these statements were formulated, I reviewed some of the old and new sexual statements of Christian mainline denominations, curious about the emphasis (or lack thereof) on heterosexual and procreative imperatives, marriage, and, of course, sexual pleasure.¹⁹

First, in almost all of the assessed statements, sex and sexuality are proclaimed gifts from God or, in the least, part of “God plan.”²⁰ “Catholic teaching sees human sexuality as a great gift from God...,” states the Catholic position.²¹ Missouri Synod

¹⁸ James Poling, “Sexuality: A Crisis for the Church,” in *Pastoral Care and Social Conflict*, eds. Pamela D. Couture and Rodney J. Hunter, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 119.

¹⁹ The following brief synopsis contains a summary of my cursory reading of denominational statements that are available on the Internet. The multiplicity of expressions of the Christian faith makes it impossible to make universal claims about a singular “Christian” sexual ethic, set of sexual morals, or position with regards to sexual pleasure. Theological positions and teachings vary from denomination to denomination, as well as within various denominations. This, however, does not preclude the existence of common beliefs across denominations. Here, I sample a variety of mainline denominational statements addressing human sexuality, curious of the aforementioned emphases. These statements represent the official positions and opinions of the following denominations: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), The Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, the Episcopal Church USA, the Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the United Methodist Church (UMC), and the United Church of Christ (UCC).

²⁰ Sbc.net, “Sexuality,” <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/pssexuality.asp> (accessed January 28, 2011).

²¹ Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, Institute for Public Policy, “Human Sexuality, Marriage and Same-sex Unions: Questions and Answers,” <http://www.pacatholic.org/bishops-statements/human-sexuality-marriage-and-same-sex-unions> (accessed January 28, 2011).

Lutheranism identifies, "...the gift of sexuality," and describes sex as, "...God's beautiful gift."²² The United Methodist Church (UMC) document states, "...sexuality is God's good gift to all persons," and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) proclaims, "Sexual love...is a wondrous gift...God's good gift..."²³ The Episcopal Church, in the introduction to its report entitled "The Gift of Sexuality: A Theological Perspective," defines sexuality as, "...one of God's wonderful, complex, confusing, and, sometimes, dangerous gifts."²⁴ Finally, the United Church of Christ (UCC) similarly states, "Sexuality is a gift from God."²⁵

While sexuality [read: sex] receives substantial, explicit affirmations, sexual pleasure is rarely mentioned. Only the ELCA and the Episcopal Church address it directly. The ELCA explains, "Sexuality especially involves the powers or capacities to form deep and lasting bonds, *to give and receive pleasure*, and to conceive and bear children."²⁶ The Episcopal Church asserts, "The links between love and *sexual pleasure* testify to the way in which sexuality blesses human intimacy."²⁷ In both cases, sexual pleasure is recognized and acknowledged as valuable to healthy expressions of sexuality.

²²A Report of the Commission of Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod as Prepared by the Social Concerns Committee September 1981, "Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective," <http://www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=685> (accessed January 28, 2011).

²³ From the Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, "Human Sexuality," http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content.aspx?c=lwL4KnN1LtH&b=5066287&content_id={1F6BAEA8-E9EE-4867-B892-2F6871C78CB6}¬oc=1 (accessed January 28, 2011); Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "A Social Statement on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx> (accessed January 28, 2011).

²⁴ Report of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, "The Gift of Sexuality: A Theological Perspective," <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/theologycomreport.pdf> (accessed on January 28, 2011).

²⁵ Ann Hanson, "Theological Reflection: Sexuality Education," <http://www.ucc.org/justice/sexuality-education/theological-reflection.html> (accessed on February 9, 2011).

²⁶ ELCA, <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx> (accessed January 28, 2011), emphasis mine.

²⁷ Episcopal Church, <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/theologycomreport.pdf> (accessed on January 28, 2011), emphasis mine.

I have to admit that seeing explicit mention of sexual pleasure in official church documents was initially reassuring and positive.

Thus, if there has been any headway made in the Church since Augustine, it is that sexuality and sex are no longer interpreted as dangerous or threatening to one's spirituality. They are regarded as "good" and as "gifts," conjuring up a departure from sin language and a sense of something special, worthy of excitement, given for good purposes. Pleasure, when explicitly noted, is depicted as a blessing and part and parcel of the good gift of sexuality. In every case, however, these affirmations are given alongside qualifications and, in some cases, warnings. Here, these modern documents begin to resonate, to more or less an extent, with aspects of the Christian legacy.

First, sexual intimacy is affirmed primarily and only in marriage, an institution defined between one man and one woman. In the more traditional statements – the Missouri Synod Lutherans, the Catholic Church, and the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) – this arrangement is named simply as "God's plan," and it is determined by the naturalness and divine sanctioning of male-female duality and complementarity. Steering clear of the language of dualism and complementarity, the Episcopal Church indicates that God gave sex as a "means for married persons to share themselves with each other."²⁸ The ELCA, which seems to have the most developed and affirming position on sexual relationships, concludes, "...the greatest sexual intimacies, such as coitus, should be matched with and sheltered both by the highest level of binding commitment and by social and legal protection, such as is found in marriage."²⁹

²⁸ Episcopal Church, <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/theologycomreport.pdf> (accessed on January 28, 2011).

²⁹ ELCA, <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx> (accessed January 28, 2011).

In addition to a marital framework, sin and danger language also remains a part of the discourse surrounding sex and sexuality in these documents. This is most emphatic in the Missouri Synod Lutheran document, which states, “Sexuality, like all aspects of our lives, has been disordered as a result of sin. Appetite uncontrolled by mutual love constantly threatens to break out in disruptive ways in our lives.”³⁰ Adopting Luther’s language, this proposal includes the metaphor of marriage as a “remedy,” the place where sexual appetites are controlled and disciplined and where passion is domesticated.

We also find an allusion to the uncontrollable sexual impulse that needs to be contained. Pointing to the vulnerability, fragility, and complexity inherent in sexually intimate relationships, the Episcopal Church warns, “Disordered sexual behavior can destabilize human society and become a means of exploitation and damage.”³¹ Fallout, according to this document, includes high divorce rates, serial marriages, and promiscuity. The ELCA also addresses the complexity of human sexuality, which, permeated by sin, has the potential to harm and exploit. This document states, “...this church opposes non-monogamous, promiscuous, or casual sexual relationships of any kind. Indulging immediate desires for satisfaction...is to ‘gratify the desires of the flesh’ (Galatians 5:16-19).”³²

The relationship between social order and proper sexual behavior also emerges as a great concern. The Catholic Church maintains that sex should always remain open to

³⁰ Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, ,” <http://www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=685> (accessed January 28, 2011).

³¹ Episcopal Church, <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/theologycomreport.pdf> (accessed on January 28, 2011).

³² ELCA, <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx> (accessed January 28, 2011).

procreation because it is the means to a family, “the basic unit of society.”³³ In this precise way, sexuality channeled into the marital relationship for the purposes of reproduction has public significance toward the good of society. The Episcopal Church argues that sexual intimacy has public and social dimensions. “When healthy and well-ordered, our sexuality and sexual expressions contribute to the health and stability of individuals and society.”³⁴ For example, “mutual fidelity...protects both partners involved and the well-being of the social order.”³⁵ With respect to sexuality, the ELCA also supports the public character of marriage, which “signals to the community [the heterosexual couple’s] intent to live a peaceful and mutually fulfilling life, even as they endeavor to strengthen the community in which they live.”³⁶

As a result of the aforementioned commitments to marriage in the context of affirming sexuality and sex, a number of sexual relationships and sexual acts do not fall into the purview of affirmation or celebration. Only one of the denominational statements I reviewed conclusively embraces same-sex sexual relationships. The UCC, as recently as 2005, voted to legally recognize and advocate for same-sex marriage.³⁷ Due to the autonomous nature of UCC churches, however, each congregation is free to accept or reject the recommendations of the General Synod. The SBC, the UMC, the Catholic Church, and the statement issued by the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church all reject same-sex marriage, same-sex sexual relationships, and “homo-sexual” sexual behaviors.

³³ Catholic Church, <http://www.pacatholic.org/bishops-statements/human-sexuality-marriage-and-same-sex-unions>, (accessed January 28, 2011).

³⁴ Episcopal Church, <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/theologycomreport.pdf> (accessed on January 28, 2011).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ ELCA, <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx> (accessed January 28, 2011).

³⁷ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Religious Groups’ Official Positions on Same-Sex Marriage,” July 27, 2010, <http://pewforum.org/Gay-Marriage-and-Homosexuality/Religious-Groups-Official-Positions-on-Same-Sex-Marriage.aspx> (accessed February 2, 2011).

The statements from the Episcopal Church and the ELCA explain the tensions in the debate concerning same-sex marriage endorsement, including that any future grounds for support holds the expectation that same-sex couples will enter into lifelong, monogamous relationships. In 2009, however, both of these denominations passed resolutions. The Episcopal Church's national convention voted to "give bishops the option to bless same-sex unions" and the ELCA's church-wide assembly voted to "allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships."³⁸ Still, neither denomination appears to call these unions 'marriage,' and both expect the nature of the relationship to mirror that of heterosexual married couples.

Thus, with marriage reigning as the sanctified location for sexual expression, these statements – even the most comprehensive and open-minded – must oppose pre-marital, extra-marital, non-monogamous, and casual sexual relationships. Any sex outside of marriage, which typically refers to coitus, is not affirmed. Since gay and lesbian individuals are denied marriage in most cases, any sexual activity for them is out of the question.

Sex and the Church: The Media Spotlight

As I have already mentioned, Christians have a reputation in Western culture for a prudish and sheltered approach to sex. Abstinence-only education movements promoted by Focus on the Family, True Love Waits, the Silver Ring Thing, and The True Love Revolution at Harvard University, as well as a recent attempt by The Anscombe Society at Princeton University to establish a university-sponsored Center for Abstinence and

³⁸ Ibid.

Chastity, all signal to culture that Christianity – at least the public face of Christianity – is committed to keeping sex and sexual expression bound to marriage and the family.³⁹

Most abstinence-only education and advocacy highlight the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, the threat of unwanted pregnancy, and the inability of contraceptive methods to protect young people from the physical, emotional, and spiritual fallout of sexual activity outside of marriage.

Though many abstinence-only programs affiliated with Christian organizations claim to celebrate sexual pleasure in the context of married sex, they demonize masturbation and neglect to discuss the mechanics of sexual pleasure, our myriad erogenous zones, expectations for pleasure in sexual experience, mutual pleasuring, and the differences in how men and women experience pleasure. It is no wonder that I have seen married Christian individuals and couples in my clinical practice who are confused and uneducated about making pleasurable love. One client who “saved herself for marriage” expressed anger at God, arguing that since she waited until marriage to have sex, she deserved a better, more fulfilling sex life. When I inquired if she had ever

³⁹ These movements and organizations are all affiliated with conservative Christianity, or, the sometimes controversial, “Christian right.” Although Christian views on sex and sexuality vary greatly, the tenacity, financial backing, political support, and very public nature of these conservative views often dominate the face of Christianity in popular culture. See: <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/>; <http://www.lifeway.com/tlw/>; <http://www.silverringthing.com/>; <http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/tlr/>; and <http://blogs.princeton.edu/anscombe/>. The proposal by the Anscombe Society at Princeton (a student-run group) was motivated by a perceived promotion of sexually liberal programs at the University, in addition to an “impressive” support network and “generous resources” for “homosexual” and “transgender” students. These students feel that an imbalance has been created by Princeton’s establishment of a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Center in 2005. The President of the Christian Union at Princeton called the imbalance a “double-standard,” and prominent Princeton professor Robert George, informal advisor to Anscombe, argued that chaste students should not be marginalized. The proposal for the Abstinence and Chastity Center was rejected for a second time by Princeton’s president, Shirley Tilghman, who responded by pointing out that a difference in opinion, even if it is a minority, is not sufficient grounds for establishing a center. She also argued that centers which support women and LGBT students are responding to ongoing discrimination of these groups, some forms still enshrined in law. Thus, the analogy of “discrimination” against chaste students is “inappropriate.” See Catherine Elvy, “A Double Standard, A Lower Standard,” in *The Ivy League Christina Observer*, 9 (Winter 2010) 13-15.

masturbated, experimenting with herself to see what felt pleasurable, she indicated that she had not and that according to her faith tradition, all masturbation was a form of lust.

In some ways, public sex education mirrors this “sex-negative” approach when it focuses solely on the risks of sexual activity and deprives young people of important knowledge about their bodies. For example, although public sex education may discuss contraceptive methods (something that is not part of abstinence-only approaches), emphasis typically falls on sexually transmitted diseases, the threat of unwanted pregnancy, emotional unpreparedness, and general knowledge of the male and female reproductive systems. Teaching about certain sex organs and their functions, like the clitoris and orgasm, as well as alternatives to sexual intercourse – like masturbation, mutual masturbation, and oral sex for example – is extremely controversial. This quiet distrust or fear of sexual pleasure seems like a remnant of a powerful legacy, theological or otherwise, that is proving difficult to overcome.

Affirmations of sex and sexual pleasure in Christian contexts have also been no stranger to the media, as selected churches have pressed back against culture with exuberant injunctions to indulge in sex while maintaining the status quo. In 2008, the media could not get enough of “sexperiments” and “sex challenges” that Christian pastors were issuing from their pulpits. The message on the surface cried out to America that Christians are talking about sex and that they and their leadership are far from prudish and sex-phobic. “Thou shalt have sex and lots of it,” begins the online article from ABC News, referring to a seven-day sex challenge that Reverend Ed Young, founder of the nondenominational Fellowship Church in Grapevine, TX, issued to his congregation.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Imaeyen Ibanga, “Texas Pastor: Let’s Talk About Sex,” ABC News, November 16, 2008, <http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=6264959> (accessed June 22, 2010).

The New York Times reported on the same church on its website, explaining how Young called for a week of “congregational copulation.”⁴¹ The article described the large bed placed on stage as a prop and the pastor, at times reclining on the bed with his Bible, stressing that “it is time for the church to put God back in the bed.”⁴² Young was also featured on ABC’s *Good Morning America*.

A few months prior, the online *Time* article “And God said, ‘Just Do It,’” featured Reverend Stacy Spencer, pastor of New Direction, a mostly African-American Disciples of Christ Church in Memphis, TN, and his challenge “40 Nights of Grrreat Sex.” The program, complete with daily planners directing parishioners to “worship together,” as well as to try a “quickie in any room besides the bedroom,” was aimed to promote more and better sex.⁴³ Spencer even affirmed oral sex and role-playing. His program followed on the heels of Reverend Paul Wirth’s “The 30-Day Sex Challenge,” which encouraged the parishioners of his mostly white, nondenominational Relevant Church in Tampa, FL to engage in some kind of sex each night for 30 days.⁴⁴ Wirth was featured on CBS’s *The Early Show*.

The public interest and curiosity the media sought to inspire were grounded undoubtedly in the cultural perception that Christian discourse and sex talk make strange bedfellows, particularly if the talk is sex-positive. A closer look at the articles, however, reveals a Christian position on sex that is far from radical or new. First, the wide spread

⁴¹ Gretel C. Kovach, “Pastor’s Advice for Better Marriages: More Sex,” *The New York Times*, November 24, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/24/us/24sex.html?adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1313116396-tezi+A1xvmiVtpcAA42Iaw> (accessed June 22, 2010).

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ David Van Biema, “And God Said, ‘Just Do It,’” *Time*, June 26, 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1818197.00.html> (accessed June 22, 2010).

⁴⁴ CBS News, “Pastor Issues ‘30-Day Sex Challenge’: Wants Married Congregants to Have Sex for Month Straight, and Singles to Abstain,” February 20, 2008, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/02/20/earlyshow/living/relationships/main3850842.shtml?tag=mnco1;lst;1> (accessed June 22, 2010).

availability of birth control in the 1970s put many churches in a position to embrace sex for reasons other than procreation. These challenges obviously embrace sex for more than procreative purposes when it is recommended daily for seven, 30, even 40 days. Still, reproduction is not completely lost on church leaders. Young added, “But the true test of success for this endeavor may come nine months from now...I think we better expand our nursery area.” The ABC article is unclear about whose sentiment the first half of this quote is. The second half regarding the nursery area was a quote from Young. It is difficult to tell here if the media are manipulating this allusion to the goal of growing the community of faith or if Young is simply quipping about the reality that in a congregation of some 35,000 worshippers, pregnancies are bound to result.

In addition to sex enhancing intimacy with one’s partner and God, the pastors noted that sex could help one perform better at work, prevent an extramarital affair, and promote forgiveness (related to infidelities, addictions to pornography, etc.). A number of the pastors also admitted that the “sex challenge” effort was a response to the growing rate of divorce among conservative Christians, which is now on par with the national rate of divorce. Not surprisingly, all of the challenges were issued only to married, heterosexual couples in the congregations. Young emphasized that there is no shame in married sex; as for single congregants, he said, “I don’t know, try eating chocolate cake.”⁴⁵ Wirth also advised his single members to abstain. Spencer’s program was only offered to married people. Same-sex couples were not addressed in any of the articles, and it is probably safe to say that these churches would not support same-sex sexual

⁴⁵ Kovach, “Pastor’s Advice for Better Marriages: More Sex,” *The New York Times*, November 24, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/24/us/24sex.html?adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1313116396-tezi+A1xvmiVtpcAA42Iaw> (accessed June 22, 2010).

activity. Thus, expressions of sexuality outside of heterosexual marriage were entirely neglected.

My informal review of these “sex challenges” has a number of flaws and limitations. My point, however, is that the sentiments here do not differ dramatically from the official church documents reviewed earlier. Pleasure is affirmed, but something about it necessitates its containment in marriage – even though its “goodness” is no longer tied to procreation. Same-sex sexual pleasure – also with no attachment to procreation – is absent from these hardy affirmations. Divorce is feared and noted as a major impetus for the sex challenges, further emphasizing the churches’ strong commitments to heterosexual marriage and family. Young in particular alludes to the negative influence of culture, arguing “...we’ve allowed culture to hijack sex from the church.”⁴⁶ This is a common sentiment in many churches, namely that culture has become so permissive that the Church must respond with its own discourse of reformation.

But are sex challenges really the best way of putting theological sexual ethics into action? Even within the restricted sphere of heterosexual marriage, is suggesting – even commanding – that all couples have sex daily ethically responsible? My answer is, “No.” This sort of situation may not benefit women, already burdened by the double shift of work inside and outside of the home and/or routinely forced to participate in sexual activity by their spouses. Likewise, for couples recovering from hurt and betrayal, perhaps associated with an affair, sex may be the last step in a prolonged process of forgiveness. Many couples who have not been having sex for some time are more likely to be in need of counseling, not a sex challenge. From a pastoral perspective, this kind of

⁴⁶ Ibanga, “Texas Pastor: Let’s Talk About Sex,” ABC News, November 16, 2008, <http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=6264959> (accessed June 22, 2010).

approach assumes that the congregation's leader is intimately acquainted with the lives of all of his or her parishioners and knows that he or she is not putting anyone in danger by recommending daily sexual activity.⁴⁷ In a congregation like Young's, with over 35,000 parishioners, this is impossible. In sum, this form of active (albeit partial) affirmation of sexual pleasure in a community of faith is too problem-laden to be positive. It is yet another example of the need for critical resources on this front.

Finally, one group firmly committed to issues of sexuality in the Church is the New York-based Religious Institute on Sexuality, Morality, Justice and Healing, directed by Debora Haffner. Founded in 2001, the Religious Institute has a media presence and describes itself as "a multi-faith organization dedicated to advocating for sexual health, education, and justice in faith communities and society."⁴⁸ It provides resources and advocates for comprehensive sexuality education, reproductive justice, LGBT inclusion, and abuse prevention.⁴⁹ In 2010, the Institute updated their "Religious Declaration" on sexual morality, asking culture at large, including religious leaders, to support a sexual ethic focused on personal relationships and social justice, including sexual lives that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent, and *pleasure*.⁵⁰ The declaration also supports respect for the body and for the vulnerability that intimacy brings, as well as physical, emotional, and spiritual health. It "accepts no double standards and applies to

⁴⁷ I use both pronouns here because in each example the male pastor was openly supported by his wife, who participated in promoting the sex challenges.

⁴⁸ The Religious Institute, "About Us," <http://www.religioustheology.org/about-us>, (accessed on May 30, 2011).

⁴⁹ Internationally, the Religious Institute responds to global suffering generated by "preventable maternal mortality, violence against women and sexual minorities, the HIV pandemic, unsustainable population growth and over-consumption, and the commercial exploitation of sexuality." The Religious Institute, "International," <http://www.religioustheology.org/about-us>, (accessed on May 30, 2011).

⁵⁰ The Religious Institute, "Religious Declaration," <http://www.religioustheology.org/about-us>, (accessed on May 30, 2011), emphasis mine.

all persons, without regard to sex, gender, color, age, bodily condition, marital status or sexual orientation.”⁵¹

In its approach to educating individuals about sex and sexuality, the Religious Institute promotes and provides resources for people across their lifespan. It recognizes the presence and continual growth and transformation of sexuality from puberty through advanced age. It opposes abstinence-only education and programs that withhold information about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases. The Institute takes as its priority in sexual ethics the nature of personal relationships and social justice, as opposed to specific sexual acts and, therefore, opposes discrimination in all its forms. Affirming sexuality is more than affirming sex; it is affirming a dimension of being human that is essential to our spirituality.⁵²

The Religious Institute is a highly valued organization for those committed to more progressive Christian sexual ethics. As it is a fairly new institution, I can imagine that many of the ethicists explored in this project have influenced the commitments and conclusions of the Religious Institutes’ supporters. I am curious about if and how some of my critique of this body of scholarship will affect the position of the Institute. At the moment, “mutuality” and “pleasure” in the Declaration is either purposely left undefined, or their meanings are assumed. Either way, the boundaries of “pleasure” – if any – and the context for “mutuality” are ambiguous.

⁵¹ Ibid. See Appendix.

⁵² Ibid.

Method: A Critical Correlation of Religion and Culture – Toward a Feminist Pastoral Theological Reconstruction of Sexual Pleasure

This project is not a comprehensive review and critique of all cultural expressions, practices, and commentary regarding sexual pleasure across time. Like most projects, this one must contain itself, and such containment is guided by the restraints of time and resources, as well as the expectations and requirements of the dissertation process. For these reasons, I have chosen influential historical figures who, I argue, have made powerful and pointed contributions to the discourse on sexual pleasure specifically. Most importantly for pastoral theology, this project looks *toward* practical application. It will be suggestive for how pastoral theology can take up this thick description of sexual pleasure in the service of a comprehensive pastoral theology of sexual pleasure or sexual behavior. The dissertation will imagine how this research might touch the ground in communities of faith, public education, and other cultural outlets that heavily influence how we envision our sexual selves. It will not, however, develop concrete, detailed suggestions for caregivers. Still, it promises worthy scholarship to these ends.

In addition to being a pastoral counselor, I identify myself as a feminist pastoral theologian. “A central purpose of pastoral theology is to conceptualize a comprehensive theological understanding of the human condition,” pastoral theologian Andrew Lester explains. “Pastoral theologians are interested in the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual potential of humans; why things go wrong that inhibit these possibilities; and discovering what processes bring healing and lead to well-being.”⁵³ Frequently in pastoral theology, this kind of comprehensive theological understanding, which aims to interpret human brokenness, healing, and fulfillment, begins with concrete human

⁵³ Andrew D. Lester, *The Angry Christian: A Theology for Care and Counseling*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 9.

experience. As Nancy Ramsay explains, pastoral theology “begins with the concrete particularity of experience, intends a useful response for that situation and aims to articulate normative dimensions of the context of care.”⁵⁴ Thus, pastoral theology is *contextual theology* arising from “critical engagement in acts of care or response to needs posed for such care.”⁵⁵ In other words, it is contextual theology that begins with the *concrete experience* of human suffering or struggle and intends a response aimed at healing and transformation. According to Ramsay, the purpose of pastoral theology is to provide resources for care, as well as to “revise and inform theological understanding on behalf of the practice of care and theology more generally.”⁵⁶ In this way, reflection on experience also becomes a critical resource for revising theology itself.

I approach the varied and convoluted interpretations of sexual pleasure with a pastoral theological method aimed at answering my research question and arguing my thesis, namely that contemporary Christian sexual ethics has uncritically accepted and promoted a vision for sexual pleasure without thorough attention to and consideration of the valid critiques and suggestions of pertinent theological, social scientific, and cultural resources. I justify the use of a pastoral theological approach to this dimension of sexual experience because *sex is a universal human experience*, and sexual pleasure can be a gift to enhance that experience. *Pastoral theology prioritizes human experience* and recognizes it as the crucial resource for understanding and responding to human suffering and fulfillment. It possesses a deep investment in *both* religious and everyday practices,

⁵⁴ Nancy J. Ramsay, “Contemporary Pastoral Theology: A Wider Vision for the Practice of Love,” in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. Nancy J. Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 157.

⁵⁵ Nancy J. Ramsay, “A Time of Ferment and Redefinition,” in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. Nancy J. Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

of which sex can be one or both. In the shift from the therapeutic paradigm to the communal/contextual paradigm, the guiding metaphor of the experience interpreted in pastoral theology has also shifted. Feminist pastoral theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore has updated Anton Boisen's analogy of the "living human document," which was elaborated upon by Charles Gerkin in *The Living Human Document: Revisioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (1973, 1984). Miller-McLemore suggests a more appropriate metaphor, which accounts for the wider context – *the living human web*. The imagery of the web takes into consideration systems seen and unseen that impinge upon and even construct the self/subject.⁵⁷ Thus, pastoral theology always interprets individual everyday experiences, like sex and its pleasures, within the larger cultural context.

A pastoral theological approach is also justified because pastoral theology usefully appropriates a method that allows for dialogue and critique across interpretive disciplines. For me, studying and understanding sexual experience necessitates cross-disciplinary work. Theological discourse is limited in providing the most comprehensive explanation for many aspects of the human condition, including our experience of ourselves as sexual beings. Therefore, I take seriously the contributions of other disciplines, like psychology, sociology, and science for example, while maintaining that theology can also make rich contributions to this discussion. In this project, I see my task as bringing theological responses into the conversation with a cultural analysis that includes psychology. This attention to *dialogue* between religion and psychology is where I locate my work and method in the broad field of religion and psychological

⁵⁷ See Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "The Living Human Web: Pastoral Theology at the Turn of the Century," in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson Moessner, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 9-26.

studies.⁵⁸ I maintain that all discourses included here are mutually dependent on one another for a thorough critique and for offering the best possible response when the goal, as it is for me, is developing a theology of care.

Because sex and its pleasures have been the object and subject of numerous discourses, and not just religious discourse, the aforementioned correlational approach is advantageous and necessary for understanding not just individual experience, but a culture that is shaped and transformed by these discourses. Pastoral theology, which is connected to its own “institutional forms and movements of power,” acknowledges that it too participates in the construction of discourse that may or may not promote human flourishing.⁵⁹ The point is that in addition to exploring the contributions and limitations of theology and psychology, pastoral theology must also become an object of its own analysis as part of the critical correlational method.

As an academic, I am fortunate to be part of the long lineage of influential scholars who have developed and implemented versions of a “correlational” approach to the human sciences and theological disciplines. I inherited and prefer a version of the revised correlational method exemplified in Bonnie Miller-McLemore’s work. Tracking the progression of the method, Miller-McLemore explains,

⁵⁸ I am in agreement with Miller-McLemore, who defines psychology as both “a tool for the enhancement of the faithful care of others and as a cultural force that shapes moral ideals and spiritual hopes and hence requires critical evaluation.” In other words, psychological theories and techniques are interpreted as resources for caregiving, as well as cultural phenomena in their own right that explicitly and implicitly make normative claims and are, therefore, subject to critique. “Religion,” she says, “is not simply an object of study but rather a body of beliefs and practices about ultimate and mystical dimensions of life to be encountered, experienced, tried and perhaps followed.” Here, religion/theology resists objectification and is viewed as a dialogue partner that offers interpretations and explanations of the human condition and healing/transformation. Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Shaping the of Religion and Psychology: Feminist Transformations in Pastoral Theology,” in *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain, Contemporary Dialogues, Future Prospects*, eds. D. Jonte-Pace & W. B. Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2001), 182.

⁵⁹ Susan J. Dunlap, “Discourse Theory and Pastoral Theology,” in *Feminist & Womanist Pastoral Theology*, eds. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Brita L. Gill-Austern, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 135.

...pastoral theologians do not always agree on how to relate to the sciences...even though many...follow the twentieth-century liberal trajectory that runs from Don Browning and David Tracy to Seward Hiltner and Paul Tillich.⁶⁰

Though Miller-McLemore commits to a version of a correlational approach with “liberationist” adjustments, she reflects here on the theoretical shifts that transpire from Paul Tillich to those of her mentor, Don Browning. Tillich, in his correlational approach, held out the importance of both the Christian “message” and the “situation;” the “situation” (context or culture) offers questions concerning the human situation, while the Christian “message” provides the answers.⁶¹ David Tracy, who argued that Tillich’s approach lacked a “critical” correlation of the message and the situation, revised what he argued was a unidirectional approach. “For if the ‘situation’ is to be taken with full seriousness, its answers to its own question must also be investigated critically,” Tracy explained.⁶²

Thus, Tracy asserted that the theological task should involve a *critical* correlation of the results of the investigations of the two sources of theology – “common human experience” and “the Christian Tradition”. He identified the former as the religious dimensions of everyday and scientific language and experience and the latter as the historical and hermeneutical investigation of classical Christian texts.⁶³ The task of the critical correlation, he explains, is to

...allow for the application of the other set of criteria to each analysis...the meanings discovered as adequate to our common human experience must be compared to the meanings disclosed as appropriate to the Christian

⁶⁰ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Cognitive Neuroscience and the Question of Theological Method,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, forthcoming. Miller-McLemore is intimately connected to this trajectory, having earned her doctoral degree under Browning and Tracy at the University of Chicago.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1988), 46.

⁶³ Ibid, 46-49.

tradition in order to discover how similar, different, or identical the former meanings are in relationship to the latter.⁶⁴

In other words, human experience and the Christian tradition provide both questions and answers to the human situation, and there can be a critical analysis of this dialogue or conversation. Dialogue or conversation is possible between these two sources because both engage *limit-situations* and attempt to answer *limit-questions*. Both limit-situations and limit-questions disclose, explains Tracy, “certain fundamental structures of our existence beyond that ordinary experience (e.g., our fundamental trust in the worthwhileness of existence, our basic belief in order and value).”⁶⁵ Such questions, for example, can be as common in science as they are in religion.

Don Browning makes significant use of the mutual, critical correlation or the revised critical correlational method in a number of his works. For example, in *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies: A Critical Conversation in the Theology of Culture*, Browning’s title gives testimony to his goal: the application of the revised critical correlational method to theology and a variety of clinical psychologies. On the grounds that both disciplines are interpretive, he applies this method to compare and contrast “implicit images of the human with an eye toward discovering those perspectives that more adequately describe the human condition.”⁶⁶ Browning takes the same approach to practical moral thinking in previous publications, including *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* and *A Fundamental Practical Theology*.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 79.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 93.

⁶⁶ Don S. Browning and Terry S. Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, 2nd ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), x. Given his premise, Browning also calls this approach *critical hermeneutics*.

Often, those engaging in pastoral theology employ a dialogical model, according to which theology and psychology are brought into conversation via the critical correlational method. Pastoral theologian Joretta Marshall says that this method allows “psychology and theology to be more intricately engaged in a mutual process of forming and re-forming one another.”⁶⁷ According to Charles Scalise, a critical correlational method allows for the revision and transformation of both theology and culture, as well as the prioritization of “lived experience,” which has already been noted as the key component of pastoral theology.⁶⁸ These pastoral theologians and others emphasize the importance of the critical analysis of the *strengths and limitations of each discipline’s perspective*, effecting a “mutually critical and revisionist influence.”⁶⁹

My project adopts a revised correlational method to better understand sexual pleasure as interpreted by the Christian tradition, feminist theologians, and contemporary Christian sexual ethics. Because the psychological sciences, particularly psychoanalytic theory and its decedents, have contemplated the role of sexuality and pleasure in human motivation, growth, and attachment, psychodynamic theory is a fourth conversation partner due to its influential, cultural-shaping force in the twentieth century. In addition, a critical lens for interpreting sexual pleasure in our current context cannot do without the highly influential work of philosopher Michel Foucault and the subsequent analyzes of

⁶⁷ Joretta L. Marshall, “Methods in Pastoral Theology, Care, and Counseling,” in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. N. J. Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 139.

⁶⁸ Scalise says, “Correlational models enable insights from theology and insights form the human sciences to engage one another, ideally in an open forum...this cultural openness is particularly useful for ministries that begin with a focus upon “lived experience”...pastoral theology maintains a concrete point of departure in human experience for its subsequent analysis and theological reflection.” Charles Scalise, *Bridging the Gap: Connecting What You Learned in Seminary with What You Find in the Congregation*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 58-59.

⁶⁹ Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, (London: SCM Press, 2005), 160.

secular feminists who ardently battled to decry, affirm, and complexify women's potential for sexual pleasure and power in sex as it is currently constructed.

Thus, the path to critically analyzing the inclusion of sexual pleasure and its qualifications into contemporary Christian sexual ethics can best be described as a *critical correlation of religion and culture*, or a mutually critical dialogue between historical and contemporary theological resources (including pastoral theology), psychodynamic psychological theory, and the critical scholarship of contemporary figures who focus specifically on the role of sexual pleasure in the construction of discourses on sexuality, the ongoing oppression of women and sexual minorities, and the liberation of women and sexual minorities. Insofar as this method relates to the whole of the pastoral theological enterprise, I concur with Miller-McLemore, who asserts, "...the critical correlation of religion and culture [is] an essential component of an adequate...pastoral theology."⁷⁰

More pointedly, this is a dissertation in feminist pastoral theology. It exemplifies a "topical reconstruction," in which the aforementioned disciplines are applied to sexual pleasure, critiqued, and reformulated.⁷¹ Miller-McLemore explains that the hallmarks of such a project include a pastoral theological method that incorporates critical use of psychological and cultural resources, power analysis, explicit feminist positioning, pastoral or transformative intentions, and a cultural-political version of the revised correlational method. The first four aspects of this approach are what distinguish the fifth.

⁷⁰ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "The Subject and Practice of Pastoral Theology as a Practical Theological Discipline: Pushing Past the Nagging Identity Crisis to the Poetics of Resistance," in *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theology in Context*, edited by Riet Bons-Storm & Denise Ackermann, (Louvain: Peeters, 1998), 179.

⁷¹ Miller-McLemore, "Shaping the Future of Religion and Psychology: Feminist Transformations in Pastoral Theology," 188.

These four aspects also distinguish this feminist approach from Tillich's, Tracy's, and Browning's correlational approaches.

In my approach to sexual pleasure, I critique psychology and touch on other discourses from history, sociology, philosophy, and science. My approach to historical, feminist, and queer theology is critical. Power analysis and attention to power is a key aspect of my project, as is advocacy for and exploration of the experiences of women, ethnically different individuals, and queer persons, as well as those oppressed at the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and class. The final aspect of a feminist pastoral theological topical reconstruction – empowerment and transformation through concrete pastoral practices – is a goal toward which this dissertation gestures in its conclusions, pointing the way toward the cultivation of practical sexual wisdom.

Lastly, I want to note that this dissertation is a theoretical project and, as such, I have not undertaken any empirical work from which to draw observations and reflections. However, as a caregiver, I have a wealth of experience working with individuals, couples, and families. They are the inspiration for this research. Thus, throughout the dissertation I briefly attend to some of my experience in the clinical context. I do not use names and markers as to the identities of these persons have been removed or thoroughly altered so as to preserve their privacy and my commitment to confidentiality.

Mapping the Journey Ahead

The process of mutual correlation between pastoral theology, the Christian tradition, modern psychology and cultural resources, feminist theology, and

contemporary Christian sexual ethics is evident in the flow of the dissertation, which is organized into six chapters. **Chapter One** assesses the problematic lack of reflection on human sexual experience in pastoral theology. It identifies and analyzes the scant scholarship available and concludes with a substantial critique of the missed opportunities in recent pastoral theological attempts to redeem sexual pleasure. Unsatisfied with these efforts, I am compelled to undertake the task myself and begin by looking back at the inherited Christian tradition to understand the magnitude of the historical legacy with respect to sexual pleasure.

Chapter Two assesses the negative view of sexual pleasure in the Christian tradition. It revisits Augustine of Hippo's interpretation of sexual pleasure and the theology he constructs around it. The remainder of the chapter examines the work of Thomas Aquinas and the Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin, formative figures in the Catholic and Protestant traditions, respectively, with regards to sexual ethics. Although there are nuances in their arguments, pleasure in sexual experience remains highly problematic for all of these well-known theologians. Confident that the theological legacy with respect to sexual pleasure is negative, I turn to consider some modern discourses that have also influenced this contentious dimension of sex.

In **Chapter Three**, I consider influential modern discourses that profoundly shaped, reinforced, or changed cultural perspectives on the role of sexuality and sexual pleasure. Psychoanalysis, especially Sigmund Freud's libido theory, left a lasting mark on how Westerners understand sexual desire and sexual pleasure. Philosopher Michel Foucault, however, reinterpreted Freud's example of a 'science of sexuality.' Foucault argued that the concept of sexuality was actually historically and socially constructed into

discourse that claimed that deeper knowledge about the self could be extracted from sexual pleasures. Foucault's assertions became a cornerstone of sexual liberation, influencing feminists who questioned the role of sexual practices and pleasures in women's oppression. Feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin attempted to understand the erotic appeal of dominant and submissive roles in sex, while others fiercely debated the role of sexual pleasure in women's oppression and liberation.

I maintain that it is hard to grasp the contemporary situation with respect to sexuality without considering the influences of both Freud and Foucault. But I also argue that the critiques of feminists – particularly those engaged in the 'sex wars' of the 1980s – are invaluable for understanding the complex nature of and potentials for sexual pleasure. One would expect to see their influence on contemporary theological scholarship, especially feminist theology pertaining to sexual ethics.

I bring this expectation to **Chapter Four**, in which I choose to explore the promising contributions of feminist *eros* theologies. After giving limited attention to *eros*' philosophical and theological legacy, as well as secular feminists' influence, I focus most intently on Carter Heyward's appropriation of the erotic, the only project that considers sexual pleasure. While she is overwhelmingly affirming of pleasure as part and parcel of erotic love, Heyward is extremely critical of our proclivities to be sexually aroused and pleased by the tensions generated by relinquishing power or asserting power over another. She argues that the tensions between dominating and submitting must be eliminated, and mutuality must be eroticized. Articulating a reality for which she offers no viable escape, Heyward opens feminist *eros* theology up to critique. Criticism,

however, has not stopped the appropriation of feminist *eros* theology by contemporary Christian sexual ethics.

Chapter Five analyzes the inclusion of sexual pleasure into contemporary Christian sexual ethics. Pointing to the foundational work of James Nelson and Heyward, I identify three repeated themes that capture the theological prerequisites, the necessary qualifications, and the larger sociopolitical aims for including sexual pleasure in Christian sexual ethics: embodiment, mutuality, and justice. I demonstrate support for these themes in feminist, womanist, and queer theological scholarship. However, I use these same bodies of work to show points of departure from these themes, uncritical accommodations of feminist *eros*, and the deeply personal nature of sexual pleasure and the meanings attributed to it.

In sum, my critique argues that including something as subjective and protean in meaning as sexual pleasure demands complexification. Christian sexual ethics must be wise to how the discourse it produces related to sexual pleasure participates in the production of a sexual regime that normalizes some pleasures and practices and marginalizes others.

Significance

This project is significant because it makes important contributions to the fields of pastoral theology and Christian sexual ethics and highlights the importance of and need for theological discourse on this issue in the broader public. First, it recognizes *both* theology's contribution to the current state of affairs with respect to sexual pleasure (negative and convoluted) and its potential to offer a fuller, more informed, theologically

grounded understanding of sexual experience that is conversant with our current cultural context. In other words, my scholarship demonstrates that the theological discourse that has flowed from the study of religious doctrine and practice is accountable for shaping cultural understandings of sexual pleasure. I simultaneously empower this same enterprise, in a mutual, critical dialogue with the social sciences, to contribute pastoral theology that connects with how Christians today are experiencing and interpreting their own lived sexual experience.

Those in pastoral leadership cannot ignore the presence and importance of sex to their congregants, regardless of age, and are in need of theoretical and practical tools for overcoming the uncomfortable silence. This project is a first and necessary step toward providing resources, not only for supporting a positive understanding of ourselves as sexual beings, but for understanding sexual dysfunction, as well as those experiences that constitute violations of our sexual integrity in a faith context.

Second, alongside a demonstration of theology's need for cultural resources to interpret sexual pleasure, this project maintains that theological discourse on this topic has much to offer regarding how we as a culture make meaning out of our sexual experiences. Firmly holding that this discourse has something to offer the community beyond the church walls, it challenges sex education models that forego or shun the reality of and desire for sexual pleasure in sexual experience and critically opposes portrayals of sexual pleasure that discriminate, oppress, or romanticize the complexity of sexual relationships and experience.

Consequently, the project makes pastoral theological reflection on this topic incredibly relevant to the psychological and physical sexual health of the broader

community. A more complex understanding of sexual pleasure lends itself to *comprehensive*, age-appropriate sex education that incorporates positive understandings of bodies and sexual pleasure, alongside risk, while critically engaging popular, seemingly positive images of pleasure that might support abuse and discrimination.

Finally, probing the past and present theological discourse on sexual pleasure, particularly the pervasive silence and fear so prevalent in the life of the Church, will contribute to a deeper understanding of pertinent issues related to the confluence of sexuality, religion, and politics. For example, how might an ethical prioritization of sexual pleasure in Christian sexual ethics serve to support the celebration of all sexual orientations, gay marriage, and the inclusion of gay and lesbian individuals in positions of pastoral leadership? How might certain qualifications or expectations exacerbate the stigma of some sexual communities? In other words, this project has the potential to illuminate the connections between the fears and reservations surrounding embracing sexual pleasure insofar as it leads to the full inclusion and celebration of a variety of sexual pleasures in a faith context and beyond. As a result, it will contribute to the ongoing discourse regarding sexuality in religious communities and our political context.

In conclusion, a complexified understanding of sexual pleasure, attained via a critical correlational method that puts theology into a dialogue with a variety of disciplines (sociology, psychology, philosophy, and women's studies), interprets the gap between academic Christian sexual ethics and the complexities and tribulations of actual sexual decision-making and meaning-making in sexual experience for people in communities of faith and beyond. As a pastoral theological enterprise in aim and method, its conclusions lay the groundwork for practical suggestions for leadership, caregivers,

and educators aiding communities and individuals to transform sex education, combat sexual injustices, and improve how people of faith cultivate sexual wisdom. In the service of the community of faith, pastoral theology has a responsibility to attend to how sexual pleasure has been understood and misunderstood in contemporary culture and Christian theology, to discover how it might be reclaimed in a more responsible and complex fashion, and to offer, in time, its own pastoral response. Understanding the cultural and theological hopes and tensions surrounding sexual pleasure is a necessary first step and is itself an original contribution to our field.

On a last note, before hopes for this work become too inflated, it will be helpful for me to clarify some of its limitations. First, all interpretation, analysis, and response is limited by my own social location as a middle-class, educated, straight, 30-something, white female, born and raised in the northeastern United States. I make assumptions based on the particulars of my own experience, and I welcome feedback, correction, and illumination. Second, the cultural context of my analysis in this work is Western culture, specifically the contemporary U.S. I am not aiming to generalize my critique to other contexts where sexual pleasure is more or less freely or critically addressed. Third, this project concerns Christian theology, both the legacy of the historical Christian Church and the potential for contemporary theological scholarship to make positive contributions toward a better understanding of sexual pleasure. Recognizing that other faith traditions have addressed sexuality in positive ways, the dissertation does not attempt an understanding of sexual pleasure across religious traditions.

CHAPTER ONE

CURIOUS ABSTENTIONS: THE LACUNA IN PASTORAL THEOLOGY

I previously mentioned that my clinical work greatly influenced and motivated my interest in theological interpretations of sexual pleasure. As a pastoral counselor with training in marriage and family therapy, I regularly worked with Christian and non-Christian individuals distressed by self-identified “sexual struggles and issues,” including sexual dysfunction, sexless relationships, sexual addiction, sexual guilt, sexual infidelity, sexual identity confusion, and sexual abuse. In my search for guidance, I immediately turned to the texts in my discipline, pastoral theology, within which I discovered a paucity of reflection on human sexual experience, much less sexual pleasure.

While sexual abuse has been an acknowledged concern for pastoral theologians and caregivers, reflection on the meaning of sexual experience, especially as a gateway to better understanding human needs, motivations, healing, and flourishing, is sorely lacking. This void regarding reflection on sex is problematic for pastoral theology because lived human experience is *the* key resource in pastoral theological method, distinguishing it from other theological disciplines that focus exclusively on Scripture, doctrines, or historical texts. I was shocked to discover that pastoral theological reflection on a universal human experience like sex was so limited and outdated.

As a result, I am compelled to begin this project with a thorough investigation of what pastoral theology has and has not said regarding sex and sexual pleasure. Have pastoral theologians avoided the topic, mirroring the silence on sexual matters in some

faith communities? How have pastoral theologians responded to the Christian community and to secular culture, given revelations about human sexual activity over the course of the twentieth century? What have been the most recent attempts in the field to understand sexuality and its relationship to spirituality, and why do these attempts fall short of the kind of critical reflection this project demands?

To answer these questions, I review the few resources in pastoral theology that attempt to reflect on sexual experience. I begin with the pastoral care movement's response to the Kinsey Reports in the 1950s, in which Seward Hiltner, a formative figure in pastoral theology, led an attempt to quell the Christian moral backlash to Alfred Kinsey's findings. Next, as the field reconsidered its focus on the individual in a therapeutic context, Don Browning peripherally attended to sexuality in his attempt to marshal a return to ethical commitments in pastoral care. Guided by five levels of practical moral reasoning, his case studies parsed out the conflicts and priorities that applied to sexual behavior. Up until this point – the mid 1980s – pastoral theological responses on this front gave limited attention and priority to context and yielded fairly traditional conclusions.

The second half of this chapter recognizes the shift in paradigms in pastoral theology from an individualistic, therapeutic focus to a communal, contextualized approach to giving care and constructing pastoral theology. It probes and critiques the limited scholarship since the early nineties that addresses sex. This includes short pieces by reputable pastoral theologians Edward Wimberly, Carrie Doehring, and Joretta Marshall, who all drew heavily on prevalent themes in Christian sexual ethics to explore the relationship between sexuality and spirituality for African Americans, women, and

gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, respectively. My assessment also evaluates book-length attempts by Andrew and Judith Lester and by Raymond Lawrence to pointedly address sexual pleasure within a theological framework.

The Pastoral Care Movement Responds to the Kinsey Reports

In the history of the pastoral care movement and the emergence of the academic discipline of pastoral theology, attention to sexuality did not accrue serious interest until the 1950s, following the publications of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948 and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953. Kinsey, a professor of zoology and a Harvard-trained scientist, gathered detailed data from more than 5,000 men and more than 6,000 women regarding the details of their sexual behavior. His goal was to generate a reasonably representative sample of the U.S. population with respect to sexual life histories, providing reliable research-based data from which individuals and society could make informed decisions about sexual behavior.⁷²

Kinsey's conclusions, which revealed the prevalence of premarital sex, extramarital sex, and homosexual experiences in the general population, generated a slew of negative responses, especially from church leaders. "Some members of the clergy declared that [Kinsey] was doing the devil's work," explains June Reinisch, a former director of The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction.⁷³ Some faith leaders responded to the revelations about the secret sex lives of Americans by

⁷² Paul H. Gebhard and Alan B. Johnson, *The Kinsey Data: Marginal Tabulations of the 1938-1963 Interviews Conducted by the Institute for Sex Research*, (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Company, 1979), 1; June M. Reinisch, *The Kinsey Institute New Report On Sex: What You Must Know to be Sexually Literate*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), xvi. Kinsey, along with Clyde Martin, Wardell Pomeroy, and Paul Gebhard were all original directors of the non-profit Institute for Sex Research, established in 1947, affiliated with Indiana University. Kinsey died in 1956 and did not live to see the full impact of his labor. Gebhard and Johnson, 2.

⁷³ Reinisch, xviii.

reinforcing a strict moralism in their congregations. Pastoral theologian James Poling hypothesizes that the pastoral care movement took this opportunity to reflect on sexuality as a way of challenging the Church's narrow moralism. Scholar-practitioners focused on the suffering being generated by the *gap* between actual sexual behaviors (per Kinsey's results) and the Church's ethical positions on sexual matters.⁷⁴

In 1953, two texts emerged in the fields of pastoral theology and pastoral psychology. Seward Hiltner, one of the founding fathers of pastoral theology in modern America, authored *Sex Ethics and The Kinsey Reports*. The other text, a compilation of articles published in the journal *Pastoral Psychology* on the theme "Sex and the Church," was edited by Simon Doniger and titled *Sex and Religion Today*. In the preface of the latter book, Doniger credits Hiltner, the journal's "Pastoral Consultant," with encouraging the special issue on the theme of sex and the Church. The volume also includes an essay by Hiltner titled "Sex – Sin or Salvation?" Lastly, Hiltner reiterates many of his main points from *Sex Ethics and The Kinsey Reports* in a smaller, more concise text, *Sex and the Christian Life*, published in 1957. Taken together, Hiltner's extended attention to sex in these works signaled a response by a leading figure in the pastoral care movement to the turmoil generated by the Kinsey Reports.⁷⁵

In *Sex Ethics and The Kinsey Reports*, Hiltner takes full responsibility for his reflections and, in the preface, acknowledges his personal acquaintance with Kinsey by thanking Kinsey for the extended correspondence that contributed to the book's content. From the start, Hiltner approaches the Kinsey Reports from a theological middle ground, explaining that to those on the "right" his Christian view on sex will appear radical, while

⁷⁴ Poling, 117.

⁷⁵ All of these pieces preceded Hiltner's well-known and formative disciplinary text, *Preface to Pastoral Theology*. See Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958).

those on the “left” will be disappointed to find that his position does not relegate sex to the individual, private realm.⁷⁶ Hiltner’s method of putting Kinsey’s research, as well as psychoanalysis, in conversation with the biblical text and Christian history, produces a response he hopes will diminish the increased anxiety around sex in faith communities. Complexifying simple moral injunctions related to sexual behavior, Hiltner attempts to debunk Kinsey’s findings that the role of sex in the Christian life is best captured by a “reproductive” imperative. Hiltner does not deny that the Christians in Kinsey’s studies reported such a relationship between sex and their faith; his contention, however, is that this view runs counter to both the biblical message and Christian history.⁷⁷ Sex, he asserts, has more meaning than simply a method for reproduction.

Across his writings, Hiltner also rejects the position that sex and the body are inferior or dirty, advocating for a “total spirit [that] includes acceptance of his [sic] sexuality and a right use of it.”⁷⁸ He maintains a biblical view of sex as a mystery and a gift from God – one that “always points beyond itself...toward the revelation of our nature as total personal spirit.”⁷⁹ Thus, he encourages the idea of an integrated body, mind, and spirit, an important point that is elaborated on many years later by prominent theologians and Christian ethicists James Nelson, Carter Heyward, and Christine Gudorf.

In his article “Sex – Sin or Salvation,” Hiltner focuses on negating the belief that the sexual impulse is uncontrollable, akin to a flood that sweeps one along in its current. In terms of sexual ethics, he insists, “if it is to be both Christian and relevant, it must be an ethic of freedom in responsibility – and no mere legalism attempting to hold the dike

⁷⁶ Seward Hiltner, *Sex Ethics and the Kinsey Reports*, (New York: Association Press, 1953), vi.

⁷⁷ Seward Hiltner, *Sex and the Christian Life*, (New York: Association Press, 1957), 10.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 9.

⁷⁹ Hiltner, *Sex Ethics and the Kinsey Reports*, 30.

against what it really believes is a flood.”⁸⁰ Here, one sees Hiltner’s resistance to imposing a strict moralism in light of Kinsey’s discoveries. Rather, he advocates for an ethic of freedom in responsibility, which he explains amounts to the coherence of the sacramental, romantic, and companionable functions of sex. According to Hiltner, the multi-dimensional purposes of sex make it available as an aspect of the doctrine of salvation.⁸¹

Hiltner explains the theological, psychological, social, ethical, and biological dimensions of sex as follows. Insofar as it is sacramental – or symbolic – it is a mystery (theological). It is a serious business in which we discover hidden aspects of ourselves (psychological), as well as the depths of another and potentially the depths of all other persons (social). Sex also holds us to a relationship between fulfillment and responsibility (ethical) and functions to reduce tension (biological).⁸² Taken together, Hiltner’s prospective on sex here is positive, as it is both meaningful to the self and to our relationships with others. It can bring a degree of satisfaction and tension reduction to the self, as well as a degree of responsibility for our lovers and our community.

Each of the dimensions, Hiltner adds, requires both intensity and steadfastness.⁸³ A discourse on sexual pleasure emerges in the context of these qualifiers. Sexual pleasure is part of the biological, tension-reducing function of sex. Intensity in this dimension is marked by “the intense pleasure of the encounter and the orgasm,” and steadfastness manifests itself “in the form of physical fidelity to another.”⁸⁴ Thus, sexual pleasure is

⁸⁰ Hiltner, “Sex – Sin or Salvation,” in *Sex and Religion Today, Pastoral Psychology Series*, ed. Simon Doniger, (New York: Association Press, 1953), 13.

⁸¹ Ibid, 15. Hiltner is drawing here on Roland Bainton’s three types of attitude and relationship in regard to marriage and the function of sex.

⁸² Hiltner, *Sex and the Christian Life*, 82.

⁸³ Ibid, 86.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 87.

good, an important – even required – part of sexual experience. Like sex, however, it is exclusive to the relationship in which it is enjoyed. Beyond these remarks, Hiltner does not make any detailed psychological or theological interpretations of sexual pleasure. His biological or seemingly scientific understanding of pleasure as a discharge of tensions is surely informed by Freudian libido theory.

Alongside his affirmations, Hiltner reminds the faithful that human freedom continues to bind sex to an aspect of the doctrine of sin. Not all sex and its pleasures are endorsed from a Christian perspective. For example, he condemns homosexuality, sadistic and/or masochistic sexual activity, and promiscuous intercourse. Masturbation, he points out, has a developmental purpose, but should be discontinued and replaced by sexual intercourse with a married partner (further evidence of the impact of Freud's theory of the stages of psychosexual development). Extramarital sexual relationships are problematic too, but he warns against judgment before obtaining full knowledge of the couple's potentially complicated context. According to Hiltner, the problematic nature of affairs is evident in the injury incurred by partners and children, not in marriage as a social institution.⁸⁵ In other words, affairs are bad because they harm spouses and children; they do not signal a fundamental problem with the institution of marriage.

With regards to pre-marital intercourse, Hiltner's response is initially more open-minded. While he recognizes that the Christian view rejects this in principle, he sees the decision as much more complex and personal. The sacramental nature of intercourse, however, marks the sexual union as a "marriage;" Hiltner, therefore, encourages couples who are having premarital sex to make the commitment official. He assumes a traditional position on marriage, asserting that intercourse – the joining of two in one flesh –

⁸⁵ Ibid, 105.

constitutes the marital bond. Finally, he refrains from a definitive answer on forms of pre-marital petting, including heavy petting leading to orgasm, but indicates doubt that these activities are always done “for the purposes of sex-discovery in its Christian dimensions.”⁸⁶ In other words, he doubts that these activities are pursued with the intent of joining the sacramental, romantic, and companionable aspects of sexual activity. Thus, for Hiltner sexual pleasures outside of the marital covenant are questionable.

In his assessment of how the pastoral care movement was navigating the moralistic backlash of the Church in light of the Kinsey Reports, James Poling argues that Hiltner ultimately reaffirmed the place of sex and sexuality in the enhancement of marriage.⁸⁷ In my analysis, while Hiltner affirms many positive dimensions of sex according to the Christian life, including self-fulfillment and mutuality between partners, sexual play outside of coitus, and a number of goods outside of procreation, a subtle expectation and priority on marriage as the appropriate context for sex pervades his work. For example, pre-marital intercourse itself (which, by the prefix, seems to assume a forthcoming commitment) institutes a “marriage” that awaits an outward commitment before others. Sex that is not “pre-marital” is “promiscuous.” Hiltner seems to be saying that the coherence and integration of the goods of sex – intense pleasure and/or orgasm, discovery of the depths of the self, discovery of the depths of another, the integration of fulfillment and responsibility, and the deepening sense of mystery – are possible only in the context of heterosexual, married life.

Thus, Poling is correct to suggest Hiltner’s priority on marriage in the guise of “covenantal relationality,” or the idea that what matters most when it comes to sex is

⁸⁶ Ibid, 111.

⁸⁷ Poling, 119.

cultivating a capacity for love and guiding the sexual impulse in the expression and service of love.⁸⁸ But Poling also argues that Hiltner fears that gays and lesbians, as well as the promiscuity of the lower classes, will threaten the stability of the family.⁸⁹ After reviewing Hiltner's work, my reading is more nuanced. Poling's analysis and accusations of sexual injustice make Hiltner's claims appear more pointed than Hiltner actually is in his assessment and comparison of Kinsey's work and the Christian viewpoint. Hiltner does not affirm the celebration of homosexual lifestyles, and he warns against normalizing them. Also, his work is replete with Kinsey's data, which often compares the sexual activities of lower class, uneducated youth with middle and upper-class, educated youth, and demonstrates greater promiscuity and earlier ages of intercourse among the former group. I concede that Hiltner's *uncritical* reiterations of these differences, situated in the context of his priority on marriage, points one in the direction of Poling's conclusions.

Between Paradigms: Sex and the Ethical Dimensions of Pastoral Care

A significant amount of time passes – thirty years – before sexuality is addressed again in the context of pastoral theology and care. This is mind-blowing, considering the sexual revolution that was occurring in the West between the 1960s to the 1980s, including the second wave of the women's liberation movement and the gay liberation movement. During this time period, rates of sex outside of heterosexual, monogamous marriage increased, the FDA approved the birth control pill, homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic Statistic Manual (DSM), and abortion was legalized. Still, pastoral

⁸⁸ Ibid. Poling's understanding and use of covenantal relationality seems to come from Carroll A. Wise's chapter, "Pastoral Problems of Sex," in Doniger's *Sex and Religion Today*, pages 164-165.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

theological reflection on sex was muted. Finally in 1983, Professor of Religion and Psychological Studies at The Divinity School at University of Chicago, Don S. Browning, considered sexuality in the form of case studies while promoting the relationship between pastoral care and ethics. Though Browning's main concern was to explicate a method and argue for its use in pastoral caregiving, one can access his interpretation of sexual pleasure through application of his method.

In *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*, Browning argues that moral reflection and ethical guidance had been sorely neglected in pastoral care.⁹⁰ Recall, for example, Hiltner's opposition to the increase in legalism with regard to sex in churches after the publications of Kinsey's reports. Moral guidance was not part of Hiltner's initial approach to pastoral theology, and in *Preface to Pastoral Theology*, he actually separates moral theology from pastoral theology. Instead, he adds moral theology to the 'logic-centered' disciplines along with biblical, systematic, and historical theology.⁹¹ Since moral guidance was not a function of pastoral theology, the ethical dimensions of care did not come to the fore until Browning's *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*.

Browning is sensitive to what he interprets as a cultural malaise or a growing amorality in pastoral care, fostered by a cultural context that focused on the individual and a market-driven economy. His solution to this deficit was to marshal a return to

⁹⁰ Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*, 16-17.

⁹¹ Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology*, 20-29. The discipline of pastoral theology emerged in the heyday of modern psychology, particularly during the height of the third-force in psychology – humanistic psychology – heavily influenced by Carl Rogers. Pastoral caregivers and counselors found psychological theory and technique to be helpful for understanding the human condition and the movement toward health. Psychology became part of pastoral reflection and practice. Though Hiltner maintained skeptical eyes with respect to psychology and, according to historian Brooks Holifield, later questioned the impact of his enthusiasm for psychology on pastoral care, caregiving from his perspective had a Rogerian flavor. Rogers suggested that the prohibitions and norms of society limited self-realization, and, thus, resisted any kind of theory or practice that imposed upon the burdened self.

practical moral reasoning on the part of the caregiver.⁹² Practical moral reasoning involves the critical correlation of the Christian tradition and the human condition as understood by philosophy and/or psychology, bringing all discourses into a dialogue via five levels of practical moral reasoning. These levels include 1) the metaphorical (what is our vision of the ultimate concern, or the way the world is?), 2) the obligational (how shall we live?), 3) the tendency-need (what are our motivations and needs?), 4) the environmental/contextual (what is our context?), and 5) the rule-role (what are the guidelines for achieving the above levels?).⁹³ After explaining these five levels, Browning applies them to two case studies, both grappling with the theological legitimacy of homosexuality.⁹⁴ As he applies the five levels to the “dilemma,” we are able to see how sexual pleasure and intimacy factor into his system of moral reasoning.

The application of Browning’s method to the sexuality case studies reveals multiple flaws in his approach to practical moral reasoning. Thus, my analysis simultaneously critiques his method and his unhelpful contributions to pastoral theology’s attention to sex and pleasure. First, while Browning engages culture and context and identifies the human situation as the entry point for moral reasoning, context ultimately fails to retain the import and the creative and transformative possibilities that more contemporary sources in pastoral care acknowledge and defend. For Browning, a priority on context (level four) restricts theology (level one). Because of this hierarchical configuration, positioning contextual analysis at the fourth level of reflection

⁹² Practical moral reasoning is otherwise known as moral theology in a Catholic context, theological ethics in a Protestant context, and philosophical ethics in a philosophical context.

⁹³ Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*, 54-55.

⁹⁴ One study deals with a “homosexual” individual, “The Case of Arthur Strand.” In the other, Browning analyzes three studies on the subject of homosexuality conducted by mainline Protestant denominations in the United States. *Ibid*, 76-86.

subordinates it to the visional, obligational, and tendency-need levels of reasoning. In addition, the hierarchy only permits unidirectional change. Thus, differences, changes, and even inequalities at the third and fourth levels *do not change* analysis at the first and second levels. In other words, context does not change our view of the ultimate/God, our notions of the way the world is, or God's principles – the core of how we should live. Similarly, conflicts at lower levels – the tendency-need level, for example – are settled by the priorities determined at level one.

The hierarchical, unidirectional nature of Browning's approach opposes any liberation perspective that takes the position that care *must* start with the experience and context of the least of these.⁹⁵ His neglect of the transformative and creative power of context to shape theology (level one) meets resistance from marginal voices that insist on the redemptive power of context (level four). For example, womanist Jacquelyn Grant, in *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, claims a black Jesus in her vision of the ultimate one who suffers with the oppressed and struggles alongside the black community in its quest for liberation.⁹⁶ Pastoral theologian Joretta Marshall, in *Counseling Lesbian Partners*, argues that one cannot do pastoral care with lesbians and emerge with a pastoral theology that does not imagine God in a different, transformed way.⁹⁷ She suggests that counseling lesbians has much to teach practitioners about sexuality and God's understanding of right relationships characterized by a covenant of mutuality, love, and justice.

⁹⁵ Browning fundamentally disagrees with liberation theologian Juan Segundo on this front, arguing against any precondition to reflection, care, or the construction of theology. This includes the option for the poor and preference for liberation of the oppressed, both emphasized by Segundo in his text *The Liberation of Theology* (1976).

⁹⁶ See Jacquelyn Grant, *White Woman's Christ, Black Woman's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1989).

⁹⁷ See Joretta Marshall, *Counseling Lesbian Partners*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

This devaluation of context runs counter to other contemporary feminist and womanist resources in pastoral care, which argue that patriarchal and racist images of the ultimate (level one) have been detrimental to the lives of women and black individuals (the context at level four). In fact, this critique was so powerful that a number of these scholars championed a paradigmatic shift in the field – a shift from a therapeutic paradigm, focused on the individual, healing, and clergy as caregivers, to a communal-contextual paradigm, centered on the community, context, liberation, and the congregation as caregiver.⁹⁸ Nancy Ramsay points out that context and its analysis via sociology, gender studies, politics, etc. have moved to center stage in pastoral care today. Bonnie Miller-McLemore asserts that pastoral care begins with and responds to the experience of life in all of its complex and messy contexts. Why? Christie Neuger argues that context reveals difference as well as imbalances of power, two crucial considerations for pastoral theological reflection and response.⁹⁹ For example, Carroll Watkins Ali insists that all pastoral theology for African Americans begins with the context of poor black women.¹⁰⁰ Taken together, pastoral care and theology now acknowledge that some contexts can be the source of suffering (racist, sexist, heterosexist, etc.), while others provide resources for healing.

The limitations of context and the hierarchical nature of Browning's levels of moral reasoning affect his understanding of sexuality, sex, and sexual pleasure. In applying his rubric to the case studies on homosexuality, his analysis at level four

⁹⁸ See *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. Nancy J. Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

⁹⁹ Christie Cozad Neuger, "Power and Difference in Pastoral Theology," in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. Nancy J. Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 65-85.

¹⁰⁰ See Carroll A. Watkins Ali, *Survival and Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African American Context*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999).

(context) indicates that heterosexism abounds and that communities of faith tend to shun homosexuals. Here, he correctly identifies a degree of suffering for these individuals. In fact, after thirty additional years, this suffering still pervades our cultural context and is part of how some conceive of the crisis of sexuality in the Church.

Per Browning's method, additional analysis of same-sex attraction at level three (tendency-needs) suggests that all human beings need love, touch, and various levels of intimacy. Humans also need to reproduce to keep the species alive and well. Here, Browning affirms human needs for physical and emotional pleasures in relationship with others, as well as the need for reproduction to perpetuate life. Up until this point, analysis at both of these levels bodes well for affirming sex and pleasure as part of moral reasoning.

The needs of the "homosexual," however, generate a conflict at the third level of analysis. Their need for intimacy, pleasure, and companionship are justified, but their inability to reproduce is problematic.¹⁰¹ When Browning jumps to an analysis at level one (the way the world is) and interprets the theological metaphor of God the Creator, he concludes that God shows *preference* for the good creation and potential for fruitfulness and multiplication.¹⁰² This dimension of level one shapes the priority of needs at level three – reproduction carries greater import than our need for physical and emotional pleasures.

So, Browning's method ultimately shows a preference for heterosexual sexuality, best arranged in monogamous marriage to preserve the species and ensure the proper rearing of children. Although he validates everyone's need for sexual intimacy and

¹⁰¹ Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*, 91-93.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

pleasure and argues that churches should welcome homosexuals, he maintains that ethical reflection *does not support* the lifestyle. Thus, in my analysis, Browning supports a very limited and traditional definition of sexuality, one that is bound to procreation – a limit that restricts individuals of all sexual orientations, subordinates sexual pleasure, and easily leads to a sexual ethic that focuses on acts as opposed to the nature of the sexual relationship.

Posing as open but clearly not affirming, Browning's conclusion in the case studies colludes with heterosexism. Interestingly, in his transition from theoretical moral reasoning to pastoral practice, Browning falters when trying to explicate the appropriate pastoral response in the case study dealing with a homosexual careseeker. While he concludes that a homosexual lifestyle is not in accord with our ethical obligations to our neighbors and ourselves, he stops short of suggesting that the caregiver subject the careseeker to these claims. *He ironically asserts that it is not the job of the caregiver to moralize.* Instead, the caregiver “opens the way,” or shows the way ahead, and facilitates a transition when the careseeker is ready.¹⁰³ Is Browning indicating that at the moments of pastoral response, the caregiver finds herself supporting the homosexual lifestyle insofar as the careseeker appears to be moving toward a heterosexual orientation? His highly theoretical reasoning breaks down when it touches practical ground. Not only does this keep his pastoral “care” rather academic and impractical, but it also suggests that caregivers *impose* meaning on human experience where it should be made.

To be sure, Browning brought with him many positive contributions to the discipline of pastoral theology, including the revised critical correlational method, attention to ethics, and a critique of psychology that revealed its religious function in

¹⁰³ Ibid, 119.

providing normative horizons for care and human fulfillment. He even suggested that moral reflection could be undertaken by congregations, pointing the way to communal dimensions of care. Still, while he was open to a number of the critiques made by more contemporary scholars in the field, he maintained his stance on sexuality and continued to publicly support the traditional family via his staunch support of heterosexual marriage.

For example, in 2004, Browning co-authored an opinion piece with Elizabeth Marquardt in *The New York Times* entitled “A Marriage Made in History?” In it, they question the dearth of sociological data supporting the health of children reared by same-sex parents and argue that marriage has both a religious and profoundly secular history “as a way to help society regulate and achieve a complex set of desires and goals: sexual activity, procreation, mutual help and affection, and parental care and accountability.”¹⁰⁴ They claim the natural fitness of heterosexual parents over sex-same parents and prioritize reproduction and rearing offspring as the foundational basis or ethical dimension of coupling. They also implicate marriage as a form of regulation and help in sexual activity and mutual affection.

In sum, Browning is more of a champion of heterosexual marriage, based on a procreative ethic, than a supporter of sexual pleasure in its own right. As demonstrated above, this likely reflects his hierarchical method of moral reasoning according to which needs like pleasure, as well as suffering in a given context, are superseded by needs that have timeless, resolute theological precedence.

¹⁰⁴ Don S. Browning and Elizabeth Marquardt, “A Marriage Made In History,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/09/opinion/a-marriage-made-in-history.html>, (accessed on June 2, 2011).

Sex and Context: Contributions of the New Paradigm

Hiltner was a foundational figure in the therapeutic shape of the pastoral care movement, while Browning represented a transitional figure in pastoral theology's shift from a therapeutic paradigm to the current communal-contextual paradigm.¹⁰⁵ Inspired by feminist, womanist, and queer voices, the communal-contextual paradigm emphasizes liberation from domination, drawing attention to populations that suffer unjustly from racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, etc. Pastoral theologians reflect on pastoral care's functions, which now include nurturing, empowering, resisting, liberating, justice-making and ecological concern, in addition to healing, guiding, sustaining, and reconciling.¹⁰⁶ Pastoral theological reflection ultimately makes contributions to the life of faith and charges congregations, including lay members, with pursuing advocacy and political action in addition to caregiving. Thus, the goals of pastoral theology and practice extend beyond the walls of the church.¹⁰⁷ In the communal-contextual model, the audience is broader (speaking to church, society, and the academy) and the focus more particular (centered on context and diversity) than Hiltner ever envisioned.

Curiously, after Browning's *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* and the eventual paradigmatic shift in the field, pastoral theological reflection on sexual experience by self-identified, contemporary, pastoral theologians is scant at best. In 1994, the *Journal of*

¹⁰⁵ The theoretical posture of the clinical or therapeutic paradigm in pastoral care and theology was characterized by an empathetic, accepting stance on the part of the care giver, a focus the inner conflict of the individual, and a guiding stance that held that one possessed his or her own answers to the deep questions and concern that were cause for internal conflict.

¹⁰⁶ See W. A. Clebsch and C. R. Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964); Larry Kent Graham, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds: A Psychosystems Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992); Miller-McLemore, "Feminist Transformations in Pastoral Theology," 194-195; Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 2nd ed., (New York: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2003).

¹⁰⁷ See Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "Pastoral Theology as Public Theology: Revolutions in the 'Fourth Area'," in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. Nancy J. Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 45-64.

Pastoral Theology (JPT) published a number of articles from the 1993 annual meeting of the Society of Pastoral Theology (SPT). The theme was timely, as scholars in Christian sexual ethics were making significant headway in the early nineties. The theme of the conference was “Sexuality and Spirituality,” and the subsequent journal issue included articles by African-American pastoral theologians Anne and Edward Wimberly, feminist pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring, and lesbian pastoral theologian Joretta Marshall.

Each scholar brought his or her own special interests to the proposed topic; none, however, had expertise in sexuality or continued writing on the topic after the conference and publication of the journal. In addition, none of the articles focused specifically on sexual pleasure, obviously another disappointment for my research. A few touched on important themes related to sexual pleasure – themes that were addressed in great depth by Christian ethicists and feminist and womanist theologians, including James Nelson, Jacqueline Grant, Carter Heyward, and Rita Nakashima Brock.

Both Anne’s and Edward Wimberly’s articles attend to African-American experience, but only E. Wimberly’s essay addresses the holistic, embodied African-American understanding of sexuality and oneness with the body’s rhythms and desires. He asserts that an African-American worldview holds spirituality and sexuality together as part of community and all of life.¹⁰⁸ Wimberly also points to the “massive condemnation of African American sexuality that has been expressed in racism,” and the defamation of black sexuality continues to be used by white culture to oppress black people.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, he implicates the connection between sexuality and racism in the

¹⁰⁸ Edward P. Wimberly, “African American Spirituality and Sexuality: Perspectives on Identity, Intimacy and Power,” in *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, (1994): 24.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 25.

sexism that is present internal to the African-American community, which sadly severs the connection between black communities and their African heritage.

Carrie Doehring's piece, "Life-giving sexual and spiritual desire," touches on feminist themes pertinent to a deeper understanding of sexual pleasure, including power and the body. According to Doehring, life-giving sexual desire resists a thirst for power over another and seeks to empower and enable, "where we respect our own and other's power, where we can each be assertive, and where, together, we can name our experiences."¹¹⁰ Whereas empowerment and sharing – as opposed to dominance and submission – define the appropriate use of power, empathy defines the appropriate stance with respect to boundaries between persons when it comes to sexual desire. She explains how an empathic, attuned posture resists sexual relating characterized by disengagement or its opposite, merger or over-involvement.

Thus, according to Doehring, sexual desire that is mutually empowering and empathetic creates life-giving dynamics. Her work draws heavily on James Nelson's use of *divine Eros* and Audre Lorde's concept of "the erotic" to define this "passion for connection" or "empowering life force."¹¹¹ Doehring also collapses the divide between body and spirit and, once again, draws on Nelson to identify bodily experiences as a source of revelation. Lastly, she incorporates theologian Paul Tillich's renderings of desire as an "essentially good longing for communion" and references this emphasis in feminist *eros* theologies.¹¹² A reader familiar with theological scholarship that reclaims the erotic recognizes that none of Doehring's reiterations here are new. Her attention to

¹¹⁰ Carrie Doehring, "Life-giving Sexual and Spiritual Desire," in *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, (1994): 51.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 52.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 53. Doehring points the reader to feminist *eros* theologians Carter Heyward's and Rita Nakashima Brock's works.

sex repeats feminist theological arguments regarding power and familiar tropes regarding the erotic, both without any substantial critical analysis.

Furthermore, Doehring's overarching concerns, guided by her feminist commitments, are power dynamics and relational boundaries, which she seemingly applies to sexual desire and sexual relationships. Unfortunately, she makes this application without any critical analysis as to how or why sexual relationships, especially when it comes to sexual pleasure, complicate our understanding of power dynamics and relational boundaries.¹¹³ She also misses the opportunity to critically address female sexual pleasure and its impact on spirituality. Again, this is disappointing given the amount of information available that statistically demonstrates lower rates of orgasm for women (versus men) generally, lower rates of orgasm with intercourse for women (versus men), as well as the realities of anorgasmia (failure to have an orgasm), dyspareunia (painful intercourse), and vaginismus (painful or impossible vaginal penetration).

As a pastoral theologian, Doehring turns to the psychological sciences, specifically object relations theory (ORT), to speculate about the influence of the intrapsychic world on sexual desire. She astutely recognizes that early experiences of primary caregivers come to shape our desires and that sexual desire may be bound up with feelings of dependency, hostility, and fragility.¹¹⁴ This is an excellent point – one

¹¹³ In the endnotes to her article, we learn that the ideas presented in Doehring's paper are elaborated more fully in a soon to be published text, *Healing? Or Abuse?: Relational Boundaries and Power Dynamics in Pastoral Care and Counseling Relationships*. In 1995, she published retitled text as *Taking Care: Monitoring Power Dynamics and Relational Boundaries in Pastoral Care and Counseling*. It focuses on ethical issues in pastoral care and counseling.

¹¹⁴ Doehring, 57.

that she could use to raise critical questions about the malleability of sexual arousal and the nature of activities that generate sexual pleasure.

Again, Doehring unfortunately stops short of indulging the complexity of sexual desires and pleasures when, for example, such stimulation is intertwined with the need to dominate or submit. Understandably, taking this step creates a tension for feminists, who are sensitive to power dynamics that harm women *and* who want to see women empowered sexually. I would be more appreciative if Doehring had named this tension. As a result, the implication in her article is, as I understand it, that some sexual activities, although they may provide an abundance of sexual pleasure, are neither properly erotic nor spiritual. Once again, activities in which stimulation and pleasure are intertwined with the need to dominate or submit come to mind.

Finally, Joretta Marshall, in “Pastoral Theology and Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Experiences,” insists that gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals have gifts to offer pastoral theology when it comes to understanding the relationship between sexuality and spirituality. They claim an intimate connection between spirituality and sexuality, one that moves beyond the individual toward the communal embodiment of these dimensions of personhood.¹¹⁵ Those in the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community also insist on continuing to analyze power dynamics and address the ways that power can be used in positive and negative ways with respect to sexual orientation. Marshall advocates for communal empowerment and encouraging mutual relationships as a way to transform institutions into gracious and just communities.¹¹⁶ Lastly, she points to the need to name institutional heterosexism, or ways in which institutions like the Church and the academy

¹¹⁵ Joretta Marshall, “Pastoral Theology and Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Experiences,” in *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, (1994): 74.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 76.

silence, ignore, or deny lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons' opportunities to "participate in complete and whole ways."¹¹⁷ To this last point, she indicates the desires of some in the queer community for family, children, ordination, and a spiritual community.

Marshall's article is not directly about lesbian, gay, or bisexual sexual experience or pleasure and its spiritual dimensions; rather she argues that *sexual justice* should be a top priority for spiritual communities and faith institutions. This theme – sexual justice writ large – was also common in scholarship in Christian sexual ethics at the time. Marshall, too, draws on Nelson, as well as lesbian-feminist theologians Heyward and Mary Hunt, to support the need for Christian sexual ethics to focus on sexual justice. The thrust of her piece is that sexuality concerns *more* than the individual; it concerns the community. I would add that recognizing and affirming same-sex desire and pleasure, in addition to proclaiming a Christian view of sex that prioritizes pleasure over procreation, undergird attention to sexual justice. In other words, theologically affirming *all sexual pleasure* – not just sexual pleasure in married sex – is part of the larger goal of sexual justice for the queer community.

Since the 1994 publication of the *Journal of Pastoral Theology* the field remained relatively silent on the meaning of sexual experience and its contributions to better understanding human needs and motivations, as well as healing and flourishing. Why? A colleague of mine, after reading the aforementioned section on Marshall's piece, wondered if Marshall's challenge to name *institutional heterosexism* could be applied to pastoral theology's neglect of sex.¹¹⁸ In other words, like other institutions in the Church and the academy, perhaps the discipline of pastoral theology has been so blinded by and

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Much thanks to my colleague, Karla Van Zee, for this insight.

compliant with compulsory heterosexuality that the complexities of “everyday” sexual lives have been taken for granted. While we have paid attention to sexual abuse, we have left unexplored other forms of sexual suffering in married intercourse and the traditional family. If we ignore that there is profound sexual suffering in the daily grind of “ideal” married, heterosexual intercourse, how can we possibly theorize about sexual suffering outside this heterogendered box? Is this not similar to the same assumption – the necessary goodness of the moral norm – that keeps the Church so silent about sex? In other words, the case is already closed.

In 1998, Andrew and Judith Lester published *It Takes Two: The Joy of Intimate Marriage*, a text written primarily for a lay audience. In it they advocate for sharing power and responsibility in partnerships and conclude with an emphasis on relational justice, which is characterized by “seeking mutuality and reciprocity rather than dominance and subordination.”¹¹⁹ The most notable limitation of the text is signaled by the subtitle, which indicates the authors’ focus on a heterosexual marriage partnership. Thus, *It Takes Two* reifies the institution of marriage as the appropriate site for intimate relating, including sexual activity. Not only does marriage in our current ecclesial and political context typically exclude same-sex partnerships (as well as other forms of partnering), but also the language and examples in the text assume a monogamous, heterosexual couple. Lester and Lester take a small step, but it is hardly radical.

In addition, Lester and Lester only include a single chapter devoted to sexual intimacy. They rightly advocate for broader notions of sexual encounter beyond coitus and broader purposes for sex beyond reproduction. They also affirm creativity and play

¹¹⁹ It is unclear in the text whether Lester and Lester are quoting Larry Graham in *Care of Persons, Care of World* or quoting themselves from an earlier chapter. Andrew D. Lester and Judith L. Lester, *It Takes Two: The Joy of Intimate Marriage*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) 191.

with erotic touch, mutual sexual pleasure as a norm, and the multitude of needs met through sexual contact – all are part of God’s gift of sexuality and each is thoroughly sacred. Aspects of their reflection on and response to sexual intimacy in a Christian context speak to a recovery of women’s sexual pleasure; however, issues related to race, class, and sexual orientation remain unexplored. The same can be said of Lester and Lester’s silence on the parameters related to creativity and play when partners move outside the realm of ‘vanilla’ sexual activities. Just as we saw in many of the official denominational statements, sexual pleasure can be affirmed, but only the safe space of heterosexual marriage. In this sense, pastoral theology affirms the same parameters for sexual pleasure as the Christian tradition.

Missed Opportunities and Further Proof

For all of pastoral theology’s neglect of sex, there is one book-length pastoral theological reflection on sexual pleasure. While the details of my project were coming to fruition, I came across the bibliographical information for a recently published text entitled *Sexual Liberation: The Scandal of Christendom* (2007). Authored by Raymond J. Lawrence, Jr., an Episcopal cleric and recently retired Director of Pastoral Care at New York Presbyterian Hospital, it focuses exclusively on how sexual pleasure has been and continues to be devalued and demonized by Christendom. As part of a series that explores the interface of religion, psychology, and spirituality, the book takes sexual pleasure as its primary subject, which, in the initial stages of my research, held promise as a valuable resource internal to my field. It contains a foreword by Don Capps, a notable pastoral theologian, as well as a chapter on Anton Boisen, a pioneering figure in

the clinical pastoral education movement. All signs indicated that this text was perhaps my most relevant and up-to-date resource. In fact, I worried that Lawrence had already addressed my research questions and concerns and that my project would lose some of the force of its originality.

After procuring the book and perusing its contents, I was disappointed (and selfishly relieved!). Surprisingly, the text is uninformed and retains a boorish patriarchal character. First, it is not academically rigorous. Like the other books in the series, it is intended for a lay reader or the undergraduate university student, as well as professional persons in the field of religion, psychology, and spirituality. The paucity of footnotes and textual support reflect this intent. However, this allows Lawrence to make numerous claims, generate hypotheses, and leverage refutations without the backing of creditable scholarship.

My textual analysis reveals that Lawrence misunderstands the theological claims of some of the scholars he critiques. Ironically, this creates errant affirmations of theology that would otherwise serve to prove parts of his overarching argument! For example, he argues that Christianity has a history of negativity toward sexual pleasure. Here, I am in agreement. However, he goes on to proclaim that Martin Luther was “unabashedly positive about sexual pleasure,” stating that when it came to sexual matters, “[Luther] was far ahead of everyone else.”¹²⁰ Lawrence even interprets the Reformation as a “sexual revolution.” A close reading of Luther’s work does not support these claims. As I will show in Chapter Two, the Reformers – particularly Luther and Calvin – did not endorse the pursuit of sexual pleasure apart from potentially reproductive, heterosexual,

¹²⁰ Raymond J. Lawrence, Jr., *Sexual Liberation: The Scandal of Christendom*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 77-78, 152.

married sexual intercourse; and even then, sexual pleasure remained a reason for shame. What Lawrence really has in regard to Luther is *more evidence* that Christianity has a history of negativity toward sexual pleasure.

The last few chapters of *Sexual Liberation* prove to be the most troubling and problematic. Here, Lawrence evaluates the “sexual disarray” of the late twentieth century. He argues that the great strides made by the “Sexual Revolution” – the liberation of women, including their ordination, and the “coming out of homosexuals” – were quickly followed by “a counterrevolution fueled by negative feelings about sexual pleasure generally, and exacerbated by radical feminism’s resentment toward men in particular.”¹²¹ For Lawrence, sexual harassment and sexualized violence policies exemplify the force of the latter. In chapter seventeen, he uses evolutionary biology to oppose these policies – policies, he argues, that stand in the way of male/female courtship rituals and unfairly target heterosexual males. He believes that sexual harassment and sexualized violence policies neglect the possibility that some women might “sometimes relish such an ‘invasion’.”¹²²

And Lawrence does not stop there. He also thinks that “righteous indignation” at adult sex with minors is “blunt and heavy-handed,”¹²³ going on to cite forms of pedophilia that are permitted in other cultures. The excessive claims of the child abuse of “[adolescents] under the statutory threshold for adulthood” speak to a culture of moralists, he argues, “infected by Christianity’s ancient loathing of sexual pleasure.”¹²⁴

¹²¹ Ibid, 115.

¹²² Ibid, 127.

¹²³ Ibid, 120.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 121. In his brief attention to the Catholic Church, Lawrence explains that it complies with the counterrevolution (though not the feminist elements) by requiring its all-male clergy to deny sexual pleasure in any form. He intimates a frustration that the Church is more concerned with priests’ relationships with men than with women, and thinks, “the reports of abuse are a bit over the top.” He

Though he agrees that children should be protected from sexual predators, he unabashedly states, "...the cost of such protection is high."¹²⁵ If all of this is not enough, he negates the existence of sexual addiction, and argues that the "invention" of such a malady is yet another example of "the counterrevolution's war on sexual pleasure."¹²⁶

In the last chapter, "Sexual Disarray in the Churches," Lawrence identifies his version of the "crisis of sexuality in the church." He argues that the definitive problems in faith communities with respect to sex are policies, procedures, and regulations regarding clergy sexual misconduct. Even liberal churches, he claims, have adopted what he calls "the radical feminist mantra," or the claim that "sexual harassment is not about sex, but about the abuse of power."¹²⁷ He singles out Karen Lebacqz, an educator with a commitment to social justice issues and professional ethics, as a "counterrevolutionary" because she called attention to the sexual misbehavior of male clinical supervisors at the American Association of Clinical Pastoral Educators' (AACPE) annual conference in 1992. Lawrence then spends the remainder of the chapter lambasting feminist theologian Marie Fortune for promoting boundaries between congregants and their leaders, opposing dual relationships, and identifying power, as opposed to sex, as the motivating force behind the sexual abuse of congregants by clergy.¹²⁸ Neglecting to cite even one quote

remains unconvinced, for example, that the seduction of a 16-year-old boy by an adult is cause for life-long trauma, and is skeptical that these experiences of "man/boy love" have negative consequences or are innately perverse. He counters the idea that man/boy love is perverse and destructive by pointing to the prevalence of pederasty by the Greeks in classical times. Ibid, 146-147.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 127. Lawrence feels that such measures, like having a third person present for example, prevents special bonding that might occur between a student and a pupil. He says that such practices communicate to the child that he or she is sexually defenseless. Lawrence also raises questions about the "magical age of consent."

¹²⁶ Ibid, 128.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 136.

¹²⁸ Lawrence includes his own experience in the pastorate, when "many lonely wives came on to [him] sexually. Most did this subtly, although some made their advances in quite dramatic fashion." Ibid, 144. He goes on to say that his avoidance of becoming "sexually involved with a number of young, attractive women in that context," had much more to do with fear of losing his job and professional credibility, and

from Fortune's many texts, Lawrence implicates her as a prominent force in the sex-phobic counterrevolution plaguing churches!

Lawrence's critique of Fortune is outrageous, given that she is someone who has contributed so much of her time and efforts to stopping a multitude of abuses in all kinds of faith settings, including explicating the role of power in sexual abuse.¹²⁹ Fortune is the founder of the Seattle-based FaithTrust Institute, dedicated to resisting domestic and sexualized violence, child abuse, and clergy sexual misconduct. She is also the author and editor of numerous books to these ends. Shockingly, prominent pastoral theologian Don Capps, who authors one of the two Forwards to *Sexual Liberation*, affirms Lawrence's critique. Fortune is "an enemy of human sexuality who has carried the day," claims Capps.¹³⁰

Is it possible that *both* of these scholars missed Fortune's chapter – "The Sharing of Pleasure" – in her text *Love Does No Harm? Proof that she is far from sex-phobic*, Fortune declares,

If we genuinely preach and seek to practice an incarnational theology, which means that we believe that our bodily selves are a good gift from God, then we must also affirm sexual pleasure as good and, if we so

nothing to do with thinking that such liaisons would have been intrinsically destructive to the women or himself. Something he still maintains today. I find it challenging to read both Lawrence's confessions and his critiques of Fortune without wondering how much of his reaction to Fortune is a reaction formation grounded in unconscious guilt.

¹²⁹ See <http://www.cpsdv.org/>. See Fortune's texts: *Sexual violence: The Unmentionable Sin; Keeping the Faith :Questions and Answers for the Abused Woman; Is Nothing Sacred: The Story of a Pastor, the Women He Sexually Abused, and the Congregation He Nearly Destroyed; Sexual Abuse by Clergy: A Crisis for the Church; Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook; Love Does No Harm: Sexual Ethics for the Rest of Us; Sexual Abuse Prevention: A Course of Study for Teenagers; Remembering Conquest: Feminist/womanist Perspectives on Religion, Colonization, and Sexual Violence; Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited.*

¹³⁰ Donald Capps, forward to Raymond Lawrence, *Sexual Liberation: The Scandal of Christendom*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007), xiii. Capps also expresses appreciation for Lawrence's self-reflectiveness, especially about, "being the object of the sexual advances of lonely wives when he was a newly ordained minister..." Capps believes that Lawrence's acknowledgement of Lawrence's own attraction proves the absence of malicious intent and debunks the arguments about ministers as sexual predators. Capps, xiv.

choose, seek to share that pleasure in relationship. The ethical concern which this affirmation calls forth is our responsibility to attend to our own and our partner's sexual needs in a context of choice, consent, and respect.¹³¹

Here, Fortune clearly affirms sexual pleasure and encourages seeking it when desired, while articulating loose parameters for safety and freedom of participation. It is perplexing and a shame that both Lawrence and Capps ignore Fortune's blatant theological affirmation of sexual pleasure and, instead, choose to interpret her extended attention to the dynamics of sexualized violence as "sex-phobic."

Taken together, the conclusions Lawrence reaches regarding the ongoing loathing of sexual pleasure in Christian contexts stun me, especially in regards to his assessment of the impact of feminist analysis and his interpretations of sexual activity between men and women, minors and adults, and clergy and parishioners. He loses all sight of women's voices, consent, and safety when he dismisses claims of sexualized violence and harassment, attributes these behaviors on the part of men to evolutionary biology, and criticizes policies put in place to protect victims from this kind of abuse. The second half of Lawrence's book reads like a tirade against progressive feminist politics. Personally, it was difficult not to experience his argument as the diatribe of an old, white male whose pleasure [read: power] has been progressively eroded by the successive waves of women's liberation. If anything, his passionate and biased interpretation of the ongoing repression and demonization of sexual pleasure in the contemporary Christian context lends credence to my argument that the topic of sexual pleasure continues to generate emotional and distorted perspectives.

¹³¹ Marie Fortune, *Love Does No Harm: Sexual Ethics for the Rest of Us*, (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1995), 127.

Lawrence also walks an extremely thin line when he expresses doubt about the prevalence of child abuse and its traumatic effects, particularly for older adolescents. Again, he dismisses the suffering of individuals who are taken advantage of by trusted elders who use their power to victimize and abuse. Lawrence's deep misunderstanding of power differentials in these examples and his intimations that these instances are founded on the (sometimes unconscious) sexual desires of victims are exactly the kinds of beliefs and justifications that perpetuate abuse in families and in faith communities. Regardless of what Lawrence believes, sexual abuse certainly is one dimension of "the crisis of sexuality in the church."¹³²

In the introduction to *Sexual Liberation*, Lawrence claims, "There have been no giants in the field of sexual ethics in the five hundred years since Luther."¹³³ In the post-script, he points to the late twentieth century as a time of contradictory voices and conflict between those supporting the "Sexual Revolution" and what he calls, "dark forces" and "counter-currents," which amount to "angry male-hating factions of feminists," "hysteria over an imagined epidemic of sexual abuse of children," and "virulent homophobia."¹³⁴ Lawrence plainly states, "In the heat of the conflict, no major voice spoke with clarity of sexual pleasure as a great gift of God and that everyone was entitled to an ample share of it..."¹³⁵

What? First, see Fortune's quote above. Second, contrary to what Lawrence claims, there have been a number of scholars invested in Christian sexual ethics in the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Many have made rich

¹³² See Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

¹³³ Lawrence, xix.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 153.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

contributions to a loving and just approach to sexuality, including an affirmative stance on sexual pleasure. And many of their proposals claim exactly what Lawrence contends is missing from theological discourse, namely that sexual pleasure is a good gift from God. In fact, I devote an entire chapter to these pleasure-affirming proposals later in this project. Given Capps' overwhelming applause for this text, it is a mystery as to whether or not he agrees with Lawrence's claim. If so, Capps poorly represents the discipline of pastoral theology, which typically relies on resources in Christian sexual ethics for teaching pastoral care around issues related to sex and sexuality.¹³⁶

Stop Beatin' 'Round the Bush...Let's Get It On¹³⁷

Looking back to Hiltner, James Poling insists that pastoral theologians have not actively engaged increasing anxieties in the Church related to sexual matters since the 1950s and 1960s. He also asserts that the pastoral care movement has failed to provide important leadership in the debate/crisis over sexuality in the Church. For his part, Poling identifies the current crisis as “confusion and resistance to the liberation movements of women, African Americans, and gays and lesbians.”¹³⁸ Unequal power distributions that take the form of pervasive sexual attitudes about these groups undergird his argument. Put differently, the crisis according to Poling stems from failing to acknowledge and right the discrimination, oppression, and abuse perpetrated against women, African Americans, and queer individuals (and any combination of these identities) by devaluing their sexuality. Lawrence's rant against and resistance to feminism politics is case and point.

¹³⁶ For example, I first encountered many of the texts in Chapter Five in a pastoral theology and care class at Vanderbilt Divinity School. The class, taught by Dr. Evon Flesberg in the fall of 2004, was titled, “Sexuality: Ethics, Theology, and Pastoral Practice.”

¹³⁷ Marvin Gaye, in lyrics to *Let's Get It On*, Tamala Records, 1973.

¹³⁸ Poling, 119.

I do not disagree with Poling that sexual justice issues for women, African-Americans, the queer community, and others whose sexuality has been maligned and then used as a tool of oppression must be a critical dimension of a pastoral theology concerned with suffering and thriving in these communities. Sexual justice must be a dimension of sexual ethics and pastoral care in faith communities, one that necessitates a communal response. My interest, however, still lies in the role and redemption of sexual pleasure as integral to *both* the “crisis” of sexuality in the Church, as well as its resolve. In many ways, the experience that concerns me is particular and individual, as I am unsure how to conceive of a communal dimension of sexual pleasure, especially as it relates to orgasm. Still, I do not doubt that sexual pleasure, however individual the focus, is firmly intertwined with issues of gender, sexuality, race, power, and the struggle to negotiate the tensions inherent in interdependent relationships.

To his credit, Lawrence names sexual pleasure as “the best of God’s gifts to humankind.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that all behavior, including sexual behavior, is subject to the biblical injunctions of love and justice, and he openly affirms and celebrates same-sex relationships.¹⁴⁰ Unfortunately, his critique of feminist figures and their theological resources is backwards, reasserting deeply patriarchal and sexist beliefs about sexualized violence and child abuse. This wayward critique blinds Lawrence to reputable scholarship in Christian sexual ethics that does affirm sexual pleasure.¹⁴¹ By neglecting the scholarship in contemporary Christian sexual ethics, he forfeits the opportunity to

¹³⁹ Lawrence, 154.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 153.

¹⁴¹ One hypothesized reason for Lawrence’s dismissal of this body of scholarship might be its affiliation with and strong grounding in the feminist theological theory he so deeply opposes.

critically analyze it – an analysis that could deepen the complexity of what it means to include sexual pleasure in a Christian sexual ethic for our time.

I have to be honest and admit that if I am grateful to Lawrence for anything, it is for giving me the opportunity to conduct such an analysis on these resources, as well as looking with fresh eyes at how modern culture and feminist theology have contributed to current suspicions and affirmations regarding the role of sexual pleasure in human suffering and flourishing. Paying homage to one my favorite Motown artists, Marvin Gaye, it's time to get it on! But before examining the fruit of the tree from which pastoral theology has so curiously abstained, it behooves me to assess the roots. The move to redeem sexual pleasure in a theological framework assumes that there are fertile grounds from which it must be vindicated. Therefore, it is appropriate to begin by looking back at the inherited Christian tradition to better understand and evaluate the intricate root system in which sexual pleasure remains entangled.

CHAPTER TWO

ROTTEN ROOTS: THE CHRISTIAN SEX-NEGATIVE LEGACY

While some faith communities remain oblivious to the ramifications of the sex-negative dimensions of their theology, the suffering I have encountered in the clinical context as a pastoral caregiver has been impossible to ignore. Working primarily with women, I identified sexual issues at the core of almost every case in which I provided pastoral care. I saw many women who had been sexually abused, one of them by a minister in the church in which she served. There was a high school student from a religious family who regularly bemoaned the dearth of helpful sex education (an “abstinence only” approach coupled with a biology class formed the extent of the sexual education curriculum). Her parents, who had serious sexual issues of their own, approached sex talk with considerable anxiety. Eventually, this young girl made an impulsive decision to have intercourse. Overburdened by the shame and guilt of having given in to sex, she spent a significant amount of time in my office discussing her subsequent drug use and depression.

The pain was no less severe in other cases. A client was on the brink of suicide as she came to grips with her unshakable attraction to women. She was married with children and dreamed of being a pastor. Though the female priest at her church referred her to me and supported her in private, the priest did not publically affirm same-sex relationships or the ordination of gay and lesbian individuals. My client was extremely angry at her denomination, confused, depressed, and at times suicidal. Her religiously

conservative parents, who she firmly believed would disown her if she divorced her husband and embraced her attraction to women, exacerbated her anxiety about her complicated situation. I also counseled an evangelical woman who was guilt-ridden for having had two children out of wedlock. She missed attending her church, but insisted that she still had a strong personal faith. She wrestled with staying in a neglectful relationship with the father of one of her children because she desired to be married, arguing that “getting married and being a family was best for [her] children.”

As a pastoral caregiver for these women, I regularly faced the suffering, depression, guilt, shame, confusion, sadness, anger, hurt, pressure, and hopelessness wreaked by theological positions that sacrifice physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being on the altar of tradition. At times, all of these women (including the young woman mentioned in the Introduction) felt cut-off, shunned, or abandoned by God. They either feared how their churches would perceive them, felt too deeply wounded to return to church, or both. The experiences of these women seem to support Christianity’s sex-negative reputation in our culture.

Pastoral theology reflects on and, in turn, informs the practices of the Church, as well as myriad forms of caregiving in faith contexts, including pastoral care and counseling. It takes very seriously the lived experience of those receiving care and considers this lived experience a crucial source for constructing pastoral theology. Before turning to reflection and deeper analysis, however, pastoral theology responds to the suffering to which it bears witness. An informed pastoral response to the suffering I encountered in my clients is influenced by many factors, including an historical investigation and critical analysis of the sources that form the Church’s attitude and

official positions regarding sex. In the Introduction, I argued that contemporary Christian individuals and their collective communities of faith inherited a long struggle with anxieties and fears involving sexual pleasure. My counseling experiences buttress this contention. In the interest of more fully understanding what I regard as “lingering discomfort,” this chapter explores a number of questions. What are the theological roots of this angst? Which theological traditions explicitly or implicitly influence many of the mainline denominational positions, especially interpretations of sexual pleasure? How do these traditions shape discourse on sex, marriage, and family? Is our legacy entirely sex-negative?

To answer these questions, I turn to four highly influential theologians whose sentiments on sex have shaped the course of Catholic and Protestant approaches to sexual ethics in the Church, as well as in our political life and community. First, Augustine of Hippo garners the most attention for contributing to a negative view of human sexuality, and, as I will show, to the skeptical, distrustful, and disparaging view of sexual pleasure. His influence in this area of theological reflection is immense and foundational to both Catholic and Protestant interpretations of sexuality. For these reasons, I devote a large portion of this chapter to the analysis of his work.

In the second half of this chapter, I address the work of Thomas Aquinas, who is well known for his teachings on natural law as well as his articulation of the role of reason and logic in Christian theology. His writing has had considerable influence on the Church’s teachings about sex, particularly sexual ethics in the Roman Catholic Church. Adopting an Augustinian interpretation of original sin, Aquinas follows Augustine’s lead in shunning sexual pleasure, while adding a premium on reason as the framework for his

sexual ethics. I conclude with Martin Luther and John Calvin, pivotal figures in the Protestant Reformation, who argued passionately against the denigration of marriage, as well as professing and honoring vows to celibacy and virginity. They, too, have earned their place in Christian history as contributors to the understanding of human sexual life, its relationship to spirituality, and how it fits into the greater purpose and meaning of our lives. Some even argue that Luther's and Calvin's affirmations constitute pro-sex theological assertions.

Theologizing some 800 to 1,100 years after Augustine, Aquinas', Luther's, and Calvin's arguments hold promise as correctives to Augustine's conclusions about sexual pleasure. Sadly, although there are positive nuances in their theological arguments, pleasure in sexual experience remains highly problematic overall. Taken together, the works of these men perpetuated a theological insistence on some troubling aspect of sexual pleasure, reinforcing the negative interpretation of sexual experience that has been passed to future generations of Christians.

Saint Augustine of Hippo: Doctor, Doctor, Gimme the News...

Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430) is generally regarded as one of the most influential theologians in Christian history. I maintain that he is particularly influential in regards to how sexual pleasure is understood or constructed, and subsequently reinterpreted, in the development of Christian doctrine and practice.¹⁴² Compared to other patristic scholars, Augustine writes at length in a number of his works about

¹⁴² My exploration of all four theologians will focus on their work as it appears in textual form, not on practices or accounts of practices generated by their theological claims.

concupiscence, sex, and sexual pleasure.¹⁴³ He is widely known for his *Confessions*, in which he appears to write explicitly about his own sexual experiences.¹⁴⁴ His marked attention to articulating the theological significance and meaning of the sexual dimension of human life – including his keen use of rhetoric to “reveal” his own sexual struggles – earned him a certain authoritative voice on the issue. His articulation of a Christian understanding of the institution of marriage has exerted comparable influence. Embracing sexual intercourse necessitated a validation and thorough explanation of the origin, place, and purpose of Christian marriage. Scholars argue that the intensity and endurance through the centuries of Augustine’s systematic insight into sexual morality and marriage have earned him the moniker “Doctor of Christian Marriage.”¹⁴⁵ One could also argue that these contributions are critical to his prominent role in Christian theology as a whole.

Although Augustine has been influential, many scholars across theological disciplines (especially those with an affinity for sexual ethics) are critical of his teachings regarding sex and marriage, as well as his broader theological assertions regarding original sin and concupiscence, the theology upon which his conclusions regarding sex and marriage are contingent. Catholic theologian David Kelly asserts that while Augustine’s contribution of an anti-sex sentiment is clear and universally recognized, the extent to which anti-sex biases in certain strains of theology have been influenced or reinforced by Augustine’s teachings remains contested.

¹⁴³ Such works include autobiography, apology, exegesis, dogmatic, and moral exposition and controversy with his adversaries.

¹⁴⁴ Psychologists of religion and others with a background in modern psychology, particularly psychodynamic theory, have a field day with Augustine’s “confessions” about his raging sexual impulses, his complicated relationship with his mother, his absent father, his struggles with women and special male friends, and his agonizing journey to understand and ultimately live a life devoted to God.

¹⁴⁵ Todd A. Salzman & Michael G. Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology*, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 29.

In *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, Catholic Christian ethicist Margaret Farley points out that although Augustine writes eloquently about Christian marriage, his valuation of sex is a different matter entirely. Even in marriage with procreative intent (according to Augustine), sexual intercourse contains an evil stain.¹⁴⁶ Any degree of moral goodness in the act is related to procreation. In *The Ethics of Sex*, ethicist and Aquinas scholar Mark Jordan explains that Augustine's influence on Christian sexual morality is strong, but ambivalent. For all of his affirmations of the goods of marriage, Augustine still asserts that celibacy is preferable. Jordan points out that Augustine, who restricts sex to the institution of marriage, also restricts sex *within* marriage. Sex in marriage for procreative purposes is the only justified sex, leaving no justification for the pursuit of sexual pleasure in its own right.¹⁴⁷ Historical theologian Margaret Miles claims that Augustine's identification of the unique religious significance of sexuality reaches to our time. She, like Jordan, surmises that Augustine's influence is ambivalent.¹⁴⁸

Are the ends in Augustine's work unavoidably sex-negative? What nuances and complications exist? What was at stake for him? How does he reach his conclusions? Finally, is there anything salvageable in the service of claiming the goodness of sexual experience and pleasure? The following subsections take up these questions by returning to selected primary texts and welcoming insight and criticism from scholars of Augustine.

¹⁴⁶ Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, (New York: Continuum, 2008), 41.

¹⁴⁷ Mark Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 109-117.

¹⁴⁸ Margaret Miles, "The Body and Human Values in Augustine of Hippo," in *Grace, Politics and Desire: Essays on Augustine*, ed. Hugo Meynell, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1990), 62.

I argue that although Augustine permits sexual intercourse and, subsequently, the sexual pleasure that he imagines is part of each and every procreative sexual act, sexual pleasure is not upheld as a good in its own right. Marriage, the only relationship that allows for sex, has “goods,” but pleasure is not one of them. I demonstrate that Augustine’s negative theological interpretation of sexual pleasure is firmly grounded in 1) a male-centered interpretation of sexual impulses, sex, and sexual pleasure and 2) his interpretation of original sin and its punishment. Regarding the latter point, shame is always inextricably bound to sexual arousal, sexual acts, and sexual pleasures, even those tempered for procreation.

Confessions: Methinks He Doth Confess Too Much?!

Augustine is passionately compelled to juxtapose human sexual life and a life of faith devoted to God. At the time he wrote *Confessions* (396), he was in a different position than that of the ascetic layman he was ten years prior and had different expectations pressing upon him.¹⁴⁹ As the bishop of Hippo in Northern Africa, he was responsible for building up and unifying the community of faith there, a role with significant authority and pressure. During this time, the place of marriage and sex in the lives of faithful Christians became a pressing theological concern to which he had to respond. The Catholic Church in Northern Africa was fracturing, suffering from schism, and religious differences and disagreements were undermining the family, the basic unit of society. Augustine saw the possibility of enhancing concord among adherents by validating aspects of Roman society, including marriage and the hierarchical family.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Brown, 388.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 399.

Thus, a number of his writings aimed at a faithful rendering of marriage and sexual intercourse to these ends.

Personally, however, Augustine had sacrificed his own sexual life in devotion to God and believed that conversion and renouncement of sexual life ultimately set one free to serve the Church. In addition to supporting the aforementioned social structures, Augustine also likely desired to speak to those in the Christian community like himself. As a result, his writings theologially justify sex and marriage, while maintaining a priority on chastity. In *Confessions*, he uses his gifts as a writer and rhetor to further this agenda, skillfully using the “story” of his own life as an example and tapping into what he assumed was a universal struggle with lust.

Considering Augustine’s position as bishop and his assumptions about the universal tyranny of lust, we must take seriously that *Confessions* is not a strict autobiography in the way the modern world understands the genre of ‘autobiography.’ *Confessions* intends to be persuasive, both in the genuineness and praise of Augustine’s own character and the nature of a life devoted completely to God. Early church historian Henry Chadwick, in his “Introduction” to *Confessions*, identifies the text as a polemical work, “at least as much about [Augustine’s] self-vindication as an admission of mistakes.”¹⁵¹ He calls it “a prose-poem addressed to God, intended to be overheard by anxious Christians and critical fellow-Christians.”¹⁵² Peter Brown, prominent scholar and biographer of Augustine, argues that the text attends to the hopes for the self and society of a distinct group, even aiming to form such a group, namely Catholics of ascetic

¹⁵¹ Henry Chadwick, introduction to Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), ix.

¹⁵² Ibid. Chadwick goes on to give context, including pressure for Augustine to respond to those who distrusted him and those curious about his adoption of an ascetic life.

experience who have come into positions of power and leadership in the Catholic churches in Africa and Italy.¹⁵³ The point is that Augustine has multiple motivations for telling his story in *Confessions*. It is a thoroughly theological text. Though he could not possibly have had our current context in mind, I am still most interested in the story he is telling about human sexuality.¹⁵⁴

Confessions is a chronicle of the tug of war between a human's will to serve the spirit and the will to serve the flesh. It begins with an account of adolescence, a time when strong sexual urges emerge and beg to be indulged. "At one time in adolescence I was burning to find satisfaction in hellish pleasures. I ran wild in the shadowy jungle of erotic adventures," Augustine recalls.¹⁵⁵ Though the expectation was that sexual experimentation would eventually be quelled in a marriage commitment, Augustine imagines that such a commitment would be impossible on the account of sexual appetites. "Even so, I could not have been wholly content to confine sexual union to acts intended to procreate children, as your law prescribes, Lord," he confesses. In other words, Augustine claims that the sexual appetite is interested in more than just traditional intercourse for the sake of reproducing. He may be referring here to other kinds of sexual

¹⁵³ Brown, 388.

¹⁵⁴ "Sexuality" is a modern concept typically used to capture the erotic dimension of human life, the experience of the sexual self, one's gender expression, and/or the nature of one's sexual attraction to others. It acquires a broader definition in contemporary sexual ethics. Sexuality, however, in the ways that we understand it, was not a concept familiar to patristic and medieval theologians. Historian, Thomas Laqueur, suggests that "sexuality" prior to the late 18th century could be conceived of as a "one-sex" model, a hierarchical spectrum in which masculinity grounded one pole and femininity the other. See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990), 5-6. French philosopher, Michel Foucault, famously argues that sexuality is a socially constructed phenomenon. He refuses any suggestion that sexuality is a "natural given" or an "obscure domain" containing secret knowledge. Foucault attempts to show that since the 17th century power, operating in and through a number of discourses, has been successful in creating the construct that today seems so essential to our very being and identities – sexuality. He feels that he has proven the relationship between sexuality and the elements of a social construction to be essential. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. I*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 105.

¹⁵⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 24.

activity or having sex more frequently than is necessary for conceiving a child. Either way, his point is that pleasure is the motivating factor, and he finds it impossible to find a container for his sexual appetites of which God would approve.

The battle with lust continues into young adulthood, as Augustine avoids a commitment to formal marriage and instead pursues a career as an orator and teacher of rhetoric. During this time, his sexual energy is channeled into a committed relationship with a woman who is referred to in secondary texts as a concubine. He explains,

In those years I had a woman. She was not my partner in what is called lawful marriage. I had found her in my state of wandering desire and lack of prudence. Nevertheless, she was the only girl for me, and I was faithful to her. With her I learnt by direct experience how wide a difference there is between the partnership of marriage entered into for the sake of having a family and the mutual consent of those who love is a matter of physical sex, and for whom the birth of a child is contrary to their intention – even though, if offspring arrive, they compel their parents to love them.¹⁵⁶

In his explanation of his relationship, Augustine admits to loving this woman and being a faithful partner, meaning that he was monogamous in his sexual relations with her. His ability to sustain a physically intimate relationship with a single partner – a relationship that lasted 13 years – is interesting, considering his own perception that rampant lust could not be contained or controlled. Augustine explains that it is the *intention* behind their sex that keeps it from being a “marriage,” namely that they enjoyed sex for pleasure, perhaps engaged in a variety of sexual experiences outside of intercourse, and did not intend to have children.¹⁵⁷

Although aspects of his recollection of his relationship are warm, Augustine’s tone is self-condemning. He connects the start of their relationship with a degree of

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 53.

¹⁵⁷ Though he does not mention it here, Augustine and his partner did have a child; however, they likely took precautions to avoid conception.

immaturity and regret. He was motivated by lust and believes his decisions were conditioned by a lack of foresight and misplaced longing. While the relationship was meaningful for him, it does not soothe his growing anxieties about the importance and requirements of a virtuous spiritual life.

As time passes, pressure for Augustine to marry and improve his social status mounts. Simultaneously, he is intrigued by the ability of some of his friends and acquaintances to set aside sex and marriage for the pursuit of friendship and wisdom. In consideration of this lifestyle choice, he bemoans, “Fettered by the flesh’s morbid impulse and lethal sweetness, I dragged my chain, but was afraid to be free of it.”¹⁵⁸ The attachment to sex makes the idea of giving it up seem impossible. Similarly, feeling “stuck fast in the glue of this pleasure,” he continues to imagine that marriage, given its limitations and stipulations regarding sex, could not satisfy insatiable sexual desire.¹⁵⁹ Compelled, finally, by his mother’s relentless petitions, he agrees to marry. With Augustine’s new commitment to a formal marriage, his lover is sent back to Africa. “The woman with whom I habitually slept was torn away from my side because she was a hindrance to my marriage...As I was not a lover of marriage but a slave of lust, I procured another woman, not of course a wife,” he grieves and shamefully admits.¹⁶⁰ Though Augustine indicates great sadness at the loss of his lover, he cannot pass any substantial amount of time without sex.¹⁶¹ Because he must wait for his bride-to-be, sexual desires must be satisfied by sleeping with another woman. He is constantly

¹⁵⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 106-107.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁶¹ This unnamed woman, by Augustine’s admission, returns to Africa to live out her life as celibate woman.

reminding his reader of the power of the bondage to lust, a chronic anxiety universalized in his theological works to come.

The climax of *Confessions* occurs in book eight, in which Augustine's spiritual search and longing face off with his attachment to sexual desire and pleasure in a quasi-mystical experience. He reveals to his reader how God delivers him from "the chain of sexual desire."¹⁶² From this point forward, he dedicates himself to a continent life. He does not take a wife, renounces sexual activity completely, abandons his secular career, and is eventually baptized as a Christian. He initially hopes to live in a community of men devoted to chastity and wisdom, but is ordained instead and becomes a Catholic bishop in the North African seaport of Hippo Regius for the remainder of his life.

The content of *Confessions*, especially Augustine's account of his struggle with sexual desire and the lure of the pleasures of sexual activity, includes theological reflections on sex and marriage. Sexual encounters are both pleasurable and highly problematic. Augustine is enticed and disgusted. Sex keeps him from true friendship and distracts him from the pursuit of wisdom.¹⁶³ However, even more abhorrent than keeping him from true friendship and distracting him from the pursuit of wisdom, his lust keeps him from being a faithful Christian. His choices related to sexual activity – sex outside of

¹⁶² While contemplating his struggle in a garden in Milan, Augustine is tormented and tempted by the voices of "his old loves," seduction and lust. Before him appears a vision of a dignified and chaste woman, Lady Contenance, who invites Augustine to release his anxiety and take the leap of faith to trust in God. Overcome with emotion, Augustine hears another voice imploring him to open the scriptures, where he is confronted with Rom. 13:13-14 - "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts." Upon reading the verses, he explains, "a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled." Augustine, *Confessions*, 153.

¹⁶³ As modern readers, if we take Augustine's prose at face value, his lust does not seem particularly abnormal. Miles suggests that the language he uses to describe his relationship with sexual desire and pleasure (chained, in bondage, being tied, fettered by the flesh, etc.) is suggestive of addiction. For Augustine it is compulsive. Miles asserts that Augustine so struggled with sex that it felt impossible for him to fathom an integrated sexuality – he could not enjoy with freedom and gratitude that which felt so difficult to control. Miles, "The Body and Human Values in Augustine of Hippo," 61.

marriage and participation in non-procreative sexual acts – are unacceptable Christian practices in the late fourth century. In addition, there is considerable pressure from his influential mother to conform, to save his soul, and to be baptized.¹⁶⁴ Given his experience and context, Augustine most likely has to reconcile his sexual appetites with his impending faith commitment.

Why not marry? Recall Augustine's own doubts that sexual desires could be tempered for the specific conjugal duty demanded in marriage. I argue that there are other, less obvious reasons. In *Confessions*, Augustine subtly portrays marriage as a lesser option. He reports that his mother, in his early adolescence, did not force him to consider marriage to contain his sexual drive. Instead, she hoped that he might forego marriage altogether to serve the Church or enjoy a successful career, both of which she felt might be impeded by a wife.¹⁶⁵ Later, Alypius, Augustine's friend and companion during his conversion experience, warns that taking a wife restricts the hope of men communing together in carefree leisure for the love of wisdom – a desire of Augustine's that comes up numerous times throughout *Confessions*.¹⁶⁶ Higher callings, whether they are constituted by a successful secular career, the pursuit of wisdom with like-minded male friends, or a life committed to the Church, all surpassed the import and duties of marriage. Whether marriage creates a sexual conundrum or proves to be an unsuitable, lesser option, Augustine must and does give up sex for God.¹⁶⁷ The persuasive element of

¹⁶⁴ James Dittes, psychologist of religion, questions Augustine's genuine freedom to choose a life outside of a Christian commitment given his initial Christian upbringing and his mother's ongoing expectations. James Dittes, "Continuities Between The Life and Thought of Augustine," in *The Hunger of the Heart: Reflections of the Confessions of Augustine*, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Monograph Series, vol. 8 (West Lafayette, IN: Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1990), 120.

¹⁶⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 28.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 106

¹⁶⁷ Actually, it is more theologically faithful to Augustine's *Confessions* to say that God was the active agent in converting Augustine to a life of continence.

his text encourages others to use his life as an example or perhaps view it as the *exemplar* of Christian devotion.

I agree with Peter Brown that there is a tension in *Confessions*. Augustine grapples with sexual desire, sexual intercourse, and sexual pleasure as both dynamics of human social relations *and* serious problems for the individual human will.¹⁶⁸ Brown is convinced that the text communicates to its reader “the views on the relationship between sexuality and society which Augustine had come to adopt in his middle age.”¹⁶⁹ A number of these views are advanced in writings subsequent to *Confessions*. Here, his self-condemning, sometimes confusing, negative sentiments about sexuality become clear, concretized, and powerfully theologically grounded.

Excavating Augustine’s Theology of Sex and Orgasm

As previously discussed, Augustine’s reflections on sexuality and marriage in *Confessions* identify sexual desire as an irresistible force. The pursuit of sexual pleasure is incompatible with a faithful Christian life. The duties of marriage are a distraction from the pursuit of wisdom and the things of God. However personal these sentiments seem, Augustine makes similar claims that become more generalized and explicit in his subsequent writings.¹⁷⁰ In these works, one finds more substantial theological reflection, moral declaration and instruction, and (if we are sympathetic!) pastoral guidance on how to understand and best live with our *inescapably* sexual selves.

¹⁶⁸ Brown, 388.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 388.

¹⁷⁰ See *On the Good of Marriage, On Holy Virginity, On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, City of God, and On Marriage and Concupiscence*.

Responding to some of the severe criticism leveraged against Augustine, Kelly stresses that Augustine has a “deep desire to see people free, to see them rise above themselves, to see them empowered with the Holy Spirit and with the grace of Christ which is love, come to the full humanity which is their destiny in Christ.”¹⁷¹ In other words, he argues that Augustine’s intent is pastoral; it aims to be healing and salvific, and it is firmly grounded in his Christology, soteriology, and beliefs about nature and grace. Although I will not attend to the entirety of Augustine’s doctrinal positions, pointing out some of these connections is important. His writings on sex and marriage are contingent on his interpretation of human nature and original sin, which are best understood in the context of his doctrines of God, Christ, salvation, and grace. Recognizing Augustine’s good intentions, however, should not blind us to the implications of his theological conclusions.

The heart of the following exploration is to determine how Augustine understands the purpose of sexual pleasure or the theological meaning for its existence in sexual experience. What gives it the troubling quality we see in *Confessions*? When one begins exploring Augustine’s works with these questions in mind, she finds that *there is no simple answer*.

First, if Augustine’s *Confessions* holds some truth, one must keep in mind that the eventually continent theologian struggled more with his own sexual impulses than any other fleshly desire. He interpreted these desires and experiences as an obstacle to a relationship with God and a life of service to God. Second, not only is understanding

¹⁷¹ David F. Kelly, “Sexuality and concupiscence in Augustine,” *The Annual Society of Christian Ethics* (1983): 84. Kelly argues further that while Augustine has a pastoral goal to help others live fully and to illustrate the beauty of Christian marriage, his conclusions with respect to sexual pleasure and desire in carnal concupiscence tarnish human sexuality with “implications of evil and corruption.” *Ibid*, 82.

pleasure contingent on Augustine's theological doctrine of original sin, but it is also tied to a developed theology on the institution of marriage, part of Augustine's broader understanding of God's intentions for society. Augustine distinguishes life for the human race pre- and post-Fall, a distinction that must be kept clear. As a consequence of original sin, God's full intentions for creation cannot be realized. Finally, the challenge is exacerbated by Augustine's creative skills as a gifted writer and master of rhetoric. While he seemingly creates possibilities for sex and pleasure in some moments, there are always qualifications, problems, and worrisome possibilities and concessions that keep sex and pleasure from receiving whole-hearted affirmation.

In the subsections that follow, I trace Augustine's claims on the origin of sin and its relationship to and consequences for understanding the body, marriage, sex, and sexual pleasure. First, how does he conceive of human nature and sexual life before original sin? Do marriage, sex, and sexual pleasure have a place in Paradise? Second, how does Augustine understand original sin and its implications? How does original sin affect sexuality? Third, how does Augustine claim we are called to live with respect to our sexuality, given the reality of original sin? What should a life devoted to God look like?

Sex in Eden?

In Book XIV of *City of God*, Augustine's description of life and human nature pre-Fall is interwoven and often juxtaposed with his description of life and human nature post-Fall. In Paradise, before sin, Adam and Eve loved and found full satisfaction in God. They loved one another, and they always enjoyed what they loved. They peacefully

avoided sin and, as a result, had no experience of sorrow, mental distress, or bodily discomfort.¹⁷² The human will, mind, and body were all in perfect accord – human nature absolutely and in all its parts obeyed the will. Augustine explains, “For though [Adam] could not do all things in Paradise before he sinned, yet he wished to do only what he could do, and therefore he could do all things he wished.”¹⁷³ He describes here a form of blissful ignorance. Still, the original humans did all that they wished, and they flourished. Augustine also points out that in this original state, the body was free of corruption. He intends to be clear that the nature and substance of the physical body are not the source of the forthcoming burden on the soul.¹⁷⁴ It is not the flesh that causes sin.

Regarding marriage, Augustine is a defender of its ordained existence in Paradise. He understands it as part and parcel of the fabric of the society originally created by God. At the very start of *De bono coniugali*, translated *On the Good of Marriage*, Augustine states that God intended and created, as a great and natural good, the social dimension of human nature and a capacity for friendship. He further explains that the bond of blood relationship holds this capacity for relationship together, so it follows that “the first natural tie of human society is man and wife.”¹⁷⁵ This bond is described as consisting of fellowship, friendship, or concord. *City of God* provides further evidence of this original

¹⁷² Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dodds, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1950), 456-457.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 463.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 443. Miles argues that any interpretation of Augustine suggesting that the body causes the evils of concupiscence and death is flawed. It is the soul’s, or psyche’s, ruthless pursuit of objects that makes the body a “helpless victim.” Miles, “The Body and Human Values in Augustine of Hippo,” 59-60. In other words, the body is not responsible for concupiscence. Against early Christian and classical authors who stressed the insignificance of the body, Miles asserts that Augustine recognizes its permanent integrity, and that his theological anthropology highlights it as the cornerstone of human nature. Miles also says that Augustine recognized the high metaphysical status of the body, alongside its place as an integral and permanent part of human being, as suggested by the Christian doctrines of creation, the Incarnation of Christ, and the doctrine of the resurrection of the body.

¹⁷⁵ Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, in *Saint Augustine: Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, vol. 27, trans. Charles T. Wilcox, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press), 9.

intention, in which Augustine explains that Adam was not deceived by the serpent's temptation, but yielded to Eve "by the drawings of kindred," that "man could not bear to be severed from his only companion."¹⁷⁶ Brown, in his analysis, stresses the priority of friendship for Augustine (over against sex) as the bedrock of the marriage relationship in Paradise. He points to Augustine's *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, where Augustine finds Adam eating of the forbidden tree not out of sexual temptation from his spouse, but out of *amicali benevolentia*, "out of the good nature of a friend."¹⁷⁷ Taken together, the original intent of marriage in Paradise was chiefly characterized by concord or friendship, "an expression of the primal and enduring nature of men and women as ineradicably social beings, created by God for concord."¹⁷⁸

In addition to the presence and good of marriage in pre-sin Eden, Augustine argues that Adam and Eve were called to fulfill God's injunction to be fruitful and multiply. If marriage was the first natural tie of human society, the union of society in children is a consequence.¹⁷⁹ "They were created male and female, with bodies of different sexes, for the very purpose of begetting offspring, and so increasing and multiplying, and replenishing the earth; and it is great folly to oppose so plain a fact," Augustine explains.¹⁸⁰ Here Augustine says quite a bit. He suggests that God created two beings, male and female, with sexed bodies, created in a complementary fashion, for the purpose of reproducing and filling the earth with offspring. The reality of begetting children as part of God's intention for humanity and part of the movement toward the City of God *necessitated* sexual intercourse in Paradise. Interestingly, if Adam and Eve

¹⁷⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, 459.

¹⁷⁷ Brown, 402.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 403.

¹⁷⁹ Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 9.

¹⁸⁰ Augustine, *City of God*, 469

had not sinned, Augustine speculates, generations of bodies would still have come into existence through sexual intercourse, and the population would have increased to a point, perhaps aging, but free from the sting of death.¹⁸¹ Sexual intercourse, therefore, was part of God's original plan, an ordained activity between man and woman for the purpose of procreation.

It is a consequence of the primal couple's first sin that the reproductive act becomes infected with the disease of lust. Since Adam and Eve did not have children prior to their expulsion from Eden, the question remains as to whether or not they actually had sex in Paradise. Augustine accepts the possibility with important qualifications. First, if they had engaged in sexual activity, the sexual acts would not have been passionate or desire-driven. He explains, "The man, then, would have sown the seed, and the woman received it, as need required, the generative organs being moved by the will, not excited by lust."¹⁸² In other words, the will would have exhibited perfect control over the genitals, without lust, similar to the ease with which we use our will to control other body parts, like using our feet to walk, for example.¹⁸³ Although Augustine is not outwardly denying the existence of pleasure or something akin to an orgasmic experience in Paradise, he consistently reminds us that the possibility of such pre-Fall delight would have been in perfect concord with the will and completely controlled.

Augustine ventures even further to suggest that control over the genitals in sex, an act devoid of passion and calmly conducted, would have occurred without corrupting of the integrity of the body. He believes that semen would have entered the womb of the woman with the integrity of the female genital organ being preserved, "just as menstrual

¹⁸¹ Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 11.

¹⁸² Augustine, *City of God*, 472.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 470.

fluid can be emitted from the womb of a virgin.”¹⁸⁴ I argue that this “supernatural” description of the sexual act and reproduction in Eden is not only what might have been, but also a fantastic ideal for Augustine, cloaked in a thoroughly male-centric interpretation. In other words, it conveys his wish of the possibility of sex without penetration – for men the possibility of a reproductive act *without physical pleasure*. The linkage of pleasure and penetration points to his gendered interpretation.

In sum, from the turn of the fifth century to the end of his life, Augustine passionately argues that God created Adam and Eve as physical human beings, endowed with sexed bodies that were intended for the building up of society. The growth of God’s society, or City, necessitated physical intercourse, childbirth, and child rearing. There is, consequently, a preordained “naturalness” to all facets that contribute to the building of the City of God. For this reason, Augustine approves of marriage and sexual intercourse for the purpose of procreating. He also maintains that prior to the Fall, any version of sexual desire was always preceded by friendship and coincided perfectly with the conscious will, which had yet to be distorted by sin. He never speaks of sexual intercourse as an end in itself in Eden. In Paradise, sex was primarily the means to a population, not pleasure. It was always bound to reproduction as part of God’s intention. Though Augustine argues that sexual pleasure, particularly orgasm as we know it, bears the mark of sin, it is questionable as to whether or not he believes that sex in Eden would have been pleasurable. His hypothetical ideal of non-penetrative, reproductive sex, however, suggests that sex in Eden does without pleasure.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 473.

Original Sin is Not Sex, But Sex Testifies to Original Sin

According to Augustine, post-Fall sexuality must be understood in the context of his theology of original sin. For Augustine, the cornerstone of the original sin committed in the Garden of Eden is *disobedience* - Adam and Eve partaking of the fruit of the tree from which God forbade them to eat. The condition of the possibility of disobedience was pride, what Augustine describes as a “craving for undue exaltation” in which the soul abandons God as its end and, as a result, becomes an end in itself.¹⁸⁵ To recognize that the original sin consisted of the first humans’ disobedience to God is to see that *the sin itself was not of a sexual nature*. Eve did not use sex to get Adam to eat from the forbidden tree, nor did the snake tempt her sexually. Subsequent to this act of disobedience, as Augustine reiterates in a number of his works, God issues a fitting and just punishment, namely that man [sic] becomes abandoned to himself to suffer hard and miserable bondage – *his own disobedience to himself*. Put another way by Augustine, “The punishment for not willing what could be done is willing now what cannot be done.”¹⁸⁶ Man’s own disobedience to himself becomes manifest in the reoccurring experience in which the mind and flesh are no longer capable of being controlled by the will. As a result, the mind is disturbed, and the body suffers, grows old, and dies. The soul also suffers and is affected by the sensations of the flesh, both pain and pleasure.¹⁸⁷

The disjuncture between the human will and the flesh has profound negative implications for human life – in Augustine’s case, most especially for sexual life and experience. He explains that after the Fall,

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 460. “By craving to be more, man becomes less; and by aspiring to be self-sufficing, he fell away from Him who truly suffices him,” Augustine explains. Ibid, 461.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 463.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 460-464.

[pleasure is] preceded by a certain appetite which is felt in the flesh like a craving, as hunger and thirst and that generative appetite which is most commonly identified with the name lust, though this is the generic word for all desires.¹⁸⁸

Augustine uses the term ‘concupiscence’ to capture the experience of desire, or lust, that enters human experience after the Fall. Although he recognizes that lust can have any number of objects, he is most captivated by and concerned with *sexual lust*.¹⁸⁹ He literally means *arousal of the genitalia*, which cannot necessarily be moved or restrained by the will. This arousal is indicative of the mark of original sin and its due punishment. Augustine offers concrete proof that the will and the flesh have lost their primal harmony in unwanted, mentally unprovoked erections popping up at inopportune times, and/or the opposite – failure to produce an erection when it is most desired.

And then there is orgasm – further, more intense evidence of the fractured harmony between the will and flesh. On the lustful excitement of the genitals and orgasm, Augustine says,

And this lust not only takes possession of the whole body and outward members, but also makes itself felt within, and moves the whole man with a passion in which mental emotion is mingled with bodily appetite, so that the pleasure which results is the greatest of all bodily pleasures. So possessing indeed is this pleasure, that at the moment of time in which it is consummated, all mental activity is suspended.¹⁹⁰

Here, what the postmodern reader might interpret as a truly embodied sexual/spiritual experience Augustine interprets as the epitome of disorder. Not only is the entire body

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 464.

¹⁸⁹ David Kelly explains that Augustine sometimes speaks of good concupiscence, namely the desire to learn about spiritual things. However, more often than not, he is using the term in association with the consequence of original sin. Kelly, 92; Miles explicates Augustine’s concupiscence as anxiety, an “anxious grasping for,” or compulsiveness towards finite objects that provide no infinite satisfaction. Augustine believes, according to Miles, that concupiscence in general, contrary to its typical affiliation with lust, “pervades and organizes human life, from the first moment of the infant in which he grasps breath, to the adult’s pursuit of sex, power and possessions.” Miles, “The Body,” 57.

¹⁹⁰ Augustine, *City of God*, 464

possessed, compelled by desire and rendered helpless, but also the mind is caught up and, at the moment of climax, mental activity ceases to function altogether. For Augustine, the height of sexual pleasure, orgasm, is the exemplar in all of human experience (save death) of the will's inability to control the mind and the body.

Turning back to Eden, Augustine further explicates the problematic, shameful nature of division between the will and the body, so profoundly and powerfully evident in sexual experience. Before sin, Adam and Eve communed unashamed in their nudity. "Not yet did lust move those members without the will's consent; not yet did the flesh by its disobedience testify against the disobedience of man," Augustine explains.¹⁹¹ When Adam and Eve were stripped of grace as a fit punishment for their disobedience, however, "there began in the movement of their bodily members a shameless novelty which made nakedness indecent: it at once made them observant and made them ashamed."¹⁹² In essence, Augustine points to the first sign of the punishment for sin as the arousal of Adam's and Eve's genitalia, which provoked awareness and shame, and compelled them to immediately cover their "private parts" with fig leaves.

The awareness of their nudity and the uncompelled movement of body parts opened the first couple's eyes to a deeper realization about their state of affairs, namely their ability to discern between "the good they had lost and the evil into which they had fallen."¹⁹³ Their body parts moved without will and their minds were aware and ashamed of their nakedness. Augustine argues that proof of the shame that remains part and parcel of sexual desire, intercourse, and pleasure is readily observable across all times and places. For example, peoples of all nations routinely cover their "shameful parts."

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 464.

¹⁹² Ibid, 465.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 466.

Despite the pleasure it may bring, fulfillment of sexual urges and acts requires darkness and secrecy, and always occurs out of the public eye.¹⁹⁴ In his interpretation, *all sex is implicated*. Even conjugal intercourse, which he sanctions for the begetting of children, is never a public affair. *Lust and shame go hand in hand with all things sexual*.

In sum, Augustine's contention with sexual desire, intercourse, and pleasure, along with their strong connection to carnal concupiscence, arises from his interpretation of the post-Fall state of humanity. It is the distortion of the will that marks humanity's fall from grace. As a result of their disobedience, man and woman lost their "primal harmony of body and soul;" sexuality and death, the consummate separation of body and soul, stand like bookends on the human life as proof of this reality.¹⁹⁵ Brown argues that the disjunction between the will and the body, most potently experienced by Augustine in unwanted erections, orgasm, and impotence, moves Augustine *to position sexuality irremovably at the center of the human person*.¹⁹⁶ Although concupiscence infused everything post-Fall, including friendship, marriage, etc., sexual desire and pleasure hold particular prominence for him. They point directly to the single, decisive event in the soul, humanity's first sin. After the Fall, sexual activity and pleasure can only exemplify a sullied shadow of the once paradisiacal, carefully controlled, and perfectly willed sexual urge and activity.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 466.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 416.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 422, emphasis mine. This idea resurfaces with Freud's libido theory in the early twentieth century (see Chapter Three) and is very familiar to contemporary understandings of sexuality rendered by sexual ethicists, but with very different theological support and meaning (see Chapter Five).

The Doctor's Prescription

Augustine's personal solution to lust was a commitment to continence for the duration of his life. But in his new role as bishop, he committed to healing the broken unity of the Church in Africa by affirming existing aspects of Roman society, including marriage and the family. His exegesis of Genesis (described above) embraced marriage, intercourse, childbirth, and childrearing as God's intention for humanity, as opposed to the fallout of original sin. According to Brown, Augustine set out to reassure good Catholic Christians that "the marriages on which their whole society was based were not merely the result of a regrettable accident."¹⁹⁷ Even so, Augustine still had to contend with lust. His challenge was to advise Christians on the options for how to live with respect to their sexuality, given the reality of original sin.

In *On the Good of Marriage*, written in 401, Augustine produces what some hold to be the most complete patristic consideration of the duties of married persons.¹⁹⁸ The thrust of Augustine's argument is that marriage is good on three fronts: it produces offspring, it provides for fidelity between spouses, and it constitutes a sacrament. He begins by asserting what has previously been discussed, namely that marriage between a male and female is good and affirmed by Scripture, as are the fruit of marriage, children. He adds that marriage is good not only because it produces children, but because of the natural companionship and eventual charity between the two sexes. It is this companionship that preserves marriage as couples get older, past their childbearing ages.

¹⁹⁷ Brown, 402.

¹⁹⁸ Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 3. This piece is written in the midst of controversy and is a two-fold response. First, Augustine aimed to separate out his theology from any association with Manichaeism. Second, Augustine refuted what he claimed to be the false teachings of Jovinian, who considered the married state to be equal to that of virginity.

Marriage and procreation, however, also serve the good of harnessing and tempering lust. Augustine explains,

Marriage has also this good, that carnal or youthful incontinence, even if it is bad, is turned to the honorable task of begetting children, so that marital intercourse makes something good out of the evil lust. Finally, the concupiscence of the flesh, which parental affection tempers, is repressed and becomes inflamed more modestly. For a kind of dignity prevails when, as husband and wife they unite in the marriage act, they think themselves mother and father.¹⁹⁹

In other words, marital intercourse excuses any sexual indiscretions or excess because children can be conceived and born. Intercourse makes something good – children – out of unavoidable lust. Augustine does not state, however, that intercourse or lust is ever transformed. It is as if they are *permitted* for the good of begetting children. In addition, he intimates that the presence of children, who consume time, energy, and physical and emotional resources, also serves to curb the couple's appetite for sex. The goal appears to be for couples to transition from the immature role of lovers to the more mature, anti-erotic roles of mother and father.²⁰⁰

The prescription thus far is for men and women to marry and to channel their lust in the service of procreation, contributing to building up the society of God. Any sex outside of marriage is a serious sin. Fidelity, or faithfulness, is the second good of marriage and consists of the rights that spouses have over the bodies of their partners. Fidelity expects monogamy and forbids adultery. It consists of conjugal chastity, or a sexual relationship in marriage that always aims toward procreation. Augustine explains

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 13.

²⁰⁰ Mark Jordan argues, "Husband and Wife become identities for containing and getting beyond sex...they are in much of Christian tradition anti-erotic identities." Jordan, 113. The point here is the even the good for which sex is permitted – children – serves to curtail sex.

that concupiscence in marriage, associated with fidelity, becomes a means of begetting chastely.²⁰¹

Interestingly, fidelity is not owed only for procreation, but also for protecting spouses from adultery and fornication. Here Augustine approaches the topic of sex for the purpose of pleasure. He explains that having sex for purposes other than procreation is *not permitted* because of marriage, but because of marriage it is *pardoned*.²⁰² In other words, marriage is not a license for pursuing pleasure in sexual activity. Sex for pleasure is not celebrated or encouraged. Why is it pardoned? Augustine continues,

There is mutual service, in a certain measure for sustaining each other's weakness, for the avoidance of illicit intercourse, so that even if perpetual continence is pleasing to one of them, he [sic] may not follow this urge except with the consent of the other.²⁰³

It is pardoned because choosing not to have sex creates the potential to subject one's partner to illicit intercourse, adultery, or fornication. Simply put, spouses should not deny each other the pleasures of sex and risk succumbing to unpardonable sexual temptation. Augustine sums things up this way: sex for procreation has no fault; sex with a spouse for the purpose of satisfying lust alone, as part of marriage fidelity, is a venial sin; and, fornication and adultery are mortal sins.²⁰⁴

The third good of marriage is sacrament, which seems to take into consideration the concord, friendship, or fellowship bond that Augustine views as being a positive side effect of marriage. Sacrament here is manifest in the indissoluble permanence of the bond between partners. In fact, Augustine indicates, "...the bond of fellowship between married couples is so strong that, although tied to the purpose of procreation, it is not

²⁰¹ Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 16.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid, 17.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

loosed for the purpose of procreation.”²⁰⁵ In other words, once married, spouses are not permitted to leave one another, even if the purpose is to have children with someone else. Similarly, adulterers and adulteresses are also not permitted to marry again. Spouses cannot commit adultery even if they mutually consent, and remarriage before death is not acceptable. As a sacrament, the conjugal bond, a symbol of something greater, remains intact.²⁰⁶ Even when married men and women are separated, they remain wedded. Obviously an antagonist of divorce, Augustine maintains that the marriage bond is only loosed by the death of a spouse.²⁰⁷

For all of the “goodness” Augustine ascribes to marriage, there is still a better way of coping with the impediment of sexuality. In *On the Good of Marriage*, he skillfully affirms marriage and sexual intercourse for the purposes of procreation, while continually reminding the reader of more laudable options – abstinence in marriage, a life of continence, or a commitment to virginity. He explains to spouses that abstaining by mutual consent from sexual intercourse before the “ardor of youth cools” is better – “a matter of praise to refuse *beforehand* what one is able to do.”²⁰⁸ He really wants for spouses to choose continence in their marriage. When he discusses fidelity, he concludes that although intercourse in marriage for the purpose of having children is not faulted, “continence from all intercourse is certainly better than married intercourse...”²⁰⁹ “Though marriage and continence are two goods,” he says, “the second is better.”²¹⁰ If

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 18.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 19.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 48.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 12, emphasis mine.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 17.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 20.

the reader glossed over these points earlier on, later in the text he reasserts, “Marriage and virginity are, it is true, two goods, the second of them is the greater.”²¹¹

Augustine emphasizes again and again that nuptial chastity (sex for procreation only) is good, but abstinence in marriage, a life of continence, and virginity are all better. Continence allows for freedom from the duties of procreating, satisfying the conjugal debt with a spouse, and the bond of a permanent relationship. This freedom allows one to be spiritually subject to Christ alone, which Augustine says is better and holier. It is especially good and holy if this freedom is used to “think about the things of the Lord and how they may please God.”²¹² In sum, though marriage is good and contributes to the building up of society, it is better, even holier, to remain continent and free to better serve the Lord. Ironically, Augustine says that, ultimately, “...it is better not to marry, since it is better for human society itself not to have a need of marriage.”²¹³ Although at some level he is aware of the improbability, he still fantasizes that if everyone would abstain, the City of God would be filled and the end of time hastened.²¹⁴

No Pardon for Pleasure

When all is said and done, is there anything salvageable in the service of claiming the goodness of sex and sexual pleasure in Augustine’s work? A cursory read of *On the Good of Marriage*, for example, indicates that sex is necessary for procreation, one of the goods of marriage. We know from Augustine’s other writings, including his exegesis of Genesis and *City of God*, that marriage, children, and intercourse are part of God’s

²¹¹ Ibid, 45.

²¹² Ibid, 49.

²¹³ Ibid, 22.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 23.

intention for humanity. It is tempting to conclude on these grounds that sex is good. But recall that the reality of original sin has corrupted the purity of the will and intention in the sexual act. Augustine explains that, with the influence of wisdom, the best of which we seem to be capable is to regulate the mind and reason to bridle lust. Lust, therefore, is corralled for the purpose of propagating offspring.²¹⁵ The ends appear to half-heartedly justify the means. Still, despite one's best efforts, shame is always inextricably bound to sexual arousal and acts, even those aimed at procreation. Lust, with respect to the sexual impulse, stands apart for Augustine. The genitals, more so than any other body part or emotion, are so completely subject to the rule of lust, that in every sexual act, we should remain ashamed.

A close examination of these texts demonstrates that sexual pleasure is not among the goods of marriage. Augustine plainly states at the start of *On the Good of Marriage* that "children are the only worthy fruit of sexual intercourse."²¹⁶ It is hard, given this statement, to attribute anything good and worthy to sexual pleasure. Sex that is pursued for pleasure is pardoned only insofar as it occurs in marriage for the purposes of guarding against illicit forms of intercourse. But affirmation is different than permission, which is quite different than pardoning. To pardon the pursuit of pleasure in intercourse is to excuse or forgive it as a crime or wrongdoing. Furthermore, concupiscence, in this case sexual lust, though it can be channeled in intercourse toward procreative ends, remains lust. Pleasure motivates lust. Augustine assumes that sex cannot help but entail a "violent acting of lust."²¹⁷ He claims that sex necessarily involves a certain amount of "bestial motion" which is always shameful. Such an ever-present longing in sexual desire for

²¹⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, 467.

²¹⁶ Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 9.

²¹⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, 473.

sexual intercourse makes it difficult to imagine the perfectly controlled, placid sex act in Eden that he describes. Lust (and the subsequent pleasure) is so bad that we should wish to be able to beget children without it.²¹⁸

Orgasm, the climax of sexual excitement, is especially problematic for Augustine. Recall his lament that lust takes control of the whole person, both emotions and body, resulting in pleasure that is the greatest of all bodily pleasures. The pleasure is so great that all mental activity is suspended. Outside of death, orgasm is *the* genuine, palpable experience of the dissociation of the will (our ability to control) and our body's response (the uncontrollable). For Augustine, it is precisely orgasms that should sadden us, as they remind us of our profound alienation from God and ourselves. It follows that such an experience is unimaginable in Eden, explaining Augustine's conjecture that reproduction could have been possible via intercourse that lacked penetration. His perspective, undeniably male-centered, cannot allow for an activity like penile penetration, which generates such forbidden, dissociative pleasure. Whatever pleasure Augustine's Edenic, non-penetrative intercourse had the potential to produce, it is not the sexual pleasure with which we are familiar today. It is more akin to whatever pleasure one might experience when the feet follow the command of the will to walk.²¹⁹

Finally, as I have noted throughout, Augustine's theological interpretations of sexual pleasure have their roots in the particularities of male sexual experience. Women's sexual experience and any contribution it might make to a theological rendering of sex

²¹⁸ Ibid, 465.

²¹⁹ Miles points out that while Augustine's vision of the resurrected body in *The City of God* is sexed and equipped, it does not perform. In other words, although he anticipates bodily sexual differentiation in the resurrection, he does not anticipate sexual activity. Miles, "The Body," 64. This is yet another indication of Augustine's inability to fully embrace sex and its pleasures.

and sexual pleasure are neglected. As a result, Augustine universalizes numerous assertions about sexual experience that do not necessarily follow for women and perhaps for some men.

First, Augustine claims that the sexual urge is uncontrollable. It literally possesses him at times so that he feels incapable of denying it. While this might resonate for some, there are many who recognize that while our minds and bodies may indicate a desire for sexual contact, we are perfectly capable of restraint (and, in most cases, ethically and legally required). Second, he continually links sexual intercourse and orgasm. For him, pursuing the sexual urge or desire to its pleasurable end necessarily leads to orgasm. Sexual pleasure is orgasm. Lust, sex, and sexual pleasure are bound together in a linear fashion that is not reflective of all sexual experience. Third, he conflates sexual intercourse, sexual pleasure, and the possibility of reproduction. If no contraceptive methods are employed in intercourse, orgasm for men can be linked to reproduction insofar as male orgasm is routinely paired with the ejaculation of semen.

The whole of sexual experience for women, however, is more complex.²²⁰ For women, orgasm does not necessarily follow the desire for it; orgasm or pleasure is not always an inevitable outcome of sexual intercourse; sexual pleasure consists of more than achieving an orgasm; and, the relationship between orgasm/pleasure and reproduction is doubtful.²²¹ Finally, suggesting that the sexual urge is uncontrollable only harms women by justifying rape and other forms of sexualized violence.

Augustine, therefore, does not speak for all when he assumes that desire/lust

²²⁰ I will return to this point later in the dissertation. There is a tension for feminists between recognizing, for example, the complexity of women's orgasm and the proclivity to problematize or overdetermine it.

²²¹ Some suggest that the extending and contracting of the cervix associated with orgasm helps propel sperm through the cervix and up the fallopian tubes where fertilization typically occurs. Still, female orgasm is not related to the release of sex cells as it is in male ejaculation.

results in pleasure or that sexual pleasure is always a dimension of sexual intercourse and reproduction. His focus on unwanted erections and unexpected impotence further exemplifies this unreflective androcentric focus, as does his interpretation of Genesis, which finds moving genitals as proof of the divide between the will and the flesh. What exactly does he suggest visibly “moved” on Eve that necessitated covering? Because the penetration of intercourse is so tied to pleasurable orgasm for men, Augustine has to argue for ideal sex in Paradise that allows for fertilization without penetration. This point ignores the reality that many women did and do conceive via sexual intercourse without the experience of orgasm.

In sum, sexual pleasure is interpreted as a problematic moral and theological issue for Augustine. It has strong negative connotations given its necessary relationship to lust. It bears all reminders of a broken relationship within the self and with the Creator. Sexual pleasure for its own sake is a disgrace, pardoned only in marriage. In this context, however, it remains a shameful dimension of good, the ends (procreation) to which it is necessarily bound. When separated from the procreative pursuit, it is pardoned only insofar as it keeps partners from worse sexual sin. Individuals have a responsibility to channel sexual desire and pleasure into married, procreative intercourse, but reap no redemption for pleasure itself in the process. It is a necessary yet unavoidable evil, and it is always shame-laden. Undergirding Augustine’s sexual ethic is a preference for chastity, married or otherwise, which at least liberates Christians from participating in sex and sexual pleasures. Despite efforts to claim the goodness of marriage and conjugal sex, Augustine cannot attribute goodness to sexual pleasure. If there is any sentiment toward

these ends, it remains ambiguous and conflicted and cannot be used in the service of affirmation.

**Saint Thomas Aquinas:
It's Natural; It's Chemical (let's do it); It's Logical; Habitual (can we do it?)²²²**

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), an Italian priest in the Dominican order, is one of the most important religious thinkers of the Middle Ages. As a key figure in scholastic theology, the major intellectual force of the medieval period, he was committed to articulating the role of reason and logic in Christian theology.²²³ His most famous work, *Summa Theologiae*, concerns itself in comprehensive scope with the central aspects of Christian theology and the rigorous analysis of doctrinal questions. Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, II-II contains his exploration of questions of sexual morality – perhaps the fullest such treatment in the medieval period – which became foundational for formal Catholic sexual ethics.

In *Just Love*, Farley argues that Aquinas' contribution in the area of sexual ethics was less about innovation and more about clarity. According to her, Aquinas implicates sexual passion in the disordering of human inclinations that results from original sin; however, it is only evil insofar as it is freely chosen.²²⁴ She points out that he also offers rationale for the procreative norm already affirmed in the tradition – one being

...the Augustinian argument that sexual pleasure, in the 'fallen' human person (as the result of original sin), hinders the best working of the mind. It must be brought into some accord with reason by having an overriding value as its goal.²²⁵

²²² George Michael, in lyrics to *I Want Your Sex*, Epic, 1987.

²²³ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 37, 45.

²²⁴ Farley, 44.

²²⁵ Ibid.

Farley identifies continuity from Augustine to Aquinas, the latter affirming sexual pleasure's negative affects on rational thought and the need for pleasure to have reasonable ends.

Catholic Professor of Religious Studies John Giles Milhaven, in an essay devoted exclusively to Aquinas and sexual pleasure, argues that Aquinas' moral appraisal of sexual pleasure is central to his whole sexual ethics. The heart of Milhaven's essay argues that Aquinas' problem with pleasure stems from the quality and amount of knowledge it provides to the participant. Milhaven contends that Aquinas "fails to accord more than a minimal, negligible kind of knowledge to sexual experience."²²⁶ Sexual pleasure provides no rational knowledge; thus, there is no virtue in pursuing it as an end in itself.

For me, determining a definitive and coherent position on sexual pleasure in Aquinas' work is challenging.²²⁷ Like Augustine, Aquinas seems to create possibilities for affirmation in some places, only to generate skepticism elsewhere. Augustine's voice in these sections of the *Summa* is present – literally cited throughout – an authoritative standard with which Aquinas engages and to which he responds. This "dialogue" between the two theologians is a constant reminder to the contemporary reader of the enduring influence of Augustine's thought, particularly on topics related to sex and faith.

I argue that while Aquinas is not entirely "anti-sex," appropriate sex is very limited in expression, occurs in moderation, and is always questionable with respect to

²²⁶ John Milhaven, "Thomas Aquinas on Sexual Pleasure," in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 5 (Fall 1977), 166.

²²⁷ Because of the scope of this project, my treatment of Aquinas will be limited to the aforementioned section of the *Summa Theologiae*. Milhaven, who critically and carefully devoted significant time to the study of sexual pleasure in Aquinas' works, argues that Aquinas' view of sexual pleasure is a "remarkably coherent and consistent one." Milhaven, 158.

the soul's intentions. Sexual pleasure, especially in abundance, is suspect even in the most rightly-ordered sex act between married persons. It is irrational for pleasure alone to be the intended purpose or end of sexual intercourse. The experience of sexual pleasure ultimately has spiritual consequences and is precisely what keeps the soul from its virtuous peak, a virginal status. I also find that Aquinas continually implicates sexual pleasure throughout his discussions on virginity, married sex, and various forms of what he calls lechery, a category of sexual activities for which the goal is sexual pleasure.

The Inconsequential Importance of Pleasure

In the *Summa, II-II*, before a more extended section on the nature of lust and its connection to sin, Aquinas reinforces Augustine's position on the crowning virtue of virginity among various forms of chastity, including conjugal chastity, ordinary chastity, and holy widowhood.²²⁸ His view of virginity sets the tone for a less-than-positive perspective on sexual pleasure. Virginity garners top honors because, in this state, the soul, guided by right reason, chooses to continually abstain from sexual pleasure, allowing the virgin to freely devote herself to contemplating truth and spiritual matters. Aquinas remarks, "...the observance of continence is spiritual...consisting of the will's purpose to abstain from sex-pleasure."²²⁹ Consequently, he explains that virginity is not necessarily contingent on bodily integrity or the experience of sexual pleasure. On the

²²⁸ Recall that for Augustine a life of continence or virginity ultimately proves better and holier than conjugal chastity, or sex for procreation in marriage. It allows for the freedom of the pursuit of God and wisdom, unencumbered by the duties of marriage, including sexual relations. Recall that spiritual pursuits are incompatible with pursuits of the flesh that are grounded in lust, which sexual intercourse is inescapably. For Augustine, sexual pleasure is part of what keeps even married sex from being as laudable as rightly intentioned virginity or a continent life as a servant of the Lord.

²²⁹ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, II-II*, vol. 43, *Temperance* (hereafter: ST, II-II), trans. by Thomas Gilby, 2a2ae. 141-154. (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1968), 171-173.

latter point, Aquinas insists that orgasm, a sensory pleasure, is only *the material* in which the moral act is at work. It is the intension of the will (the form) that ultimately determines the moral integrity of the act, and *reason* supplies what makes an act moral.²³⁰ This premise allows for “unintended” experiences of sexual pleasure, as a result of “sleep or because of some outside force to which the mind does not consent...or from some infirmity,” without compromising a virgin’s sexual status.²³¹

Freely choosing to participate in sexual activity for the purpose of pleasure or even for procreation, however, constitutes a loss – the loss of a state of being unaffected by sexual pleasure in will and body. Aquinas makes provisions. It is possible, subsequent to the loss of virginity in material and form, to be restored; however, restoration is possible in form only. Once sexual pleasure is experienced, the material (the bodily) dimension is irretrievable. A vow, as in Augustine’s commitment to chastity, can be taken to confirm a soul’s resolve to abstain from sexual pleasures. Still, virginity sets itself above this kind of chastity because it exemplifies the “perfection of being *wholly untouched by sex-pleasures*.”²³²

In his discussion on virginity, Aquinas simultaneously minimizes *and* emphasizes the significance of the experiences of sexual pleasure and orgasm. Pleasure is both of little consequence and great importance! On the one hand, Aquinas minimizes its import by arguing that it is not determinative of virginity. Continence is a spiritual matter, a decision of the soul, guided by right reason that tends toward the contemplation of truth and godly matters. Sexual pleasure that is had without the intention of the will does not

²³⁰ Ibid, 171, emphasis mine.

²³¹ Ibid, 173.

²³² Ibid, 181, emphasis mine.

jeopardize this spiritual orientation. When virginity is lost, it is not pleasure that is implicated, but the *will's free choice*.

On the other hand, what makes virginity the highest virtue with respect to chastity is freedom from having had the experience of sexual pleasure, as well as continual abstinence from sexual pleasure. So even though sexual pleasure is not the cause of the loss, the subsequent experience of it has spiritual consequences. Similar to Augustine's position, we can read sexual pleasure here as an obstacle to divine things and closeness to God.²³³ Virginity is best, more so than conjugal chastity, widowhood, or chastity chosen after a period of sexual activity, because a virgin has never been distracted (or permanently affected/infected?) by sexual pleasure. Thus, before we even arrive at a discussion in the *Summa* about sex or sexual pleasure specifically, Aquinas defines one of the most virtuous paths in Christian life over against sexual pleasure.

No Rhyme or Reason for Pleasure

Sex and sexual pleasure go hand in hand for Aquinas, as they did for his theological predecessor. If sexual pleasure is problematic, the goodness of sex must be equally suspect. Aquinas' overall position on what constitutes permissible sex parallels Augustine's. He embraces sex between married persons for the purpose of procreation, but remains wary, even in this context, of sexual pleasure. One can see the ongoing complication that of the implicit assumption of the male perspective – the continual linkage of intercourse and sexual pleasure. Pleasure is taken for granted as part and parcel of sexual experience. Similarly, this perspective assumes that if one intends it or desires

²³³ While virginity is a high virtue, it is not the highest. According to Aquinas martyrdom and those who dwell in monasteries exhibit the highest virtue because they engage in activities that enable them to “cleave more mightily to God than virgins, who renounce the pleasures of sex.” Ibid, 187.

it, one experiences it. There is no discussion regarding those whose intention it is to experience sexual pleasure, but then once engaged in sexual activity, do not. A similar linkage is made elsewhere between sexual pleasure and procreation. Both examples are ignorant of many women's sexual experience, where sexual pleasure does not necessarily accompany intercourse, nor does it contribute to or inhibit reproduction.

On multiple occasions in the *Summa, II-II*, Aquinas makes use of the following quote from Augustine's *On the Good of Marriage*: "What food is for the health of the individual, that intercourse is for the health of the race."²³⁴ Aquinas reasons that some people must and do marry. Logically, sex is for the body's good insofar as it is used for its purpose, namely fruitfulness. Procreation is the reasonable end for sexual activity, Aquinas argues. Sexual anatomy and their biological function reasonably testify to these ends.²³⁵ Still, Aquinas stresses that this choice is not meant to overshadow the chaste life, which is for the good of the soul and intends a life of contemplation on the things of God.²³⁶ For Aquinas, as it was for Augustine, married sex, which is oriented toward the growth of the human world, is a lesser good. His position rests in the philosophical assertion that acts of the soul are superior to bodily deeds.²³⁷ But right reason, which is aimed at procreation, justifies intercourse in marriage. "Thus intercourse," Aquinas concedes, "may cast down the soul from the peak, but not from virtue itself." In other words, married sex for procreation is not the soul's noblest or best choice; however, it is

²³⁴ Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 32; Aquinas, *ST, II-II*, 181.

²³⁵ Farley, 44.

²³⁶ Virginity for Aquinas is not problematic for God's command in Eden to be fruitful and multiply because the command, he argues, is issued to the people as a whole. Some take on the responsibility of reproducing, while others are free to study "divine things for the health and beauty of the race." Aquinas, *ST, II-II*, 175.

²³⁷ *Ibid*, 175.

not without virtue, for virtue is on account of right reason, and reproduction is a reasonable end for sexual intercourse.

Does sexual pleasure affect the virtuous nature of married sex? Aquinas oscillates in his response. Recall that sexual pleasure is only the material of the moral act. In this sense, as Farley has argued, it is not intrinsically problematic or evil. It is the intention of the soul, the ends toward which it aims, that matters. Aquinas, therefore, makes the claim that “the abundance of pleasure in a well-ordered sex act is not inimical to right reason.”²³⁸ In other words, the amount of pleasure in a sex act aimed at procreation does not pose a barrier to the goal or end. It also does not make the act sinful.

In my reading, however, Aquinas remains skeptical about the *subsequent impact* of the experience of sexual pleasure on right reasoning. He flatly argues, “...the pleasures that most unloosen the human spirit are those of sex.”²³⁹ Still, pleasure in a well-ordered sex act does not pose a problem for virtue, even though reason’s free attention to spiritual things must be suspended during the pleasurable experience. This last point is important and should not be lost on the reader. According to Aquinas, *reason cannot attend to spiritual things and pleasure simultaneously*.²⁴⁰ Sexual pleasure so powerfully absorbs the mind that one becomes incapable of attending to spiritual realities. Again, as he did in his prioritization of virginity, Aquinas implicates sexual pleasure as an obstacle or imposition to the spiritual, or to God. Not only does sexual pleasure pose such an obstacle, but also to choose it is an unreasonable goal in and of itself. If the appetite for sexual pleasure alone is what moves a spouse to participate in sexual activity, one’s moral compass is called into question. This leads me to suspect that Aquinas understands

²³⁸ Ibid, 193.

²³⁹ Ibid, 191.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 195, emphasis mine.

the experience of pleasure to have a subsequent impact on one's ability to reason appropriately in the future. Perhaps the experience of sexual pleasure makes one more inclined to pursue sexual experience to these ends – clearly not a reasonable reason for sex, according to Aquinas.

Aquinas' problem with sexual pleasure, namely that it cannot be controlled or regulated by reason (and perhaps that it interferes with future attempts at right reasoning), is grounded in Augustine's interpretation of original sin. He explains,

That sexual desire and pleasure are not subject to the sway and moderation of reason is part of the penalty for original sin, for, as appears from Augustine, by rebelling against God we deserved to have our flesh in rebellion against our reason.²⁴¹

His stated position is that there could be a significant amount of pleasure in a rightly ordered sex-act, and this is permissible given that it is guided by reason. I argue, however, that given his interpretation of the punishment for original sin and the unmanageable nature of orgasm, Aquinas is skeptical that reason would aim itself at pleasurable excess.

Milhaven points to Aquinas' understanding of the value of sensory knowledge, particularly the knowledge available through the pleasures of sex, food, and drink. Aquinas argues that these are the lowest sorts of sense pleasures because they contain a minimal degree of knowledge – knowledge that has no intrinsic goodness worth the consideration of rational man.²⁴² Milhaven captures Aquinas' devaluation of sexual pleasure, stating, "The crucial reason for sexual pleasure's lack of intrinsic value is that it has in it nothing resembling *rational knowledge*...it is grounded in pure sense knowledge

²⁴¹ Ibid, 195.

²⁴² Milhaven, 165.

that has no share in reason.”²⁴³ Taken together, not only does reason fail to control sexual pleasure, but it has nothing to gain – no rational knowledge – by virtue of pursuing it. In sum, Aquinas leaves us with a tension. On the one hand, he affirms sex in marriage for procreation without the brand of sin. Sexual pleasure is permitted insofar as it is an inevitable part – and never a goal – of this well-ordered sex act. On the other hand, Aquinas indicates that reason, which values rational knowledge and sets its sights on participating in the knowledge of higher things and ultimately God, would resist sexual pleasure, even in a rightly ordered sex act.

Sinning Unreasonably: The Pursuit of Pleasure

Given Aquinas’ position on sexual pleasure and its fractured relationship to right reason, his conclusions regarding sexual activity wholly aimed at pleasure are not surprising. Sexual activity pursued for pleasure is sinful. Lechery is the name for the category of activities for which the goal is sexual pleasure – “the greatest there is to the sensory appetite, and therefore highly desirable,” he says.²⁴⁴ A sexual act is considered lecherous on account of its nature or the conditions under which it occurs. But what is of most concern to Aquinas is the *objective of the act*, which ultimately gives it its character.

Pursing sexual pleasure as an end in itself, according to Aquinas, is a disordered objective. Pursuing sexual pleasure defies right reason, and right reason guides moral sexual choices because it follows “the natural pattern of sexuality for the benefit of the

²⁴³ Milhaven, 167, emphasis mine. Milhaven goes on to explain what Aquinas means by the “rational” and how his interpretation is contextualized. He challenges sexual ethicists to take up a consideration of a *second model of knowledge* posed by Aquinas. He invokes the value of *non-rational knowledge*, encouraging its interpretation as a second positive pole, as opposed to a purely negative pole, furthest from the single model or norm of rational knowledge. Milhaven, 167-170.

²⁴⁴ Aquinas, *ST, II-II*, 199.

species.”²⁴⁵ Aquinas argues for basic principles of sexuality, which he claims are determined by nature. There is a natural order to human copulation with regards to partner, organs, and posture, as well as an ordained end – reproduction. Furthermore, because God is the ordainer of nature, and the plan for nature comes from God, violating the plan for nature constitutes an affront to God.²⁴⁶ An affront to God breaches the reasonable plan for life, “which requires that things be fittingly ordered to their ends.”²⁴⁷ A breach that confuses the appropriate fit of means (sex) to ends (reproduction) is sinful. It follows that engaging in sex acts for purposes other than procreation – for the goal of sexual pleasure – is sinful. Aquinas introduces yet another tension: sexual pleasure, while not intrinsically problematic, becomes morally problematic insofar as it is freely chosen and pursued.

For Aquinas, as it was for Augustine, *procreation* is the only natural, justifiable, and reasonable end for sexual intercourse. Sexual pleasure, insofar as it distracts the mind from spiritual pursuits and eludes the control of reason, must have this overriding value as its goal.²⁴⁸ Aquinas calls any sex act that is incompatible with generation, regardless of its potential for pleasure, an “unnatural vice.”²⁴⁹ Among the unnatural vices that Aquinas cites are 1) masturbation (the sin of self-abuse, or unchaste softness), 2) bestiality, 3) sodomy (male with male and female with female) and 4) genital contact other than penile-vaginal intercourse in the missionary position (or disregarding the natural style of

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 245.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 249.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 193.

²⁴⁸ Farley, 44.

²⁴⁹ Aquinas, *ST, II-II*, 207

intercourse, regarding the proper organ or “according to other beastly and monstrous techniques”).²⁵⁰

The procreative norm also dictates other principles, guided by right reason, given the priority on fruitfulness. Recall that marriage is the acceptable and sanctified context for sex, chiefly for the purpose of begetting and properly raising children. Consequently, fornication and adultery, even if the sex acts are rightly ordered toward and open to procreation, are contrary to right reason because they harm the possible illegitimate offspring.²⁵¹ “The sin of fornication,” Aquinas explains, “is against the good of the species because it handicaps the person to be born.”²⁵² In the case of adultery, the choice wrongs both the child who has the potential to be born out of the adulterous relationship and the existing offspring of the violated marriage(s).²⁵³

Taken together, procreation far surpasses pleasure as *the* reasonable end for sexual acts. This verdict eliminates all sexual activity that is not procreative in nature, regardless of the amount of pleasure available. The focus on childbearing and childrearing is so important that Aquinas condemns sex outside of marriage and adultery on the grounds that children born of these relationships suffer as a result of their illegitimacy. Condemnation of the pursuit of pleasure in these cases is lost under the intense focus on the procreative dimension.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 245

²⁵¹ Ibid, 213.

²⁵² Ibid, 219. “Fornication... is an act of generation performed in a setting disadvantageous to the good of the child to be born.” Ibid, 215.

²⁵³ Ibid, 235.

Perpetuating the Legacy

In sum, according to Aquinas, it is the intention of the soul that ultimately determines moral or virtuous sexual activity. So while the state of virginity, for example, may seem more virtuous, one needs to look to the true intentions behind the will to remain chaste. The application of reason to sexual life is also of importance. Sex needs to be guided by reason and, hence, rightly ordered. For Aquinas, this means that sex should be aimed at procreation, in accord with the natural order ordained by God. In the context of this kind of sex, there could be a significant amount of pleasure, permitted that it is guided by reason. But Aquinas is skeptical that reason would aim itself at such excess. After all, reason fails to exert control over sexual pleasure and is wholly suspended during orgasm. Sexual pleasure also fails to provide any modicum of valuable rational knowledge, the only knowledge that aids in the participation of godly things. So while Aquinas suggests the possibility of virtuous sex that includes the endorsement of pleasure, he seems to indicate that reason, which sets its sights on the higher things of God, would not tend toward these ends.

In addition, when the pursuit of sexual pleasure constitutes the primary objective of the sexual act, the priority on right reason is intentionally disregarded. Sexual pleasure cannot be the proper end to a sex act. To pursue pleasure is sinful. According to Aquinas, the only sexual pleasure that is not considered sinful is that of married persons intending to reproduce. Still, because sexual pleasure interferes with spiritual matters, sex must be avoided on holy days and during time devoted to spiritual activity and worship.²⁵⁴ Because sex must be tied to procreation, sexual activity is also limited to penile-vaginal intercourse. Those acts that forgo procreation (masturbation, sex using the wrong body

²⁵⁴ Milhaven, 171, fn 4.

parts, sex with someone of the same biological sex, and bestiality) are problematic, regardless of the degree of sexual pleasure they offer.

One could argue that Aquinas is not entirely “anti-sex,” but that appropriate sex is very limited in expression, occurs in moderation, and is suspect with respect to the soul’s intention. Sexual pleasure, especially in abundance, is questionable even in the most rightly ordered sex act between married persons. Pleasure in a sex act cannot be the intended purpose or end of the experience. In addition, Aquinas alludes to the ongoing effects of having experienced sexual pleasure. To experience sexual pleasure with intention has spiritual consequences and is precisely what keeps the soul from its virtuous peak. Thus, sexual pleasure remains a suspicious moral and theological issue.

Martin Luther: ... Waiting for You to Justify My Love.²⁵⁵

German priest and theologian Martin Luther (1484-1546) – instigator of the Protestant Reformation, author of the infamous “Ninety-five Theses,” and father of the doctrine of justification by faith alone – is also known for his fervent endorsement of the institution of marriage, as well as his sharp critiques of vows of celibacy and virginity. His focus on marriage, children, and the family in his sermons and treatises challenged the reigning Christian ideal of celibacy.²⁵⁶ Luther also practiced what he preached. He was a Catholic priest, who five years after the beginning of the Reformation married an ex-nun whom he helped escape from a convent. Thus, unlike Augustine and Aquinas, Luther married and participated in the conjugal duties of matrimony.

²⁵⁵ Madonna, in lyrics to *Justify My Love*, Axis Studios, 1990.

²⁵⁶ Farley, 45. Farley argues that questions regarding sexual behavior played an important role in the Protestant Reformation, and that emphasis on marriage and family replaced celibacy as the “center of sexual gravity in the Christian life.”

Given Luther's shift from previous thought and practice, and his pushing back against the Catholic Church, we might expect that Luther embraces and affirms sexual pleasure. Do his attempts at "reform" alter the sex-negative legacy inherited from Augustine and the Catholic tradition? Does Luther interpret sexual pleasure as a moral and theological issue? Is his perspective on sexual experience any broader than the male-centered perspective that dominates the tradition up until this point?

Like those of his theological predecessors, Luther's positions on sex and sexual pleasure are not always clear. He says different things to different audiences. Some believe that he is pro-sex. Recall Raymond Lawrence's recent work *Sexual Liberation: The Scandal of Christendom*, in which Lawrence argues, "Luther reveals himself to be unabashedly positive about sexual pleasure."²⁵⁷ Farley offers a more nuanced view, explaining,

According to Luther, sexual pleasure itself in one sense needs no justification. The desire for it is simply a fact of life. It remains, like all the givens in creation, a good so long as it is channeled through marriage into a meaningful whole of life, which includes the good of offspring.²⁵⁸

Farley finds that sexual pleasure for Luther can be "good" if it is directed via the appropriate relationship toward its necessary ends. She adds that both Luther's and Calvin's positions on marriage are not dependent on the procreative ethic, an emphasis we have already seen in both Augustine and Aquinas.²⁵⁹

Contrary to both Lawrence and Farley, Jordan is convinced that old theological suspicions of married sex reappear in Luther's work. Jordan argues that Luther's affirmations of married sex and its pleasures are "Edenic;" a careful look at Luther's

²⁵⁷ Lawrence, 77.

²⁵⁸ Farley, 46.

²⁵⁹ Ibid, 45.

work shows that although sex in marriage can be excused, it is not intrinsically good.²⁶⁰

Lust remains lust, and it must be confined and guarded against in moderation.

I argue that a close reading of Luther's works on marriage reveals that sexual pleasure remains suspicious and tainted. One of the reasons that marriage is so revered is that it creates a "safe space" for sexual activity, which saves the faithful soul from fornication, lest one has been blessed with the "gift of chastity." Thus, Lawrence, who titles his chapter on Luther "The Reformation as Sexual Revolution," makes a weak argument when he says that Luther was unabashedly positive about sexual pleasure. Supporting his claims with anecdotal stories about Luther, as opposed to primary source material, Lawrence confuses Luther's injunction to "pay the conjugal debt" with a priority on pleasure. I interpret Luther's injunction as a call to reproduce and to protect against worse sexual sin, like adultery.

Regarding Farley's claims about the Reformers freeing themselves from the procreative ethic in their positions on marriage, I find this to be truer of Calvin's position than Luther's. Luther states that procreation is the chief end and purpose of marriage. Reproduction and childrearing in marriage function as safeguards against sinful lust. I will show that while Luther allows for some amount (we are unclear how much) of married sex for other purposes, the primary role of intercourse is still reproduction. Also contra Farley, my reading of Luther does not conclude that sexual pleasure is good. The desire for it is a fact of life, but a sad one! Calvin, whose positions are similar to Luther's, openly reminds Christian adherents that the lust and disorder associated with sexual pleasure remain reasons for shame around the sexual act. In sum, with all of his lauding of the estate of marriage, Luther, like his predecessors, is relatively sex-negative and

²⁶⁰ Jordan, 199-120

pessimistic about sexual pleasure. Without any recognition of its gendered construction, it is morally problematic if not carefully contained and regulated.

On the Goodness of Marriage and the Impulse to Multiply

Luther writes both his *Sermon on the Estate of Marriage* (1519) and his treatise *Estate of Marriage* (1522) before his marriage to Katharina von Bora in 1525. At this point, he had been serving as a parish priest in Wittenberg for years and had dealt with many practical problems regarding the marriage relationship. As a sacrament, marriage is laden with a multitude of rules and restrictions. Luther's instructions on the married life and his explanation of the "gift" of celibacy seek to point out flaws in Catholic doctrine and papal law. After 1523, his emphasis focuses on marriage's function as "a school for character," crucial to cultivating obedience to God and important human virtues.²⁶¹

Marriage, according to Luther's interpretation of Genesis 2:18-24, is created and directed by God. It consists of the creation of man and woman by God, woman being brought to man by God, man accepting the chosen woman, and the two uniting for the purposes of companionship and children.²⁶² In his *Sermon on the Estate of Marriage*, Luther claims that marriage breeds the highest form of love between persons, a love reflective of God's love for and relationship with humanity. Against the assertion that marriage constitutes a lesser consolation for the incontinent, Luther argues, "...marriage and everything that goes with it in the way of conduct, works, and suffering is pleasing to

²⁶¹ Farley, 46. Luther stressed the importance of the structure of the family in affecting these important ends. This structure was hierarchical in nature, with the husband exercising authority over his spouse, and parents exercising authority over their children.

²⁶² Martin Luther, *A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 44, *The Christian in Society I*, trans. by James Atkinson, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 12.

God.”²⁶³ Marriage, according to Luther, should never be avoided, shunned, or looked down upon. It is an institution created by and ultimately pleasing to God.

Luther’s reverence of marriage rivals theological claims up to this point that uphold the spiritual superiority of chastity and a life committed to continence. Any suggestion that one could take a vow of his or her own accord to remain celibate offends him. With respect to celibacy, he argues that only a small number of people, “not even one in a thousand,” received a “special grace” from God which allows these persons, “equipped for marriage by nature and physical capacity,” to remain voluntarily celibate.²⁶⁴ As a result, he looks with dismay on the validity of all cloister vows and encourages priests, monks, and nuns to forsake these vows unless they determine that they have been the recipients of the “special grace” of continence.

Is one estate ultimately better than the other? Luther claims,

One should not regard any estate as better in the sight of God than the estate of marriage. In a worldly sense celibacy is probably better, since it has fewer cares and anxieties...the celibate may better preach and care for God’s word...In itself, however, the celibate life is far inferior.²⁶⁵

Here, Luther admits that the celibate life allows one to focus on religious and spiritual practices that serve the community of faith. The estate of marriage, however, possesses greater significance in that God, who finds pleasure in its works and sufferings, ordains it for the majority of people.

God’s divine ordinance to marry is so powerful that Luther makes marriage a necessity, not an option. This point is clearly articulated in Luther’s treatise *The Estate of*

²⁶³ Martin Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45, *The Christian in Society II*, trans. by Walther I Brandt, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 38.

²⁶⁴ Ibid, 21. In addition to these “spiritually rich and exalted persons,” Luther allows two other categories of people: those who are impotent and those who are castrates, having been mad eunuchs by men. Ibid, 19-21.

²⁶⁵ Ibid, 47.

Marriage. The imperative based on God’s command to “Be fruitful and multiply” [Gen.1:28] implies that marriage is a natural and necessary thing, not a matter of free choice or decision. Luther also argues that part of our created nature is the impulse to multiply. He writes, “It is a nature and disposition just as innate as the organs involved in it...God does not command man or woman to multiply...but creates them so that they have to multiply...for this is a matter of nature and not choice.”²⁶⁶ The significance of this passage is that Luther asserts that sex is not only natural, but also inevitable.

All persons who are not blessed with the gift of continence inevitably experience a powerful and strong urge within themselves to “produce seed and multiply.”²⁶⁷ Luther even warns that attempts to restrain oneself (apart from the receipt of special grace) result in physical illness that renders the body unhealthy and sickly. For example, Luther suggests that fruitful women are found to be healthier, cleaner, and happier!²⁶⁸ It follows, then, for Luther that the God-ordained estate of marriage is the only appropriate context for this procreative drive. Without marriage, persons will inevitably and unavoidably commit sexual sin. Luther’s advice to those who find themselves unsuited for the celibate life is to “strike out in God’s name and get married.”²⁶⁹

Distorting the Edenic Ideal: Marriage as Precarious Prophylactic

Given Luther’s positive and insistent perspective on the estate of marriage, it might be difficult to imagine any strong condemnation of sexual activity. In parts of his discussion on marriage (like those mentioned above), Luther indicates naturalness in

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 18.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 19; 45.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 46.

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 48.

relationship to the sexual drive. He also sees the sexual union of heterosexuals as symbolic of the great mystery of the union of the divine and human natures of Christ as well as the unified body of Christ and Christendom; hence, the sacramental nature of marriage.²⁷⁰ Like his theological predecessors, however, Luther indicates that the Fall of humankind has left its mark on human nature, implicating what had once been a pure and holy dimension of human coupling. The marital relationship is irreversibly corrupted. Luther explains, “And now [i.e. after the Fall] the desire of the man for the woman, and vice versa, is sought after not only for companionship and children, for which purposes alone marriage was instituted, but also for the pursuance of wicked lust...”²⁷¹ Sexual desire becomes a motivating factor in partnering and distorts the purity of married love. Sexual desire pursues the pleasures of sex.

It is important to distinguish between Luther’s explanations of 1) the “natural” aspect of the sexual drive that is tied to an impulse to procreate and 2) the sexual drive – lust – that is tied to the pursuit of sexual pleasure. My close reading reveals that Luther does not indicate that the pursuit of sexual pleasure is natural and God-ordained in the way he explains the drive to procreate. These are different drives. Lust perverts the original sexual drive and corrupts married love. Prior to Adam’s and Eve’s sin, married love was “the loveliest thing,” because it desired to have “the beloved’s own self completely,” explains Luther.²⁷² Now, although each partner desires to have the other, he or she also seeks to satisfy this desire *with* his or her spouse.

Luther maintains that the strength of this desire – the temptation of the flesh – is impossible to resist unless one has received the special grace from God mentioned above.

²⁷⁰ Luther, *A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage*, 10.

²⁷¹ *Ibid*, 8.

²⁷² *Ibid*, 9.

The result is two-fold. First, there is *more incentive* to marry for those who have not received the gift of chastity. Second, the estate of marriage now serves an additional function – *to counteract the sin of lust*. Together, these points dispel the idyllic portrayal of marriage that some find in Luther’s work and help us to better interpret his position with regards to sex and sexual pleasure.

If marriage is preordained as the context for sexual activity and reproduction, it takes on additional significance post-Fall with the onset of lust and the inflammation of desire. The urge to satisfy one’s sexual desire with another person (bad and distorted) must be reconciled with the natural inclination for sexual intercourse and reproduction (good and God-ordained), as well as with the symbolism of sexual union (the mystery of God and man united in Christ and Christ and Christendom as one body). Luther insists that marriage is the only context that can cover over the sin of lust in sex. Without it, the sex act is cause for damnation. He explains, “...the wicked lust of the flesh, which nobody is without, is a conjugal obligation and is not reprehensible when expressed within marriage, but in all other cases outside of the bond of marriage, it is mortal sin.”²⁷³ In other words, marriage is the safe zone for sexual intercourse. Without marriage, there is no grace to cover over the wicked lust that accompanies all sex acts. The result is fornication, and one’s salvation is at stake! Luther insists that fornication destroys the soul, consumes the body, and corrupts the flesh and blood, nature, and the physical constitution.²⁷⁴

²⁷³ Ibid, 10. In the treatise, *On the Estate of Marriage*, Luther says, “It is no slight boon that in wedlock fornication and unchastity are checked and eliminated. This in itself is so great a good that it alone should be enough to induce men to marry.” *On the Estate of Marriage*, 43.

²⁷⁴ Luther, *On the Estate of Marriage*, 43.

In addition to protecting the individual, marriage, Luther argues, insofar as it shields against fornication, “benefits whole cities and countries, in that they remain exempt from plagues imposed by God.”²⁷⁵ In addition to jeopardizing the body and soul of the individual, fornication incites divine retribution on communities and nations. In a famous quote from his *Sermon on the Estate of Marriage*, Luther likens marriage to “a hospital for incurables, which prevents them from falling into graver sin.”²⁷⁶ With the reality of lust, the estate of marriage takes on metaphorical significance as a container for sexual impulses and a guard against fornication.

Like Augustine and Aquinas before him, Luther theologizes that sex is permissible only in the context of marriage. Still, marriage is not a license for an “anything goes” mentality when it comes to sexual activity. Lust is cause for a number of sexual restrictions and warnings. Luther advises spouses to “behave properly in marital obligations,” so that lust of the flesh does not incite “those things” common to the world of brute beasts.²⁷⁷ One can assume that Luther is referring to sexual positions or perhaps to maintaining monogamous relationships. He pointedly addresses the latter in his insistence on faithfulness or fidelity in marriage. “In fidelity,” he says, “God sees to it that the flesh is subdued so as not to rage wherever and however it pleases...”²⁷⁸ In other words, sharing one’s bed with a single partner helps to exert some control over lust.

In an ironic twist reminiscent of Augustine, Luther prescribes sexual intercourse in marriage (the conjugal duty) as a remedy for the lure of fornication – not for the joy of sexual pleasures, as Lawrence suggests. Luther explains,

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 44.

²⁷⁶ Luther, *A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage*, 9.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 10.

²⁷⁸ Ibid, 11.

Although Christian married folk should not permit themselves to be governed by their bodies in the passion of lust, as Paul writes to the Thessalonians [I Thess. 4:5], nevertheless each one must examine himself so that by his abstention he does not expose himself to the danger of fornication and other sins.²⁷⁹

Here, married individuals are called to be vigilant over their sexual activity. They should not indulge themselves in the pleasures of sex to excess, but they also must be wary of their decision to abstain, lest lust moves them to any number of fornications, adultery, and even other sin. Marriage contains lust and excuses it in the eyes of God; however, lust retains its power and must continually be checked and moderated. Marriage permits sexual activity, but does not abolish one's susceptibility to fornication and sexual sin. The threat is ever-present.

Pleasure's Parameters

Finally, Luther includes a brief word about sexual pleasure, admitting that monogamous marriage "permits even more occasion than is necessary for the begetting of children."²⁸⁰ Amen! He gives permission for sexual intercourse that has some other ends besides procreation, namely for pleasure and enjoying one's spouse. It is my guess that Luther is hinting at pleasure here because he never actually says that sex is permitted for the purposes of pleasure alone. To "permit" is a far cry from instruction to "joyfully affirm." Furthermore, he immediately follows this concession with a firm injunction that "man should control himself and not make a filthy sow's sty of his marriage."²⁸¹ If the reader feels any relief, she is immediately checked by the need to limit the occasions of sex sought for pleasure alone for fear of corrupting or dirtying the marriage commitment.

²⁷⁹ Luther, *Estate of Marriage*, 36.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

How much sex is permissible for pleasure alone? One cannot be sure – only that too much or too little creates a context for fornication and disgracing the marriage covenant. To further complicate things, in his conclusion to the *Estate of Marriage* treatise, Luther emphasizes that although the institution of marriage is God’s work, and although God excuses lust-laden intercourse by God’s grace,²⁸² the Fall irretrievably corrupts the flesh and blood so that sex, infused with lust, *remains sinful*, while God, via grace, “preserves in and through the sin all that good which he has implanted and blessed in marriage.”²⁸³

It is no accident that this is the last sentence of Luther’s treatise on marriage. His endorsement of sex is highly qualified and cautionary. Sex cannot be separated from sin, lust, or marriage. A place for pleasure is tenuous. Contrary to Farley’s assertions, I find no statement of its goodness and no helpful guidelines for its pursuit apart from reproduction. My findings more closely corroborate Jordan’s conclusions. Even within the confines of marriage, sex and its pleasures, inextricably bound to lust, pose more threat than good. Sex is somewhat redeemed through procreation; pleasure, however, receives no such salvation.

Finally, Luther’s theological reflections on sex and marriage assure that sexual pleasure recedes far into the background of celebrated Christian practice and experience. For example, a third way that the estate of marriage counteracts lust (in addition to its sacramental nature and the necessity of fidelity) is the production of offspring. Luther is clear that reproduction is “the end and chief purpose of marriage.”²⁸⁴ Thus, I am unclear how Farley concludes that marriage according to Luther is not dependent on a procreative

²⁸² Ibid, 49.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Luther, *Sermon on the Estate of Marriage*, 12.

ethic. Luther asserts that married partners should not only reproduce, but should rear their children to praise, serve, and honor God. Raising children well in a spiritual sense is just as important, if not more important, than simply producing them. Properly rearing children is so important that it invokes salvation. Luther says, “For bringing up children properly is their shortest road to heaven;”²⁸⁵ and, “In all the world this is the noblest and most precious work, because to God there can be nothing dearer than the salvation of souls.”²⁸⁶ In other words, parents are implicated in creating a spiritual foundation for their children to cultivate their faith, and, hence, receive God’s grace.

By explicating childbearing and childrearing as the end and chief purpose of marriage, and emphasizing the latter duty, Luther effectively eclipses the sexual or erotic dimension of marriage. Human beings flourish in marriage because 1) sex and pleasure are contained in such a way that fornication is avoided and 2) the structure of authority imposed by the family, alongside proper childrearing, increases obedience to God and the realization of human virtues. Flourishing in the marital relationship, or any relationship for that matter, is never tied to sexual pleasure.

In the spirit of Augustine and Aquinas, Luther shows glimmers of hope that the marital relationship will in time become chaste. In the conclusions of his *Sermon on the Estate of Marriage*, he contrasts the blessed nature of a marriage properly regarded with the pitiable and dangerous condition of a marriage not properly regarded. He explains,

And to him who bears these things in mind the desire of the flesh may well pass away, and perhaps he could just as well take on chastity as the married state. The young people take a poor view of this and follow only their desires, but God will consider it important and wait on him who is in the right.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ Ibid, 12.

²⁸⁶ Luther, *Estate of Marriage*, 46.

²⁸⁷ Luther, *Sermon on the Estate of Marriage*, 14.

Luther shows his cards for only a moment, indicating that those who truly understand the noble estate of marriage eventually move beyond the need for intercourse. This “spiritually mature posture” is one that God embraces and for which God waits. The path toward this type of conjugal continence may embrace sex for a time, but ultimately moves beyond lust and the procreative drive. The marriage bond is preserved, but sexual activity and its pleasures are left behind.

Perpetuating the Legacy

In sum, I have established a number of points with respect to Luther’s positions on marriage, sexual activity, and sexual pleasure. Sex outside of marriage is a mortal sin. The drive to procreate and sexual desire both make having sex an inevitable fact of life. This fact demands marriage from those who have not received the gift of chastity. Marriage is the only context endorsed by God for sexual activity. Sex in marriage is still sinful; however, God’s grace covers the sinful aspects in such a way that God’s ordained purposes for marriage are not disgraced and come to fruition.

Still, sex in marriage requires a number of regulations. Since marriage is ordained between men and women, it follows that sex should occur only between men and women; sex in various positions (like animals) is not permitted; sex must be monogamous; too much sex beyond what is required for procreative purposes is problematic, while abstaining in such a way that could lead to fornication and other sin also raises concern. The proper rearing of offspring, best aided by the hierarchical structure of the family system, exemplifies the end and primary import of marriage. These ends are part of how marriage counteracts the sin of lust. The hope remains, however, that in time, couples

who take seriously the significance of marriage will honor God and their relationship by refraining from intercourse entirely.

Luther's arguments with respect to marriage, sex, and sexual pleasure do not differ in drastic ways from the historical legacy set in motion by his Catholic predecessors. His affirming position on marriage shifts its significance from lesser virtue to a sacramental norm, ordained by and pleasing to God. But marriage is still not an option; it is compulsory given the reality of lust and the impulse to procreate. Marriage is a good in that it contains raging lust by limiting sexual experience. This aspect of marriage is not foreign to Augustine's and Aquinas's theological proposals. Luther's position that sex is only permissible in marriage also has historical precedence. I maintain that it is difficult to argue that Luther is positive about sexual activity. It is a necessity, one ordained by God, but tainted by the effects of original sin. His assertion that "intercourse is never without sin"²⁸⁸ mirrors Augustine's conclusions regarding sex and lust. Only Aquinas differs on this point, concluding that well-ordered sex in marriage is without sin.

For Luther, sexual pleasure, the product of the conjugal act of which wicked lust is always part and parcel, is hardly affirmed. It bears a negative moral weight that is immovable and enduring. He obscurely permits pleasure outside of procreative intent, the only major difference among the theologians discussed thus far. Still, he heavily qualifies sexual pleasure with limitations and warnings that would seem to make celebrating it or enjoying it difficult. Lastly, Luther shows no evidence that his interpretations of sexual desire and pleasure are based on anything other than male sexual experience. Lust

²⁸⁸ Luther, *Estate of Marriage*, 49.

inevitably moves one to fornicate, and pleasure is always part and parcel of sexual intercourse.

John Calvin: Marriage & Moderation to Combat Fornication

John Calvin (1509-1564), a French theologian who went on to pastor churches in Geneva and Strasbourg, was one of the most important systematizers of Protestant theology in the 16th century.²⁸⁹ Best known for his work *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he was a leader of reform in Geneva and eventually opened the Genevan Academy, which educated youth according to Calvinist principles. Like Luther, after breaking with the Roman communion, Calvin took a wife, Idelette de Bure. Many of his theological reflections on marriage, sex, and the problem with sexual pleasure parallel Luther's thoughts. They also firm up my consensus that views on sex and sexual pleasure coming out of the Protestant Reformation did not alter the prevailing sentiment that sex in a post-Fall world was irretrievably tainted. Without the proper safeguards, the fruit of lust, sexual pleasure, was detrimental to one's physical, emotional, and – most importantly – spiritual well-being.

Calvin joins Luther as a key figure who stresses the import and theological significance of marriage, alongside a lingering pessimistic view of human sexuality. Both men bequeathed these sentiments to future generations of Protestant Christians. Lawrence makes scant use of Calvin, with whom he juxtaposes Luther in an effort to bolster his argument that Luther radically endorsed sexual pleasure. Calvin, he argues,

²⁸⁹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story Of Christianity, Volume Two: The Reformation to Present Day*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 61.

...kept relatively bloodless in his posture toward sexual pleasure, prioritized his work over sex and marriage and was scandalized by people who sought sexual relations past their childbearing years.²⁹⁰

Farley, who reports on Luther and Calvin in tandem, suggests that Calvin also viewed marriage as a “corrective to otherwise disordered desires” and believed “that whatever guilt remains in sexual desire and activity is ‘covered over’ by marriage and forgiven by God.”²⁹¹ While she suggests that Calvin is more optimistic than Luther about controlling sexual desire, she points out Calvin’s lingering anxiety that permission for sex in marriage could “nonetheless itself offer provocation to uncontrolled passion.”²⁹²

Jordan argues that Calvin, despite his pro-marriage stance, really believed that a Christian grows “toward a life after sex” – a better life is a life beyond sex.²⁹³ In accord with Farley, Jordan highlights Calvin’s instance that marriage does not grant general permission for sexual indulgences, including lustful thoughts. When sex is “prayerfully sought, properly performed, and temperately lived in marriage,” marriage prevents the sin of lust from being imputed before God.²⁹⁴ Though the Reformers praise marriage, Jordan wittily (and correctly!) points out that “the nicest things said about marriage are said precisely not about married sex.”²⁹⁵ None of these scholars finds Calvin to be particularly positive about sex or sexual pleasure.

My reading of Calvin is mostly in line with the aforementioned interpretations. Calvin, like Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther, only permits sexual relations in the context of marriage. If one has not been gifted with the ability to remain chaste, Calvin argues

²⁹⁰ Lawrence, 70.

²⁹¹ Farley, 46.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Jordan, 61.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 121.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 123.

that marriage is the remedy for the temptation to fornicate. Though lust in marital intercourse remains, and is always a reason for shame, marriage keeps this sin from being recognized and judged before God.

I am not sure that Calvin is more optimistic about controlling sexual desire, as Farley suggests. Calvin focuses intently on the importance of moderation with respect to sexual activity in marriage. In fact, he argues that immoderation, including indulging lustful thoughts, constitutes adultery within the marriage. As Luther believed, the threat of lust remains, though marriage covers it when a couple's sexual life is conducted with sobriety, purity, and honesty. As for Jordan's argument that Calvin ultimately advocates for a life beyond sex, I argue that Calvin is more exemplary of this position in his own personal life than in his writing. With respect to the question of sexual pleasure, I begrudgingly agree with Lawrence. Though Calvin does not focus on sex for procreation the way that Luther does, he also does not affirm sex for the purposes of pleasure. Calvin's intense focus on moderation and restraint in marriage dashes any hopes that sexual pleasure might be positively endorsed.

Marriage as Metaphorical Fig Leaf

Calvin takes the opportunity to expound upon sexual sin, chastity, marriage, and sex in his exegesis of Deuteronomy 5:18, the seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." Like Luther, Calvin argues that any sex or union outside of marriage is accursed in God's sight. He says, "Let us not delude ourselves, then, when we hear that outside of marriage a man cannot cohabit with a woman without God's curse."²⁹⁶

²⁹⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. XX, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1969), 405.

Furthermore, Calvin equates sexual relationships outside of marriage to an animal existence, imagining that without marriage, human beings, like “dumb animals,” would have indiscriminate sex with whomever they came across.²⁹⁷ This kind of fornication, Calvin argues, is sin committed in the body, as opposed to outside the body, which is especially heinous because the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and a member of Jesus Christ. If anyone is unconvinced that fornication is not a great and mortal sin, Calvin points to the punishment of death listed in tenth chapter of Corinthians as proof that God does not tolerate sexual immorality and seeks retribution for fornication. We have already seen God’s retribution for sexual immorality as a theme in Augustine’s and Luther’s writings.

How does one avoid fornicating? The answer is marriage or a life of continence, though neither is necessarily an option! Like Luther, Calvin rails against the Catholic Church and the papacy’s claim that the highest virtue is not to marry. He argues that virginity and continence are not options available to all through the commitment to a vow, but rather gifts of “special grace.” He explains, “The Lord affirms that continence is a special gift of God, one of a kind that is bestowed not indiscriminately, not upon the body of the church as a whole, but upon a few of its members.”²⁹⁸ Living a sex-free life is not a choice, but a gift bestowed by God upon a select few. Here, Calvin maintains the virtuousness of the continent life, while criticizing the Catholic Church’s position that priests, monks, and nuns be required to take vows of celibacy and reject holy marriage. So perverse is this edict, he claims, that “bestly abominations have emerged,” and Rome

²⁹⁷ John Calvin, “The Eighth Sermon on Chapter 5:18,” in *John Calvin’s Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, ed. and trans. Benjamin W. Farley, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 172.

²⁹⁸ Calvin, *The Institutes*, 406.

has “infected the world with detestable sodomies” in this “fight against nature.”²⁹⁹ In other words, he claims that such vows oppose God’s ordained order and result in same-sex sexual activity among the priests, monks, and nuns respectively.³⁰⁰ Implicit in these charges is the unstoppable nature of the sexual drive, which is moved to express itself – even in same-sex relations – when the special grace of chastity has not been granted.

Without the gift of chastity, the solution to the temptation to fornicate is marriage. Like Luther, Calvin argues, “Therefore, the Lord sufficiently provided for us in this matter when he established marriage, the fellowship of which, begun on his authority, he also sanctified by his blessing.”³⁰¹ Marriage is thus created, ordained and made holy by God. “Marriage is called [a] covenant with God...God presides over marriages...God himself wants to maintain marriage, since he has ordained it and is its author,” he expounds.³⁰² The point that God ordains the institution of marriage could not be clearer.

Calvin explores the significance of the metaphor of Christ’s relationship to the Church, reflected in heterosexual marriage, in his sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians; however, the metaphor of marriage as “remedy to keep us from plunging into unbridled lust,” prevails in his discussion regarding adultery.³⁰³ Marriage, due to the power of lust, becomes a necessity to all those who find themselves no longer able to observe celibacy. It is the “sole remedy with which to resist unchastity.”³⁰⁴ Though interpreted as a champion of marriage, Calvin’s discourse on marriage in this context is

²⁹⁹ Calvin, “The Eighth Sermon on Chapter 5:18,” 181-182.

³⁰⁰ Mark Jordan argues that later Protestants equated Catholic clergymen to sodomites, assuming that sodomy followed naturally from unnatural arrangements for mandatory celibacy in all male and all female communities. Jordan, 92.

³⁰¹ Calvin, *The Institutes*, 405.

³⁰² Calvin, “The Eighth Sermon on Chapter 5:18,” 170.

³⁰³ Calvin, *The Institutes*, 405.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 407.

replete with the language of 1) “illness” to explain the wanton condition of the temptation of the flesh, and 2) “remedy” to prescribe the cure, the marital contract.

How does marriage transform sex, which without it would lead to damnable sin and God’s retribution? Calvin is clearer than Luther on this point. Like his predecessors, Calvin identifies the problem as that “broken nature which we have incurred from Adam.”³⁰⁵ Our broken nature, which divorces will from flesh, cannot help but participate in “immoderation of the flesh,” in this case both sexual desire and sexual activity. But that which would normally constitute a vice, provoking shame, as well as God’s wrath, is “covered, and hidden, and not brought into judgment” by marriage.³⁰⁶ In other words, God does not remove the vice. God neither dispels desire for sexual intercourse, nor does God recognize the inclination and/or activity as sin or sit in judgment of it.

Still, Calvin reminds us that although marriage covers over the sin of lust, one still ought to feel ashamed. Sexually intimate relationships are still disgraceful, even if they are not judged so before God. Calvin explains, “The mantel of marriage exists to sanctify what is defiled and profane; it serves to cleanse what used to be soiled and dirty in itself.”³⁰⁷ In sum, marriage hides the filth of sex, sexual longing, and sexual pleasure. But to peer beneath or behind the covering reveals a dimension of human experience that is unacceptable to God and worthy of shame.

Cheating with One’s Spouse: The Perils of Pleasure

Not only must sex and its pleasures be confined to marriage, but also they must be contained within marriage. Whereas Luther at least alludes to the possibility that

³⁰⁵ Calvin, “The Eighth Sermon on Chapter 5:18,” 179.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 179.

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 177-178.

marriage allows for some sex that is not particularly aimed at procreation, Calvin's intense focus on moderation and restraint dashes any hopes that sexual pleasure might be positively endorsed. Again, the notion of excess pleasures provokes high levels of anxiety. In his sermon on Deuteronomy, Calvin warns, "For all immoderation is unlawful. For example, when a man wants to enjoy too much license, and a wife the same with her husband, there is no reason for them to make their home into a bordello."³⁰⁸ Here the admonishment against "enjoying too much license" is strong. Too much sex, sex in the wrong position, or sex with the wrong body parts reduce a holy relationship to that of a prostitute and her customer. When lust is not bridled, the estate of marriage is comparable to a whorehouse.

Similarly, in the *Institutes*, Calvin cautions couples "not to pollute marriage with uncontrolled and dissolute lust," pointing out that even though "matrimony covers the baseness of incontinence, it ought not for that reason to be a provocation thereto."³⁰⁹ His advice is to live in marriage with sobriety, purity, and honesty. He makes his discussion about the regulation of sex in marriage appropriate to his discussion on adultery by linking the two. Lacking sexual restraint and propriety in marriage makes one an adulterer in relationship to his own spouse.³¹⁰ Though marriage covers the sinful aspects of married sex, it only provides limited protection. The dangers of sexual temptation and excess within and outside of the marriage are causes for increased vigilance and regulation when it comes to one's sexual desires and activities.³¹¹

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 179.

³⁰⁹ Calvin, *The Institutes*, 407.

³¹⁰ Ibid, 408. Calvin takes this citation from Ambrose. Of course adultery, to break the marriage vow by soliciting another or another's partner, is also strictly forbidden.

³¹¹ Calvin implicates lustful thoughts, as well as actions. He explains, "Consequently let us note that God has not simply forbidden the act that would in effect violate marriage or break it, but he has forbidden all lasciviousness and wicked intentions. And that is why our Lord Jesus Christ says that when a man looks

Finally, I identify two places where Calvin does not seem to commit in the ways that Luther does. The first is the lack of a procreative imperative. At the conclusion of his sermon on Deuteronomy 5:18, Calvin warns Christians that “if they should be responsible for children” they should feed and provide for them because God “accepts that service.”³¹² Here, Calvin is not focused on the role of childbearing and childrearing as parts of the excuse for sexual activity, as a requirement of marriage, or as part of the marital bond that counteracts the sin of lust. The second difference is that in the selections reviewed for this project, Calvin does not insist that in time, married partners should cease their sexual activity and live chastely together. The example of his own life, however, would give reason to believe that Calvin held such a conviction. He married a widow with grown children. When she died seven years later, he chose not to remarry, presumably because the sexual temptations of his flesh were extinguished. This would be reason to support Jordan’s argument that Calvin’s personal life reflected his belief and stance that ultimately Christians grow toward a life after sex.³¹³

The final word on sex for Calvin is never positive and remains mired in the language of restraint and moderation when paired with marriage. The sexual relationship between spouses is always under scrutiny and necessitates strict policing of the self,

upon another man’s wife with lust, he is an adulterer in God’s eyes.” He demands chastity of eyes and heart, purity of body and mind. Calvin also warns that any number of lewd deeds or speech can lead to fornication, including inappropriate dress, foul language, offensive gestures and dancing. All of kinds of immorality are forms of adultery, according to Calvin. Calvin says that the same applies to all other forms of immoderation, including eating and drinking to excess. “...but we must soberly use eating and drinking to nourish us and not for the purpose of leading us into immoderation to such a degree that we no longer possess a check on ourselves or any modesty.” Calvin, “The Eighth Sermon on Chapter 5:18,” 171, 178.

³¹² Ibid, 182.

³¹³ Jordan, 61. In his argument Jordan also includes a passage from the Institutes (4.13.18), one that I did not find particularly compelling – though I agree with his conclusions. Jordan argues that both Luther and Calvin, while appearing to be ardently pro-marriage and, by default, pro-sex in marriage, really continue to endorse a life beyond sex for Christians.

including one's thoughts and actions, as well as the quality and quantity of sexual experiences. There is an obsessive focus on moderation in Calvin's thought regarding sex. Though he is relatively mute on the specific dangers of sexual pleasure, his focus on the temptations of the flesh and lust, and the dire need for containment and restraint, points to the residue of the negative portrayal explicated by Augustine. Both Calvin and Luther are profoundly influenced by Augustine's interpretation of original sin and its impact on human sexuality. I imagine that any focus on sexual pleasure for Calvin would be akin to immoderation. Because pleasure is so tied to lust, we can only speculate on the descriptive words Calvin might employ – soiled, dirty, defiled, profane – words he uses to describe intercourse. Undoubtedly, sexual pleasure would have been a moral problematic.

The Legacy: Love it or Leave It

The Christian tradition has earned its sex-negative reputation. Contemporary Christians – both Catholics and Protestants – are faced with the dilemma of accepting these theological interpretations, leaving them behind, or finding some middle ground or fresh interpretation for shaping Christian sexual ethics today. Given this history, a number of things are at stake. For example, when the Church clings to a sex-negative approach to human sexuality, it fails to respond in helpful ways to cultural change and challenge, including its responsibility to answer the perennial question necessarily bound to the ethical project, “How shall we live in light of change?” It renders itself incapable of being self-reflective and self-critical, unable to see how theological assertions have been harmful and discriminatory when it comes to understanding sexuality. This negative

legacy continues to undergird a number of theological arguments related to human nature, the body, gender, coupling, sex, and sexual pleasure that present ongoing threats to sexual justice. The ignorance of women's pleasure and the opposition to same-sex eroticism are only two examples.

In addition, although these traditional assertions may not constitute the theological positions of all faith communities, they remain deeply woven into the fabric of our culture. One could argue that although the average person in the U.S. has never read Augustine's primary texts, and although she is unfamiliar with his writings on marriage and concupiscence, remnants of his theology continue to exert cultural influence that is no longer expressed as explicitly theological. Thus, this chapter also provides a degree of insight into latent and manifest cultural sentiments regarding sexual pleasure.

In sum, relieving sexual suffering, attending to sexual ethics, engaging in critical reflection on theology, honoring commitments to justice, and understanding and being conversant with culture *all* encompass pastoral theological commitments. Given the endurance of this sex-negative legacy, it behooves pastoral theology to press forward, either leaving it entirely behind or turning to fresh theological interpretations to creatively manage our hopes for a faithful theology of care and the cultivation of sexual wisdom illuminated by our faith.

CHAPTER THREE

INCITING VICTORIA'S SECRET: SEXUAL PLEASURE AND CULTURE

In a recent correspondence with a male friend and colleague, who also happens to be a pastor, Jovan*³¹⁴ asked me if there was a correlation between clitoral stimulation in masturbation and the inability of a woman to have an orgasm from penile-vaginal intercourse. He found it hard to believe that his new partner, Victoria*, by her own admission, could only orgasm with clitoral stimulation and had never climaxed during sex. Jovan's question and claim intrigued me. First, I was struck by his concern that too much masturbation would decrease the likelihood of a female climaxing during intercourse. Second, I was confused by why he did not believe Victoria's claims about her own sexual pleasure. And third, it became clearer to me over the course of the conversation that it was very important to Jovan that Victoria climax during intercourse when and if their relationship progressed, and that he perceived this kind of orgasm to be distinct from and superior to orgasms generated by clitoral stimulation.

After responding to his inquiry about female sex organs and erogenous zones, I left the conversation discovering, yet again, that female sexual pleasure still seems so mysterious to some. Freud's influence loomed large in the background of Jovan's assumptions. For example, in his essay *The Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes*, Freud describes a little girl's penis envy as "the discovery of the inferiority of the

^{314*}The real names of the individuals in this illustration have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities and privacy.

clitoris.”³¹⁵ He also argues “...it appeared to me that masturbation [was] further removed from the nature of women than of men...masturbation...is a masculine activity.”³¹⁶ More so, “...elimination of clitoral sexuality is a necessary pre-condition for the development of femininity.”³¹⁷ In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud adds,

When erotogenic susceptibility to stimulation has been successfully transferred by a woman from the clitoris to the vaginal orifice, it implies that she has had adopted a new leading zone for the purpose of her later sexual activity.³¹⁸

Taken together, Freud theorized that the clitoris – an atrophied penis – was an inferior organ and that the pre-condition for a girl to become a woman was to replace her inferior clitoral pleasures with those of her vagina. Masturbation was a male activity and ceased in the female after her pleasure center was shifted from the clitoris to the vagina.

I was also aware, however, that sexologists have debunked Freud’s conclusions about female sexuality, suggesting that 1) masturbation actually helps women get in touch with the sensations that please them, 2) the clitoris is far from inferior with its concentrated cluster of nerve endings capable of producing intense pleasure, and 3) the clitoris actually consists of a much larger network of *internal* nerve endings and blood vessels and is capable of producing pleasurable sensations in the areas and organs surrounding the external head of the clitoris. Feminists have attacked Freud for devaluing female sexuality and pleasure and for reifying the priority on reproductive intercourse. For example, feminist philosopher Nancy Tuana reminds readers how, in relocating female pleasure to the vagina, Freud perpetuated the perceived purpose of properly

³¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes,” in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff, (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1963), 179.

³¹⁶ Ibid, 180.

³¹⁷ Ibid, 180.

³¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 4th ed., trans. James Strachey, (USA: Basic Books, 1962), 87.

channeled female pleasure to be heterosexual reproduction.³¹⁹ Furthermore, she argues, Freud indicated that repressed female clitoral sexuality increases male desire – “quite a modern trope.”³²⁰

Despite additional scientific discovery and generous criticism, I still detected the remnants of Freudian theory in Jovan’s assumptions – proof of Freud’s enduring influence on cultural assumptions about sex and gender. Furthermore, it fascinated me that *psychological theory and cultural expectations about sex and pleasure* took precedence over the traditional stance of Jovan’s Christian faith on these matters. To both of these points: Jovan’s concern about female masturbation *was not related to sin*. It was related to Victoria being unable to make the transition from clitoral orgasms (in masturbation) to vaginal orgasms (in intercourse). Also, having sex for pleasure in a dating relationship *was not guilt inducing* for Jovan. In fact, he was troubled by the lack of pleasure! Instead, Jovan was fixated on the existence of two types of orgasms, even after I explained the physiology and the contested nature of vaginal orgasms. He assumed that female orgasm during intercourse – like his own sexual pleasure in intercourse – was a given (he did not believe Victoria), and he obviously felt that female orgasm during intercourse was important – a goal to which he was determined to contribute. From Jovan’s perspective *sexual pleasure in intercourse* was prized, even though other forms of sexual activity were most pleasurable for Victoria.

My main point here is that other, more recent thinkers have influenced contemporary interpretations about sexuality and sexual pleasure. In a moment, I will

³¹⁹ Nancy Tuana, “Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance,” in *Hypatia*, 19 (winter 2004): 216.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

argue that Freud, the father of modern psychology, offers the next major cultural conception of sexuality, perhaps even replacing the dominance of aspects of the negative Christian legacy. Next, I will introduce French philosopher, Michel Foucault, who critiqued both the Christian tradition and modern psychology for their excavation of sexual pleasures to reveal deeper truths about the self. Though his name is not as culturally recognizable to lay people, his thought is central to arguments that recognize the socially constructed nature of sexuality over sexual essentialism. Foucault's concerns about sexual pleasures and their relationship to oppression and liberation lead me to the battle between secular feminists as to how women should interpret and, thus, respond to the substance of their sexual desires and pleasures. I end with the work of feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, whose insightful attempts to explain why we accept, perpetuate, and are aroused by relationships of domination and submission provide valuable insights into the complexities and tensions in all sexual pleasures.

Although this chapter functions as a temporary hiatus from theological reflection on sexual pleasure, it does so to demonstrate the sizable impact of modern psychology on constructing the sexual subject, in effect enforcing the centrality and significance of sexuality to human life. I suggest that this reality contributes to why communities of faith continue to fear and, thus, restrict sexual pleasure to (and assume it in) married, heterosexual, penile-vaginal sexual intercourse. Foucault's work, however, signals a significant turning point in cultural understandings of sexuality and the role that pleasure has and continues to have in shaping sexual identities and norms. Secular feminists, informed by Foucault, concern themselves specifically with the role of sex and sexual pleasure in women's lives, struggling to determine to what extent sex functions as a site

of oppression and/or possible liberation. As I work toward the conclusion of this project, I will argue that the summation of their interpretations is no less threatening to faith communities than Freud's. If Freud confers the dangers of unrestrained sexual impulses, these scholars challenge the legitimacy of heterosexual, married intercourse. Still, Freud, Foucault, and the feminists make contributions regarding to the understanding of sexual pleasure that are crucial to the consideration of its inclusion in Christian sexual ethics.

Sigmund Freud's Science of Sexuality

Sigmund Freud, a key founder of modern psychology, is among the most revolutionary and enduring contributors to modern understandings of the human condition. In fact, cultural critic Philip Rieff argues that Freud's "analytic attitude," inclusive of his psychoanalytic theories, replaced the dominant Christian worldview for Americans in particular. "Religious man [sic]" – whose commitments to the doctrine of right, salvific life, and 'loving one's neighbor as thy self,' – gave way to "the psychological man [sic]" of the twentieth century.³²¹ The latter personality type relinquished all doctrine, devotion to an ideal as the standard of good living, attempts to hierarchically reorder his instincts (superior/inferior, good/evil), and the protective, childish fantasy of having access to "some saving place where meanings reside."³²² In Freud's theoretical frame – a "severe and chill anti-doctrine," argues Rieff – psychological man accepts the "sovereign and unresolvable basic contradictions" that

³²¹ Philip Rieff, introduction in Sigmund Freud, *Therapy and Technique*, ed. Philip Rieff, (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 11-12.

³²² *Ibid*, 14.

comprise “the singularly complicated human being that he is.”³²³ In other words, man learns tolerance for the ambiguities that “constrict him into a unique personality.”³²⁴

The condition of Freud’s conflicted and ambivalent “psychological man” was initially theoretically (and according to Freud scientifically) grounded in a pervasive understanding of sexuality, which permeated life from birth to death and constituted the driving force that shaped personalities, gave rise to mental illness, and ultimately fostered the growth of civilization. Together, his theories left an indelible mark on how Westerners understand sexuality, sexual desire, and sexual pleasure. Although new schools and theories of personality development and pathology have challenged traditional psychoanalysis and the primacy of the sexual drive, Freud’s ideas and his Freudian-isms remain part of our cultural imagination and vocabulary. He put sexuality at all life stages back into popular conversation and culture. For example, notions of unconscious life (that we are not “masters of our own domain”), repressions, slips of the tongue, transference, and the drama of the Oedipus complex are familiar and recognizable ways that lay people, not just psychotherapists, interpret psychic and sexual life in relation to everyday experience.

Freud, who began his career as a medical doctor before developing an interest in psychology, suggested that repressed sexual desires from childhood, buried deep in one’s unconscious, played a profound role in personality development. Sexuality took a central role in the conflict at the center of mental process, especially the cause of neuroses.³²⁵ Freud’s concept of the sexual instinct, the energetic impulse that seeks pleasure or satisfaction, grounded his psychological theory as well as his theory of culture. In his

³²³ Ibid, 17.

³²⁴ Ibid, 17.

³²⁵ Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents*, 132.

latter writings, Freud elaborated on and amended his theory about the relationship between sexuality and the growth of civilization. He proposed a dual-instinct theory comprised of the sexual instincts – understood in the widest sense as Eros, or life instincts – and the death instincts, manifest in aggression and aimed at destruction.³²⁶

In the next two sub-sections, I will implicate Freud in shaping cultural skepticism with respect to sexual desire and pleasure, while clarifying his scientific understanding of sexuality and his sense of the ultimate goals for our in-born impulses. The first sub-section will cover his enduring theory of sexuality, including the role of the sexual impulse and its crucial place in personality development and mental illness. The second sub-section will cover the relationship between sexuality and the development of civilization, including Freud’s use of Eros.

Tyranny of the Libido: Freud’s Theory of Sexuality

Up until this point, the scholars addressed in this project, primarily philosophers and theologians, have used methods that implicitly or explicitly draw on human experience. Though a number of them attempt to make essential claims about the nature of the human condition, their approaches are not “scientific” in a modern sense. Today, the discipline of psychology, a social science, is situated somewhere on the methodological continuum between the physical sciences and the humanities. Some approaches attempt to be more scientific, undertaking quantitative analysis and striving for statistical significance in an effort to predict human behavior. Other schools must

³²⁶ Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1965), 129. Freud reiterates these claims in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 59.

settle for theory and practice that is more heuristic in nature and ultimately judged by its usefulness.

Freud, who wrote and practiced in the first half of the twentieth century, firmly believed that his theory of psychoanalysis was best understood as a scientific discipline.³²⁷ He grounded this argument in the premise that scientific research consisted of the objective observation of and data collection from things human and nonhuman. This approach yielded rational knowledge, including theories and concepts, which could be equated with “truth,” the correspondence of careful observations of reality, or the real, external world.³²⁸ Uncovering “truth” by investigating patterns and establishing the reliability and validity of these patterns was the aim of scientific work.

Freud insisted that psychology was a “specialist science” and claimed that “...the intellect and the mind are objects for scientific research in exactly the same way as any nonhuman things.”³²⁹ He saw psychoanalysis as a branch of science that took the human mind as its object of observation, available to the analyst in the form of the analysand’s symptoms, dreams, slips of the tongues, free associations, and/or jokes. “Its contribution to science lies precisely in having extended research to the mental field,” he explained.³³⁰ It followed that his methods in psychoanalysis were grounded in the appropriation of scientific methods. As a “specialist” science, he argued that psychoanalytic investigations were objective and no more bias than any other scientific research, as both demonstrated

³²⁷ Psychoanalysis is 1.) a procedure for the investigation of mental processes which cannot be accessed by other means, 2.) a method, based upon this investigation, for the treatment of neurotic disorders, and 3.) a collection of psychological information/theory gleaned from this method, which is gradually accumulated into a new scientific discipline. E. R. Wallace, “Psychoanalysis,” in *The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. R.J. Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 972.

³²⁸ Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, 211.

³²⁹ *Ibid*, 196.

³³⁰ *Ibid*, 197.

connections without imposing an agenda or taking sides.³³¹ Freud's claim to science and its objectivity was a step in legitimating his discoveries about the sexual drive and its role in the mental health of individuals. Insofar as psychology was a "science," it spoke to the *truth* about the human mind, its energies, and its workings.

The Structural Theory of the Mental Apparatus

Freud argued that observation and interpretation, typically taking the form of case studies, revealed the conflict-ridden nature of the human psyche. Though his theory of the mind shifted over time, he eventually committed to a "structural model." He elaborates on this model in *The New Introductory Lectures* (1917/1933) and *The Question of Lay Analysis* (1926), explaining the key components involved in mental life: the id, the ego, and the superego. His immediate concern is the relationship between the id and the ego, whose struggle is instigated by bodily needs (hunger and love, for example). A need, which takes the form of a drive or instinct, fills and energizes the id – an imposing, obscure, un-conflicted, unconscious dimension of the mental apparatus – and demands satisfaction of the need. When the need is extinguished, tension in the system is reduced, and *pleasure* is the identifiable sensation; alternatively, the consequence of any increase in this tension produces *unpleasure*. Freud calls the mind's regulation of pleasure and unpleasure the "dominance of the pleasure principle."³³²

³³¹ Simon Freud, "Contributions to the Psychology of Love," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff, (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1963), 56. In many of his works Freud emphasizes the role of observation and upholds this method as the proof of the validity of his conclusions. For example, in *The Question of Lay Analysis*, on the question regarding his contentions of the sexual life of children, Freud answers simply, "It is based on direct observation." He goes on to explain the comparison of content from both the analyses of adults and children. Sigmund Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1959), 41.

³³² Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis*, 23.

Next, Freud asks us to imagine the ego (literally, “I”) as the “external, cortical layer...of the mental apparatus (of the id) which has been modified by the influence of the external world (reality).”³³³ In this way, the ego, which tends toward self-preservation, negotiates between the drives of the id and the demands, objections, or approvals of the external world. It can become conscious, but primarily remains unconscious. The chief function of the ego is to “tame the id’s impulses,”³³⁴ and, ultimately, to pursue one of two possible routes. On the one hand, the ego can modify the drive, adapting it to the demands of reality. On the other hand, it can make changes to reality, creating conditions to make the satisfaction of the drive possible.³³⁵ As the ego increasingly faces these negotiations, the “pleasure principle” is replaced by the “reality principle.” Psychological health, according to Freud, is dependent on the ego exercising its influence over all the parts of the id, where the absence of opposition characterizes the relationship between the two.

Conflict, however, between the ego and the id is inevitable. Freud contends that this opposition is more likely when the ego is less differentiated from the id, immature, and less capable of negotiating between the id and the external world. Thus, conflict in the psyche is typical of the first years of childhood. Unfortunately, mishandled conflict during this period in life sets the stage for neurosis or varying degrees of mental disturbance in adulthood. Freud explains that when the feeble ego experiences an instinctual demand from the id, one that it cannot control and perceives will generate a trauma in the face of the external world, the ego withdraws from the id, leaving it to its

³³³ Ibid, 17.

³³⁴ Ibid, 23.

³³⁵ Ibid, 24.

own devices. The ego “institutes a *repression* of these instinctual impulses.”³³⁶ As a result of being repressed, the impulse in the id becomes isolated and inaccessible to the ego.

The inaccessibility of the instinctual impulse, however, is problematic. This is because the instinct itself is a form of energy and retains its force in isolation from the ego. In an effort to be satisfied, it “produces psychological derivatives...tears away from the ego; and finally it breaks through into the ego and into consciousness in the form of an unrecognizable distorted substitute, and creates what we call a symptom,” Freud explains.³³⁷ Neurosis, therefore, has its origins in early childhood, when the ego, undeveloped and powerless, deals with the conflict between the id and the external world by siding with the external world and repressing the id’s impulse. The impulse becomes inaccessible to the ego before making its appearance in one’s consciousness as a symptom or symptoms characteristic of neurosis.

What’s Sexuality Got to Do With It?

In Freud’s structural theory, conflict among various parts of the mental apparatus and neurosis are intimately connected to sexuality. In fact, he positions *sexuality at the center* of the conflict that plagues the mental process, especially regarding neuroses. He argues, “...factors from sexual life play an extremely important, a dominating, perhaps even a *specific*, part among the causes and precipitating factors of neurotic illnesses.”³³⁸ How exactly? The instincts that fill and energize the id are *sexual impulses*. Thus, it is

³³⁶ Ibid, 26, italics in original.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ibid, 31, italics in original.

from these sexual impulses that the infantile ego must institute repressions.³³⁹ Freud often refers to the sexual impulse or urge as *libido*, whose ultimate goal is the reduction of tension that is experienced sensuously as pleasure. Among his boldest claims is the suggestion that sexual impulses do not arise initially with the onset of puberty, but are part and parcel of life from birth onwards.

Children, Freud explains, undergo a complicated process of development with respect to the sexual impulse, passing through *psychosexual stages* that mark their psychological development. In the first five years, libidinal energy is focused on erogenous zones on the body, moving from the mouth in the oral stage, to the anus in the anal stage, to the genitalia in the phallic stage. Libido then lies dormant for a period of time before returning to the genitals with the onset of puberty. Transitions from one stage to the next are marked by the conflict between the ego and the id, creating at each stage the potential for repressions.³⁴⁰

According to Freud, the ego, as it differentiates itself from the id, must bring the sexual, pleasure-seeking impulses of the id into greater accord with the age-appropriate demands of the external world. This developmental process culminates when libido is harnessed in the service of reproduction in a heterosexual partnership. Fixations and the negotiations of conflict at each of the previous stages, however, still contribute to the development of various personality characteristics.³⁴¹ Thus, Freud implicates the sexual

³³⁹ Ibid, 34, emphasis mine.

³⁴⁰ For example, in the oral stage the infant derives pleasure from sucking, including breast-feeding. This stage peaks with the conflict of weaning, which deprives the child of the physical pleasure obtained by sucking, as well as the psychological pleasure of being held and cuddled.

³⁴¹ For example, a child who succeeds at resisting parental and societal demands for toilet training in the anal stage by withholding her feces will develop an anal-retentive character.

impulse – *arising from any number of bodily needs* – in both personality development and the formation of neurosis as a consequence of repression.

In his article, “My Views on the Part Played by Sexuality in the Aetiology of Neuroses,” Freud reiterates his claim on the importance of somatic processes as the essence of sexuality and how the constitutional dispositions of children should be recognized as “polymorphously perverse.”³⁴² Put differently, he draws attention to the importance the body and its needs, suggesting that young children experience pleasure via various parts of the body (mouth, anus, genitals), and that *multiple objects* hold the promise of providing pleasure. Freud also speculates that normal sexual functioning actually depends on certain aspects of the libido becoming repressed “under the primacy of the genital zone in the service of the reproductive function.”³⁴³ If the libido is not directed in this way, perversion or neurosis would result.³⁴⁴ Taken together, Freud claims that overly repressed *or* overly indulged sexual impulses contribute to psychoneuroses. “The nature of these maladies,” he emphasizes, “lies in disturbances of the sexual

³⁴² Sigmund Freud, “My Views on the Part Played by Sexuality in the Aetiology of Neuroses,” in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff, (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1963), 7.

³⁴³ Ibid. Weeks points out the need to grasp the fullness of Freud’s definition of sexuality if we are to understand psychoanalysis’s claim that sexuality is central for the mental life of individuals. He demonstrates that Freud makes every effort to divorce the association of made between the sexual instinct and heterosexual genitality. Freud posits the start of sexual life shortly after birth, explains that “sexual” includes many activities that are not associated with the genitals and, finally, argues that sexual life involves obtaining pleasure through zones of the body. With regards to the last point, it is only by virtue of the imposition of “civilized” morality that the sexual impulse is brought into the service of reproduction. Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, 135. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud explains, “The concept of ‘sexuality’, and at the same time of the sexual instinct, had, it is true, to be extended so as to cover many things which could not be classed under the reproductive function...” Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 61.

³⁴⁴ Perversions, Freud explains, are caused by excessive or obsessional libidinal tendencies, while neuroses are caused the severe repression of libidinal tendencies. Freud, “My Views on the Part Played by Sexuality in the Aetiology of Neuroses,” 7.

processes, of those organic processes which determine the development and form of expression of the sexual craving.”³⁴⁵

In 1905, this theory of sexuality, typified by sexual stages and the development of personality traits, replaced Freud’s “seduction theory.” In the latter he had suggested that psychoneuroses, such as hysteria and obsessions, were a result of the repressed memories of *actual sexual abuse or traumas* in early childhood. After this theoretical shift, he argued that repressed memories were actually the patient’s own “phantasies of seduction,” an attempt to defend against the sexual activities the individual practiced as a child.³⁴⁶ It was not so much the experience of sexual stimulation experienced as a child that contributed to neurosis, as how the child responded – whether the ego instituted a repression or not. Later theorists would question and fiercely debate Freud’s new interpretation of repressed and recovered memories of sexual abuse or trauma.

In his own time, Freud’s assertions were radical and met with significant resistance. The suggestion that from birth, children possessed a “sexual” life, sought to have their “sexual” impulses satisfied through attention to and manipulation of various body parts, and experienced “sexual” fantasy in relationship to their parents scandalized a culture that was emerging from the strict sexual moralism that typified the Victorian era. His explanation that repressed sexual desires constituted the secret roots of neurotic illness, buried deep in a part of the mind that was inaccessible to conscious, rational thought – the unconscious – felt threatening. His appraisal of human nature, conflict

³⁴⁵ Ibid, 9.

³⁴⁶ Freud, “My Views on the Part Played by Sexuality in the Aetiology of Neuroses,” 4. In this essay, Freud also champions his method of objective observation – what he calls an “irreplaceable method of investigation.” Such an approach helps him to see that all of his patients eventually report disturbances in their sexual lives, leading him to hypothesize a “preferential position to sexual influences in the aetiology of the neuroses.” Ibid, 2, 8.

ridden and continually subject to the ongoing tensions between sexual impulses and the demands of society and its authorities, was not positive.

But despite the criticism and backlash, Freud persisted. In the decade subsequent to 1905 he published three more case histories, as well as papers on technique to establish the legitimacy of psychoanalytic method, and defied the bounds of his specialization by authoring papers on religion, literature, sexual mores, biography, sculpture, prehistory, and more.³⁴⁷ As Peter Gay puts it in the “Introduction” to a number of Freud’s works, “Freud took all of culture as his province. He was realizing the program he had outline for himself in his youth: to solve some of the great riddles of human existence.”³⁴⁸

Freud’s Legacy

Freud’s initial claims have multiple resonances for the goals of this project. On a positive note, he demonstrates a notable affirmation of the body and its needs. Sensuous, bodily pleasure, driven by the sexual impulse, is natural and innate. More so, the satisfaction of some of these impulses is critical to healthy psychological development. Freud also viewed these sexual impulses as lifelong and unbound to any particular developmental stage. Children, therefore, are sexual creatures insofar as they desire various kinds of body pleasure, obtained through the use of self, others, and objects. Thus, sexuality in childhood is defined broadly and does not focus entirely on genital sexuality.

Also, “sexual” impulses or instincts in and of themselves do not refer directly to the drive for genital sexual pleasure. “Sexual” merely means arising from any number of

³⁴⁷ Peter Gay, “Freud: A Brief Life,” introduction to Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, xv.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

bodily needs, just as the pleasure sought refers to tension reduction. The point is that Freud's understanding of sexual instincts and pleasures is broader than how we currently conceive of sexual drives and pleasures – an intense focus on genital sexuality. Freud concedes, however, that these drives and pleasures are channeled into genital sexuality for the purposes of procreating. Although he speculates about the negative impact on mental health generated by the external impingement of “civilized sexual morality,”- the cultural emphasis on abstinence until marriage, monogamy, and procreation, sanctioned by religion, medicine, and every authority – he eventually concludes that these ends are essential for more intensive and productive cultural activities.³⁴⁹

It is my contention that Freud's theory of sexuality offered the next major cultural conception of sexuality, perhaps even replacing the dominance of aspects of the negative Christian legacy. In addition to the positive concepts he presented/argued for, Freud also determined that the sexual impulse, though natural, ultimately necessitated a degree of restriction – a sentiment common in the Christian tradition. However, instead of being sinful in its origins, Freud viewed sexual desire and its quest for pleasure as natural and constitutive of personality development. Also, the problem for Freud was rooted more in negotiations with the external world and its demands – society, civilization, and religion – than in the internal disordering of the will and the flesh prompted by mortal disobedience to God. Thus, problems in the negotiation of the sexual impulse subsequently signaled psychological illness as opposed to a moral deficiency. In other words, sexuality was no longer implicated in morality, but became an issue of health and sometimes implied a problem with society and religion rather than with the individual.

³⁴⁹ See Sigmund Freud, “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness,” in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff, (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1963).

Taken together, with respect to lingering angst regarding sexual desire and its pleasures, Freud's theory up until this point indicates that the force of the pleasure principle is a powerful one, one that necessitates a strong ego, guided by appropriate demands of the external world, to implement restrictions in efforts to realize the reality principle. Though no longer an issue of sexual immorality, expressions of neuroses and perversions implied mental illness and the repression of sexual impulses. While there are ways – per Freud's psychoanalytic methods – for dealing with this, the need for properly channeling sexual impulses and the pleasures they seek is essential.

Culture, Science, and the Bonds of Community: Freud's *Eros*

In addition to understanding mental disturbances and conducting therapeutic interventions, Freud developed a great interest in the relationship between individual psychological processes and the progress of civilization. Because sexuality was central to his rendering of the human condition, it also played a prominent role in the state of civilization. In “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness,” Freud explains that civilization is founded upon the suppression of instincts, with the suppression of the sexual instincts being no exception. He contends that sexual instincts are capable of being “sublimated:” the process of exchanging an original sexual aim for another, which is no longer sexual but psychically related, without diminishing in intensity.³⁵⁰

Again, Freud insists that the sexual instinct does *not* originally serve the purposes of procreation, but seeks pleasure.³⁵¹ Consequently, pleasure is the original ends to the sexual impulse. This is an interesting inversion of the predicament found in the Christian

³⁵⁰ Freud, “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness,” 16.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

legacy regarding pleasure, namely that the original impulse is to procreate, an impulse that after the fall is sullied by the desire for pleasure. Freud explains that the pressures of the external world eventually relegate the sexual instincts to the genitals and guide them into the service of procreation. Furthermore, any excess found useless for reproduction is “in favourable cases diverted to sublimation.”³⁵² Freud asserts that energy available for cultural development comes at the cost of the suppression of “so-called perverse elements of sexual excitation,” or those impulses unfit for the purposes of procreation.³⁵³ In other words, sexual energies that are unfit to be channeled into procreation must be suppressed into the service of cultural development.

Published in 1908, Freud spends the bulk of “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness” implicating the imposition of “civilized” morality in the increase in neurotic disorders. He argues that cultural insistence on a limited space for the expression of the sexual drive, namely monogamous intercourse in the context of legitimate matrimony for the purpose of procreation, in addition to tabooing all other sexual activity, only leads to an increase in neurotic symptoms and renders individuals less likely to contribute in positive ways to society. Put differently, the social sanctioning of limited sexual expression arrests the availability of libidinal energies that might otherwise be sublimated and channeled in ways that foster the growth of the community.

In my reading, Freud tries to strike a balance between the need for a degree of sublimation for the benefit of society *versus* societal restrictions that increase the risk of repression, thus increasing the likelihood of neuroses, and ultimately do a disservice to the energy available for cultural development. Although he urges reform of the strictures

³⁵² Ibid, 17.

³⁵³ Ibid.

imposed by “civilized” sexual morality, he cannot manage to get beyond the sexual norm of the priority on heterosexual marriage. In this sense he supports the containment of the sexual impulse and its pleasure not unlike the theologians in Chapter Two. However, while the latter are more concerned about fornication and moral sin as a consequence, Freud focuses on the detriment to the advancement of culture, particularly the scientific enterprise.

But Freud does not claim congruence with religious thought. In fact, to his concern regarding detriments to the advancement of culture, he infamously implicates religion, insisting, “religion alone is to be taken seriously as the enemy.”³⁵⁴ Because *scientific advancement* holds the key to advancement in civilization, religion is problematic because it not only rivals science in the quest for knowledge, but it claims to offer that which science cannot – comfort and assurance of happiness. Grounded in *illusion*, which is based on emotion and the fulfillment of wishful impulses, religion, according to Freud, so tightly binds sexual expression that it arrests the availability of libidinal energies that might otherwise be sublimated and channeled in ways that foster the growth of the community.³⁵⁵ *Thus, religion represses both important sexual energies and intellectual truth.* The risk in giving religion the power to contribute to knowledge is individual or group psychosis, which Freud claims leads to a future full of illusion.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Freud, *The Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, 198

³⁵⁵ Applying psychoanalytic theory to religion, Freud hypothesizes that “religion is an attempt to master the sensory world in which we are situated by means of the wishful world which we have developed within us as a result of biological and psychological necessities.” Ibid, 207. Put differently, religion is an attempt to make sense of reality that is based on emotion and wishful impulses from our past. It originates from the helplessness of children and survives into adulthood to satisfy the wishes and needs of childhood.

³⁵⁶ See Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), and Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

The Shift in Drive Theory

Elaboration on his theory of instincts and on the relationship between instincts and culture (both culture's role in restriction and its need for sublimated sexual energies) eventually forces a shift in Freud's drive theory. His introduction of the concept of narcissism, as well as curiosity about repetitious destructive human behavior, leads him to a dual-instinct theory that made its debut in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920).³⁵⁷ Freud admits that he could no longer overlook the reality of *non-erotic* aggressiveness and destructiveness.³⁵⁸

Consequently, Freud no longer posits the primary conflict at the base of libido theory as being between the ego-instincts for self-preservation and the sexual instincts directed towards objects. Instead, he argues that a portion of the ego-instincts is libidinal; sexual instincts, therefore, operate in the ego. Freud then proposes "two essentially different classes of instincts: the sexual instincts, understood in the widest sense as *Eros*, and the aggressive instincts, whose aim is destruction."³⁵⁹ *Eros* compromises the instincts that seek to preserve life, while the death instinct, manifest in aggression, seeks a return to an earlier, inorganic state. Freud hypothesizes that the death instinct could be turned out toward the external world, expressing itself as aggression, or, if restricted, it could be turned inwards, increasing self-destruction. Drawing heavily from biology and life on the cellular level, he now attributes libido to individual cells, and so the sexual instincts

³⁵⁷ Freud's concept of narcissism consisted of "the discovery that the ego itself is cathected with libido, that the ego, indeed, is the libido's original home, and remains to some extent its headquarters. This narcissistic libido turns toward objects, and thus becomes object-libido; and it can change back into narcissistic libido once more." Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 76-77.

³⁵⁸ Ibid, 78-79. It is important to point out – given these shifts in theory – that libido is proper to the power of *Eros*, distinct from the energy of the death instinct. Satisfaction of the death instinct, whether present with or without a sexual purpose, "is accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment," which fulfills the ego's old wishes for omnipotence. Ibid, 81.

³⁵⁹ Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, 129; Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 59.

constitute *Eros*, “which seeks to force together and hold together the portions of living substance.”³⁶⁰

In the shift to a dual-instinct theory, Freud argues, “The phenomena of life could be explained from the concurrent or mutually opposing actions of [*Eros* and the death instinct].”³⁶¹ So although the sexual instincts are now distinct from destructive impulses, *conflict* still remains characteristic of both the human condition and civilization. More often than not, Freud suggests that the two instincts are “alloyed with each other” to more or less degrees. This indicates that most *Eros* contains some degree of the destructive instinct.

The phenomena of sadism and masochism serve as “excellent examples” of a mixture of these two classes of instincts. Sadism, Freud explains, is the term for the experience of sexual pleasure that necessitates the pain and humiliation of the sexual object. In this case, the aggressive instinct is turned outward, away from the ego toward the sexual object. Masochism describes the experience of sexual pleasure as the pained and humiliated object oneself, occurring when the aggressive instinct is turned around upon the subject’s own ego.³⁶² Freud contends that normal sexual relations contain some “admixture” of both sadism and masochism.³⁶³ All instinctual impulses, he argues,

³⁶⁰ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 73.

³⁶¹ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 77.

³⁶² Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 66. Freud also suggests that the destructive impulse turned inward is difficult to identify unless it is “tinged with eroticism.” Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 79. In other words, manifestations of the death instinct are hard to notice unless they are accompanied by a degree of pleasure.

³⁶³ In addition, the aggressive instinct can be used in the service of the sexual function. For example, as reproduction becomes the acceptable aim for libido, the aggressive instinct can serve to overpower its sexual object, making a way for the sexual instinct to access the object. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 65.

contains some mixture of *Eros* and the death instinct. His recurring point is that the phenomenon of life proceeds from parallel or opposing activity between the two.³⁶⁴

The Cost of Community: Unavoidable Malaise

The shift in Freud's theory of instincts eventually extends to his assessment of the tension between the individual and society and to his hypothesis about the reason for pervasive malaise and unhappiness. His view of the human predicament is pessimistic, or realistic, depending on the appeal of his theory. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud reminds his readers that the road to satisfaction or happiness imposed on us by the pleasure principle cannot be fulfilled. Instead, we must seek other paths, either independent of the external world or altering the world to suit our wishes.³⁶⁵ He also reminds us that the regulations of civilization have been cause for much hostility, and in some cases, neuroses.

Freud defines civilization as

...the whole sum of achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes – namely to protect men [sic] against nature and to adjust their mutual relations.³⁶⁶

The first entails the threat of natural disaster and the reality of death, both of which *should be* the domain of science, as opposed to religion and its illusory claims to comfort and assurances of happiness. The second of the two deals with the regulations of social

³⁶⁴ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 77-78. Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, 130.

³⁶⁵ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 34. He also reminds us of the role of sublimation of the instincts, where pleasure for some can be realized from sources of psychical and intellectual work – like an artist's joy in creating or a scientist's joy in solving problems or discovering truths. Still, Freud reminds us that the intensity of this pleasure is mild compared to the satiation of the original instinctual impulses. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 29-30.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 42.

relationships, in which case civilization calls for the primacy of the community over the individual.

According to Freud, individuals are expected to sacrifice their instincts and their liberty for the cultural claims and aims of the group.³⁶⁷ Recall his claims that energy used for the growth of civilization is withdrawn from sublimated sexual energy. Thus, civilization implements tight controls over the expression of the sexual instinct by limiting it to heterosexual genital love, further restricted by insistence upon legitimacy and monogamy.³⁶⁸ Freud explains that *civilization does not permit sex as a source of pleasure in its own right* and tolerates it only for purposes of reproduction.³⁶⁹ Even though everyone does not abide by these sexual regulations, it is this “attitude” on the part of society that holds claim to such power.

In addition to issuing strict regulations on sexual relationships, Freud adds that civilization demands that “aim-inhibited” libido be channeled in to *the service of binding community members together in friendship*. “Civilization,” he says, “is a process in the service of *Eros*, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals...families...races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind.”³⁷⁰ This regulation is primarily prompted by the individual’s inclination to aggression and the threat that aggression poses to society. Freud argues that to establish bonds and relationships that

³⁶⁷ Freud suggests that there is striking similarity between the process of civilization and the libidinal development of an individual.

³⁶⁸ Freud draws an analogy between civilization’s control of sexuality and the exploitation of one population by another, pointing out that fear of revolt by the suppressed elements gives further reason for stricter precautionary measures. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 60.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ibid, 81.

run contra to “man’s true nature,” civilization necessitates the restriction of sexuality and the encouragement of friendships.³⁷¹

When Freud steps back from these ruminations, he is not surprised that, given the sacrifices required of both the sexual and aggressive instincts – *even in efforts to thrive in community with others* – human beings experience a great deal of unhappiness in life. After all, the intensity of any pleasure is mild compared to the satiation of raw sexual impulses. According to Freud, we suffice to trade a degree of this happiness for security – protection from the wrath of nature, as well as from our own neighbor. He concludes that the evolution of civilization over time can be captured by the struggle between *Eros* and Death, between the life or sexual instinct and the death instinct, as it works itself out in the human species.³⁷²

Lasting Implications

Freud’s theory about the necessary relationship between sexuality and culture established deep roots in the West. Again, there were subtle resonances with the Christian tradition, which also attributed the well-being of society to sexual restraint and containment. Adherence to the sexual mores assured protection from divine retribution. But Freud’s theory shows no allegiance to a social order committed to growing the City of God in numbers or avoiding divine wrath. He is concerned that neither individuals (with respect to health) nor civilization can prosper without a degree of sublimation, rightfully put to use by creative endeavors that increase rational knowledge, solving

³⁷¹ Ibid, 65-67. One way that civilization succeeds in binding groups together in love, Freud explains, is to target “outsiders” as the recipients of aggression. In fact, satisfying the aggressive instinct against those with minor differences serves to increase group cohesion, he argues. Ibid, 72.

³⁷² Ibid, 82.

scientific problems, and discovering truths, as well as efforts to establish bonds and relationships in community with one another. For Freud, there is a very real and present danger in pursuits – like religion – which deny these realities and insist on the attainment of higher moral standards and saving grace.

Philip Rieff notes the appeal of Freudian theory to Americans in the twentieth century. He argues that the presuppositions of psychoanalytic therapy encouraged the attitude that “man [sic] can be made healthier without being made better – rather morally worse. Not the good life but better living is the Freudian standard.”³⁷³ In other words, psychological health was no longer bound to morality. Freud had revealed the helplessly conflicted nature of the human condition from which there was no escape. Humanity needed to accept this plight, “resign [itself] to living within [its] moral means, suffer no gratuitous failures in a futile search for ethical heights that no longer exist – if they ever did.”³⁷⁴ “Freud,” Rieff indicates, “proclaims the superior wisdom of choosing the second best.”³⁷⁵ We recognize and have peace with our lack of capacity for genuine altruism, as according to Freud, we commit to community for our own security in the face of our neighbors’ aggression. Rieff argues that Freud, having revealed the nature and limits of human consciousness, intended these sentiments to be liberating. This new ideal, psychological man, was “an individual free in the sobriety and modesty of his egoism” – an ideal that America already had in Sigmund Freud, insists Rieff.³⁷⁶

A seemingly clear or analyzed conscious, however, does not unleash the fullness of the sexual impulses. Both the sexual and aggressive instincts retain their power.

³⁷³ Rieff, 20.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Rieff, 23.

Searching for a strong advocate in Freud for sexual pleasure in sex comes up short. Even though libido theory affirms the need and desire for sexual (bodily) pleasure and places it in the context of psychological development, civilization necessitates parameters, guidelines, and rules for the indiscriminant sexual impulses at the core of the self. Attention to this dimension of human life is dire –a question of health for the individual, safety for the community, and progress for society.

Subsequently, the next major cultural conception of sexuality offered no modicum of sexual freedom. As sociologist Pepper Schwartz explained in 2000,

Indeed, [change] would be possible...if we really freed ourselves from the still-lingering power of the Freudian-based belief that sexuality must be constrained to committed relationships (e.g. marriage) to assure men's involvement with their biological children and to maintain a civil society.³⁷⁷

Schwartz, like many others, points here to the endurance of Freud's work with respect to sexuality and its pleasures – to his emphasis on the cultural import of monogamous marriage (however much it diminishes our pleasure), reproduction, and maintaining the social order. Other feminists offer additional critiques of how Freud's assumptions about women and women's sexuality in these theories have served to minimize their sexual pleasure and even suggest their moral inferiority.

Foucault on Pleasure and the Social Construction of Sexuality

Just as Freud's contributions constituted a major source of new theory on sexuality in the early twentieth century, the work of French philosopher Michael Foucault has had a considerable influence on modern thinking about sexuality in the latter half of the twentieth century. Foucault questioned the assumption that "sexuality" was *naturally*

³⁷⁷ Schwartz, 215.

central to the human condition – a fundamental dimension of our personhood, capturing our preferences and desires, our desirability, our identity, our sexual activity, and our sense of ourselves as normal or abnormal. He wondered how sex had become, “the truth of our being.” In the course of his “genealogical” approach to sexuality, Foucault recognized the *centrality of pleasure* to what he concluded was a construct composed of social and historical sexual discourses.³⁷⁸ His work on sexual pleasure is essential for moving this critical conversation beyond the legacies of the Christian tradition and Freud.

In his own time, Foucault had witnessed the growth of the “science of sex,” which sought to ferret out the truth of sex from its many guises, including infantile sexuality, relations between the sexes, hormones and chromosomes, the nature of the “sexual instinct,” and the etiology of sexual perversions.³⁷⁹ Freud, along with his contemporary, Havelock Ellis, a British physician and psychologist, were followed by influential figures in the scientific study of human sexuality, or sexology. Alfred Kinsey and his infamous Kinsey reports “propelled sex into the public eye in a way unlike any previous book or event had done.”³⁸⁰ The press provided them with ample publicity, protected by the “aura of science” that surrounded the studies.³⁸¹ Though this science enhanced knowledge about human sexual behaviors, it also proceeded to rigorously scrutinize sexual difference and obsessively categorize sexual perversions. The result, according to historian and sociologist Jeffrey Weeks, has been a “more or less coherent body of

³⁷⁸ “Foucault intended the term ‘genealogy’ to evoke Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals, particularly with its suggestion of complex, mundane, inglorious origins — in no way part of any grand scheme of progressive history. The point of a genealogical analysis is to show that a given system of thought... was the result of contingent turns of history, not the outcome of rationally inevitable trends.” Gary Gutting, “Michel Foucault,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2010 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/foucault/> (accessed August 11, 2011).

³⁷⁹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5. In addition to Freud, Weeks names Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Auguste Forel, and Magnus Hirschfeld.

³⁸⁰ D’Emilio and Freedman, 285.

³⁸¹ *Ibid*, 285.

assumptions, beliefs, prejudices, rules, methods of investigation and forms of moral regulation, which still shape the way we live our sexualities today.”³⁸²

Confessing Unto Thee: Christianity and the Multiplication of Sexual Discourse

Throughout his famous text, *A History of Sexuality*, Foucault probes the marked change in societal beliefs about sexuality since the start of the 17th century. His “history” amounts to a search for instances and transformations of discursive production with regards to sex, the production of power, and the propagation of knowledge. Contrary to the popular sentiment that society suffers from a repressed, silenced sexuality, solidified by the Victorian bourgeoisie, Foucault argues that discourse on sexuality in the last three centuries has actually exploded and multiplied.

Curious as to how sexual desires and pleasures first acquired language, Foucault implicates the Christian tradition in the production of a mechanism for multiplying discourses on sex, or, as he puts it, “passing everything having to do with sex through the endless mill of speech.”³⁸³ He points to the practice of confession, ritualized in the sacrament of penance, as a seminal source in the transformation of sexual desires and pleasures into discourse. In Foucault’s account, the confession of the flesh continually increased, particularly as a result of the Counter Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century, which emphasized the rules of self-examination and heavily weighted the importance of penance in spiritual practice.³⁸⁴ Christians were told to confess their sins of the flesh in full, meaning that everything had to be told, including

³⁸² Weeks, *Sexuality*, 6.

³⁸³ Foucault, 21.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 19.

thoughts, desires, pleasures, and longings. Confession, thus, entailed verbalization of not only acts but also the smallest stirrings of desire.

This “Christian pastoral,” according to Foucault, not only succeeded in turning desires and pleasures into discourse, but also aimed to transform desires and pleasures themselves in the process. Subsequently, in addition to Christian adherents mastering and detaching from the flesh, confessing desires also effected spiritual reconversion, or “...turning back to God, a physical effect of blissful suffering from feeling in one’s body the pangs of temptation and the love that resists it.”³⁸⁵ In other words, reorienting one’s self in pursuit of God through the practice of confession yielded the convergence of *pleasure* (the experience of the love of God) *in pain* (the experience of the temptations of the flesh). Taken together, there was a spiritual and moral benefit attached to the practice of revealing sexual longings, acts, and pleasures, despite the pain.

In the imperative to confess, the technique also suggested divulging something akin to a secret, a dirty and dangerous one, deeply buried within the self. Foucault argues,

...by making sex into that which, above all else had to be confessed, the Christian pastoral always presented it as the disquieting enigma: not a thing which stubbornly shows itself, but one which always hides, the insidious presence that speaks in a voice so muted and often disguised that one risks remaining deaf to it.³⁸⁶

Foucault’s assessment of confession takes sexual temptation in the Christian life to be a threat in the slyest and sneakiest of ways. Looking back, prior to the Counter-Reformation, one finds theological support for the extraordinary problem of lust and sexual pleasure, as well as the dangers they posed and the disguises they assumed.

Pertinent examples include Augustine’s reasoning for why orgasm is so problematic, the

³⁸⁵ Ibid, 23.

³⁸⁶ Ibid, 35.

theme of God's retribution for sexual sin that runs through this patristic and medieval theology, and the constant reminders that Christians should not be fooled and allow marriage to be an excuse for indulging sexual desires and pleasures. With a Foucauldian lens I can consider how this theology, integrated into a spiritual practice, actually gives language to, or produces, that which it seeks to control.

Producing the Truth About Sex

Foucault also argues that the Christian technique of confession and its preoccupation with sex was co-opted by "other mechanisms." The emergence of a political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex had analysis and classification as its aims – not only to condemn or tolerate, but also to *manage*. "Sex was not something some simply judged; it was a thing one administered," he explains.³⁸⁷ It needed to be "inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum."³⁸⁸ Here, Foucault suggests that not only did these "other mechanisms" use the confessional technique to judge, but also to organize and regulate sexual activities in such a way that the majority might flourish. The adoption of this technique and its assumptions resulted in a multiplicity of discourses, produced by various mechanisms, operating within different institutions.³⁸⁹

Foucault sees the production of discourse on sex at work in nineteenth century medicine, and credits it, along with the rise of Protestantism, with de-ritualizing and delocalizing confessional practices. With numerous ways of accumulating this discourse, individuals are now asked about the details of *all the pleasures* that are part of the sexual

³⁸⁷ Ibid, 24.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Ibid, 33.

act. This data is amassed, eventually forming “a great archive of the pleasures of sex,” and a system of classifications.³⁹⁰ Thus, Foucault asserts that the “production of truths” formally elicited from sex through confession was co-opted by science and subject to the rules of scientific discourse. For example, mixing confession with the examination of symptoms and the use of questionnaires, hypnosis, memory recollection, and free association made it amenable to the scientific standard of observation.

Freud and his “specialist science,” the psychoanalytic institution, are among the culpable for Foucault. Recall that Freud uses the scientific method of observation and data collection to study the human mind and understands his conclusions to be *thoroughly scientific*, providing rational knowledge, insight, and *approximate truths* regarding more or less adaptive personality development shaped by the flow and repression of sexual energy. His curative method of psychoanalysis cannot escape participation in what Foucault calls the *scientia sexualis*, or the *slowly developed discursive practice that is sexuality*.³⁹¹ *Scientia sexualis* is grounded in the belief that there is deeper truth or knowledge about the self to be extracted from one’s sexual desires and pleasures. For Foucault, Freud is but one figure in the progressive formation of the “interplay of truth and sex” that has developed since the nineteenth century.³⁹²

The Scientia Sexualis Versus An Ars Erotica

Modern society is the first to embark on the ambitious project of unearthing the truth about sex and mastering sexuality: the *scientia sexualis*. Foucault points out that this

³⁹⁰ Ibid, 63.

³⁹¹ Ibid, 68.

³⁹² Ibid, 56-57.

approach to sexual pleasure is contrary to how other historical societies have approached the truth of sex – with an *ars erotica*, or erotic art. He explains,

In the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience; pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul.³⁹³

In other words, in an *ars erotica* sexual pleasure is a means to an end in itself. One gains knowledge about sexual pleasure, its contours, varieties, etc., through the experience of sexual pleasure itself. There is no imposed, external means of evaluation. This posture toward pleasure opposes the goals of the *scientia sexualis*, namely to determine pleasure's moral value or its usefulness.

Also unlike an *ars erotica*, *scientia sexualis* assumes sex's elusiveness and pervasiveness and, therefore, must implement a number of techniques, in the spirit of Christian confession, to encourage desires and pleasures into speech. With the added help of interpretation, hidden truths about the self can be extracted from the truth told about sexual pleasures. The scientist, or psychoanalyst, is the interpreter of confessions, or the master of truth, Foucault argues.³⁹⁴ The scientific enterprise subsequently orders and categorizes these pleasures and desires, guided by the rule of the normal and the pathological, resulting in the establishment of a world of perversions and peripheral sexualities, like the "homosexual," for example. Ultimately, the masters of truth make a contribution to an ordered system of knowledge. These ends also oppose those of an *ars erotica* in which knowledge about sexual pleasures is transmitted from masters of eroticism (the keepers of the secret) to their disciples.

³⁹³ Ibid, 57.

³⁹⁴ Ibid, 67.

Furthermore, Foucault suggests that a *new kind of pleasure* was created in the midst of this discursive production. “Pleasure in the truth of pleasure...of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it...of luring it out in the open – the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure, he explains.”³⁹⁵ Put simply, those in charge of eliciting and interpreting sexual pleasures came to find pleasure themselves in the process. Thus, Foucault proposes that modern society has created its own form of an *ars erotica* in the *scientia sexualis*, relishing the pleasure of seeking out the truth about sex from the details of sexual behaviors and their pleasures.

Producing Power

Still, more is produced besides discourse, new pleasures, and new knowledge. Those in charge of inciting, coaxing out, and categorizing come to *possess power* over that which they create. This power does not repress. Rather, it comes into being through the creation of various forms of knowledge and this knowledge’s subsequent dissemination through public discourse. Families, schools, churches, and other social institutions transmit this discourse, which has already been organized into what kind of behavior is normal and what kind is abnormal. In this way, Foucault claims, “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it...”³⁹⁶ Put differently, discourse establishes norms in society and, in the process, identifies all those who do not constitute the norm.

When it comes to discourse on sexuality, rather than power being the force that struggles to subdue and control the stubborn drive of sexuality, sexuality itself functions

³⁹⁵ Ibid, 71.

³⁹⁶ Ibid, 101.

as “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power.”³⁹⁷ In other words, power can be leveraged over others using discourse on sexuality to shape how they and others view their sexuality. At the same time, discourse can also legitimize sexualities that are marginalized. Foucault gives the example of medical and legal discourse in the nineteenth century, which proliferated discourses on the species and subspecies of “homosexuality, inversion, pederasty...[which] made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of ‘perversity’.”³⁹⁸ Here, these institutions used discourse to create distinctions and then assert power and control. However, as Foucault points out, “...it also made possible the formation of ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand legitimacy....often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories...”³⁹⁹ Thus, through sexuality, power also legitimizes or reinforces that which it has created.

Foucault’s Legacy

Taken together, Foucault argues that the multiplication of discourses on sex, drawn from experience of desire and sexual pleasures, produces new pleasure, knowledge, and power. These observations – this new knowledge – needed to be integrated into a scientific knowledge that effected therapeutic healing.⁴⁰⁰ It had to be understood within the context of health and illness, for example. The truth of sexual pleasure needed to be rationalized. Just as Aquinas and the Greeks before him had emphasized, desires and their pleasures must tend toward logical ends. And so the

³⁹⁷ Ibid, 103.

³⁹⁸ Ibid, 101.

³⁹⁹ Ibid, 101.

⁴⁰⁰ James W. Bernauer, *Michel Foucault’s Force of Flight: Toward an Ethics for Thought*, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1990), 136.

science sexualis ordered and categorized their observations and, guided by the rule of the normal and the pathological, established of a world of perversions and peripheral sexualities, ultimately contributing to an ordered system of knowledge.

In sum, - and we could say against and because of both the Christian tradition and Freud – Foucault argued that far from innately central to human thriving or demise, sexuality, or the slowly developed discursive practice that is sexuality, is a historical, social construction, or a product of individual or group choices and decisions which effectively constructs our reality. As a construct, a product of social and historical forces, he suggested that sexuality was also a conduit of power, power that could not only discipline, but also produce. While in an *ars erotica* sexual pleasures function as an end in themselves, in a *scientia sexualis* they are encouraged into speech, become part of a discursive practice, and are organized and categorized to create subjects whose very subjectivities are founded on these pleasures.

At this point, Foucault has given us a theory for the ways in which sexual pleasure has been used to create discourses on sexuality that shape and reshape the sexual regime in society across time. Dissimilar to the discourses on sexual pleasure reviewed thus far, Foucault seems to suggest an innocence to pleasure, a meaningless that gains its force, meaning, value, legitimacy, purpose, and moral or immoral currency through discourse. Is his final contribution to this conversation the recognition that sexual pleasure is somehow “pre-discourse”? And if so, how does this (or not) get us any closer to thinking about the place of sexual pleasure in sexual ethics?

Sexual Pleasure: Resource for Resistance or Mechanism for Oppression?

Escaping the Inescapable: Pleasuring Our Way Out of Sexuality

When it comes to sexual pleasure specifically, Foucault is not always clear as to the extent to which it too is shaped, molded, and affected over time by discourse and the transfers of power that occur in this process. Mark Vernon, a journalist and former priest in The Church of England, has written the post-script for selected essays on religion and cultural authored by Foucault, but edited and published after his death by Jeremy Carrette. In the post-script, Vernon gets at my questions about sexual pleasure through his interpretation of Foucault's refusal to publically address his own sexuality – to “come out” as a gay man. Vernon argues that Foucault's resistance to proclaiming his sexuality actually served to support Foucault's own argument that discourse about sexuality ultimately shapes, controls, and determines our pleasures. Vernon sees Foucault's choice to refrain from identifying himself as a gay man as an effort to *liberate himself from sexuality*, as opposed to liberating his sexuality.⁴⁰¹ Put differently, Foucault's choice was “...not to ‘come out,’ but to find a ‘way out’ of sexuality,”⁴⁰² demonstrating that he neither opposed liberation nor sex, but the discursive practice that is sexuality.

According to Vernon, *sexual pleasure* holds the key to a Foucauldian way out. Citing a discussion with Foucault from April 1983, Vernon argues that Foucault wants to liberate pleasure from the matter of its control. Vernon says that Foucault makes a distinction between desire and pleasure: the former “is already pathologised,” and as such, declaring one's desires only serves to declare one's classification according to the

⁴⁰¹ Mark Vernon, “‘I Am Not What I Am’ – Foucault, Christian Asceticism and a ‘Way Out’ of Sexuality,” postscript in *Michael Foucault Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy R. Carrette, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 201.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

science of sex.⁴⁰³ Pleasure, however, remains unchanged, “imposing no intrinsic limitations upon the self.”⁴⁰⁴ The way out of sexuality for Foucault, Vernon argues, becomes a creative endeavor – literally creating new pleasures – a “polymorphous perversity”⁴⁰⁵ – to free one’s self from science’s “norms” for doing sex. If this sounds familiar, recall that Freud used a similar phrase – “polymorphously perverse”⁴⁰⁶ – to describe the constitutional dispositions of children, who experience pleasure via various parts of the body (mouth, anus, genitals), just as multiple objects hold the promise of providing pleasure.

For example, Foucault offers sadomasochism (s/m) as an option. When participants in s/m experiment with relational dynamics that resist socially constructed, stereotypical roles, they open themselves up to inventing new forms of sexual activity that do not reflect traditional constructions of pleasure.⁴⁰⁷ In effect, Vernon argues that Foucault “desexualized,” or, in the least, “degenitalized” sex.⁴⁰⁸ In Vernon’s reading of Foucault, pleasure is central in finding a way out contemporary constructions of sex and sexualities. Thus, it seems that while erogenous zones and various acts are under the sway of discourse, sexual pleasure pre-discourse is available for discovery.

Not surprisingly, the meaning of Foucault’s assertions about s/m and pleasure have been debated, even as his broader argument regarding sexuality’s historical construction have found favor. Some address inconsistencies in his work with regard to pleasure and sexuality. For example, American philosopher Judith Butler points out that

⁴⁰³ Ibid, 205, paraphrasing Foucault – ‘Discussion with Michel Foucault’: 26 April 1983, D250 (9)*, Foucault Archive, Paris.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid, 207.

⁴⁰⁶ Freud, “My Views on the Part Played by Sexuality in the Aetiology of Neuroses,” 7.

⁴⁰⁷ Vernon, 207. For more on Foucault’s discussion of S/M practices, see David Halperin’s *Saint Foucault: Toward a Gay Hagiography* (1995).

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid, 207.

Foucault makes contrary claims when considering sexual pleasures. On the one hand, Butler argues that *In A History of Sexuality* Foucault maintains that no dimension of sexuality exists outside of the complex interactions of discourse and power.⁴⁰⁹ Given that the body itself is determined within a discourse in the context of power relations, this would lead one to believe that even the experience of sexual pleasure is already determined. On the other hand, in the same text, Butler calls attention to Foucault's allusions to pleasures that are *prior* to the imposition of regulatory strategies.⁴¹⁰ This sounds similar to the *creative pleasures* that Vernon argues Foucault suggests are attainable through practices like s/m, materializing unscathed by any specific discourse and power exchange.

Butler is an opponent of the latter position, pointing out that if Foucault maintains a "multiplicity of pleasures" that are unaffected by discourse and power, then

[he] invokes a trope of prediscursive libidinal multiplicity that effectively presupposes a sexuality 'before the law,' indeed, a sexuality waiting for emancipation from the shackles of 'sex.'⁴¹¹

Put another way, Foucault would be arguing for an essential dimension of sexuality buried beneath layers of discursive and institutional historical practices. Butler's point is that this argument for sexual pleasure does not square with Foucault's other assertions that "a recourse to a sexuality before the law is an illusory and complicitous conceit of emancipatory sexual politics."⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble; Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 131.

⁴¹⁰ Butler, 131. Butler references Foucault's retelling of the "inconsequential bucolic pleasures" of "a few caresses...[playing] the familiar game called 'curdled milk'" that a simple-minded farm hand obtains a little girl. Foucault, 31.

⁴¹¹ Butler, 131.

⁴¹² *Ibid*, 132.

Thus, per Butler's analysis, Foucault's other contentions maintain that the possibility of a dimension of sexuality – like sexual pleasure – that is somehow prior to the social construction of sexuality and its reinforcements is a fantasy of those who believe that sexuality can be liberated from the very discourses that constitute it. For example, coming out as a lesbian and claiming a lesbian identity does not liberate one's sexuality. To the contrary, doing so actually reinforces the existence of a lesbian sexual identity, a category constructed to differentiate individuals based on sexual preferences.

Elsewhere in her text, *Gender Trouble*, Butler herself argues that in the process of shaping the gendered subject, pleasures have also been constructed. In other words, because social discourse shapes gender norms, and participating in the performance of gender determines one's sex, we must admit that in performing, our material bodies are in fact shaped by social discourse. She argues that pleasure centers like the penis, vagina, and breasts are parts of the body that have “become conceivable foci of pleasure precisely because they correspond to a normative ideal of a gender-specific body.”⁴¹³ In other words, these stereotypical erogenous zones/organs are animated to fit the overarching regime that organizes gender-specific organs, roles, and desires. While this assertion does not negate the experience of sexual pleasure for men and women, it does negate the innate purpose of these organs to elicit pleasures, just as it negates the natural numbness of other parts of the body to erotic stimulation.

If sexuality is indeed a social and historical construction, founded on knowledge extricated from desires and pleasures and coming to function as a conduit of power capable of disciplining bodies and producing sexual identities and societal norms, then these kinds of critical inquiries into sexual pleasure – considering its role in maintaining

⁴¹³ Ibid, 95.

discriminatory sexual regimes or existing as a resource for a way out of the structure of sexual discourse itself – are important. To what extent have sexual pleasures too been constructed by the multiple (often gendered) discourses that shape the body and determine the norms for sexual practices? Foucault’s genealogy of sexuality stimulated examination into the social regulation of sexuality: “the forms of control, the patterns of domination, subordination and resistance which shape the sexual.”⁴¹⁴ Feminists in the 1980s, convinced that sex was a site of the routine reinforcement of women’s subordination to male dominance, seized on sexual pleasure to debate its complicity and its promise.

The Feminist Sex Wars:
Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones, But Chains and Whips Excite Me⁴¹⁵

Modern feminism has railed against the androcentric, patriarchal, sexist, heterosexist, racist, and classist character of the current sexual regime, one that supports female subordination, violence against women, and compulsory heterosexuality. Women have demanded recognition of their rights over their own bodies, “re-posing questions about consent and reproductive rights, desire, and pleasure.”⁴¹⁶ In many areas of daily life, feminists argued for change – pointing to sexuality as a site where power was being used to regulate and control, while simultaneously constructing the female subject, including her sex roles, her sexual desires, and most likely her sexual pleasures. Agreeing that patriarchy and its institutions had profoundly effected (if not wholly constructed) sex and its norms, feminists concerned with the politics of sexuality and sexual ethics began

⁴¹⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values In An Age of Uncertainty*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995), 7.

⁴¹⁵ Rhianna, lyrics from *S&M*, Def Jam, 2011.

⁴¹⁶ Weeks, *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values In An Age of Uncertainty*, 9.

to take sides as they contemplated how to move forward with sex and sexual pleasure given the current state of affairs.

Feminist discourse on sexual pleasure is crucial to the goals of this project for a number of reasons. The various positions on sex and pleasure testify to the difficulty – even among scholars with similar goals of fighting sexism and empowering women – of interpreting sexual pleasure and trying to place it within a framework for sexual ethics. The feminist debates also concern the “extreme sexual experiences,” like prostitution, pornography, and s/m practices, situations that Christians typically demonize or ignore in their discussion of sexual ethics. Lastly, secular feminists debating and writing about pleasure are contemporaries of many of the feminist theologians and Christian ethicists who address the need for reformation of the Church’s approach to sexuality and sex. Consequently, there is an expectation of dialogue. In other words, feminist theologians writing about sex and sexual pleasure should be aware of and in conversation with secular feminists writing and theorizing about the same.

In the 1980s, “second-wave” feminists began debating the role of sexuality in the oppression *and* liberation of women. Prostitution, pornography, and s/m were topics related to sexual practices that generated intense debate among the feminists participating in these “sex wars.” The “war” metaphor assumed the division of these feminists into two camps: The “radical feminists” and the “pro-sex feminists” or “sex radical feminists.” Stereotypically, the former viewed sex as a source of women’s oppression with nothing to recover or reclaim, while the latter understood sex as a source of power and pleasure for women. Sociologist Wendy Chapkis, however, argues that feminist thinking on the

subject of sex was much more complex, including diverse positions within these two camps and some arguing for a third camp altogether.

Drawing on sociologist Steven Seidman's work in *Embattled Eros: Sexual politics and ethics in contemporary America*, Chapkis parses out the various positions in the 'sex wars' in the following way. Those referred to as "**radical feminists**" – the first camp – breakdown into roughly two groups: "pro-positive sex feminists" and "anti-sex feminists." Pro-positive sex feminists, like Gloria Steinem and Susan Griffin, hold that some sexual practices – those that entail love, a commitment, trust, and mutual sexual pleasure – are possible when an *eros* free from the distortions of patriarchy is uncovered. The opposite of this "positive" expression of sex is "its violent articulation in pornographic objectification."⁴¹⁷ Pro-positive sex feminists argue that sexuality may be able to be reclaimed from patriarchy, but that this is contingent on the complete abolition of pornography and prostitution. And even then, sex may have to look very different than what is commonly recognizable to us as sex.

Under the same umbrella of "**radical feminists**" is the *anti-sex group*, who insist that sex as we know it must be abolished. Catherine MacKinnon, for example, is well known for her argument that *sex is male domination*, and because sexuality is socially constructed, gendered from the ground up, there is no essential sexual being underlying the corruption of patriarchy. She rejects suggestions from the *pro-positive sex feminists* that a natural *eros* preexists or persists despite male domination. Simply put, sex is constituted by male domination and, thus, the practice of sex itself must be discarded. *Anti-sex feminists*, like Andrea Dworkin and Sheila Jeffreys, understand s/m, prostitution,

⁴¹⁷ Wendy Chapkis, *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 13.

and pornography to be obvious signs of sex as male domination and argue that this reality *concerning all sex* has been eclipsed.⁴¹⁸

Pro-sex feminists or “**sex radical**” **feminists** - the second camp – compose the pole opposite the radical feminists described above. Chapkis, per Seidman, also divides this camp into two groups: the “*sexual libertarians*” and the “*sexual subversives*.” The radically individualistic *sexual libertarians feminists* reverse the image of sex that the anti-sex feminists maintain. Chapkis points out that both groups understand pornography and prostitution as a reality, and both maintain that the overarching framework here is one of power.⁴¹⁹ Their point of departure, however, concerns who ultimately holds the power in these sexual transactions. *Sexual libertarians* argue that it is women, not men, who should see sex as the source of their greatest power, as opposed to a source of oppression and abuse.⁴²⁰ Camille Paglia – a well-known sexual libertarian and critic of Foucault – rivals Dworkin and MacKinnon, arguing that in sexual relationships it is women who rule and control and men who demonstrate weakness by paying for sex for example. For sexual libertarians, consent is the measure of an “ethical” sexual encounter, and because sex has no inherent meaning and derives its meaning from its context, individuals themselves are the judges of their sex.

Feminists who consider themselves **sex radicals**, but oppose this libertarian position, remain troubled by the denial of power and privilege that structure sex. They

⁴¹⁸ Some feminists who agree that both accepted and forbidden sex acts function within the social convention of patriarchy, argue that sexualized violence, like rape, must be identified as both sex and violence. Typically considered by feminists to be an issue of power and violence, addressing rape as sex, in addition to violence, “clarifies the extent to which rape and socially condoned, coercive sexual practices resemble each other.” Alyda Faber, “Eros and Violence,” in *Feminist Theology*, 12 (May 2004), 338. Also see Charlene L. Meuhlenhard, Sharon Danoff-Burg, and Irene G. Powch, “Is Rape Sex or Violence,” in *Sex, Power, Conflict: Evolutionary and Feminist Perspectives*, eds. David M. Buss and Neil M. Malamuth, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 119-137.

⁴¹⁹ Chapkis, 21.

⁴²⁰ Ibid, 22.

situate sex in a culture of male domination and concede that sex is constructed by this culture.⁴²¹ Thus, they are cognizant of and take into consideration the impact of the social and political context of sex. They distinguish themselves from **radical feminists**, however, by asserting that sex is not fully determined by patriarchy. Carole Vance, in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, explains that attention must be given to both the patriarchal structure of sexual life *and* women's choice and agency to determine what pleases them. With this in mind, this group of sex radical feminists sees sex as a site of struggle, neither inherently liberating nor repressive. Theirs is a vision of political struggle from within a culture of male domination that places *power and pleasure* at the heart of sexual discourse. They advocate for more than just consent in erotic ethics – they favor a subversive approach.

Subversive sex radical feminists “resignify sexual language and practices through using them in unintended ways.”⁴²² For example, Pat Califia argues that lesbians have been able to liberate and change the meanings of sexual vocabulary, like the word “dyke” for example. Califia also insists that the meaning of sexual language and practice is context dependent. In her article, “Feminism and Sadomasochism,” she explains how her sexual experience in s/m sexual activity is framed by a superseding egalitarian relationship, mutual negotiation about the rules of play, the intent to enhance sexual pleasure, and safety concerns. Far from sexual assault, with the intent to damage or harm, Califia explains how s/m play uses dominant and submissive roles *toward* “the most significant reward for being a top or bottom...sexual pleasure.”⁴²³ Thus, s/m practices in

⁴²¹ Ibid, 23.

⁴²² Ibid, 26.

⁴²³ Pat Califia, “Feminism and Sadomasochism,” in *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*, eds. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 233.

her context maximize her agency and her pleasure, as opposed to hurting her and rendering her powerless.

Taken together, the main disagreement between the **radical feminists** and the **sex radicals** when it comes to the politics of sexuality and sexual ethics does not concern whether structures of gender inequality construct and enact sex. Both agree that the historical construction of sexuality has produced a sexist social order that profoundly implicates sex. The difference rests in the *extent* to which patriarchy has determined sex and its pleasures. Whereas radical feminists see the extent of determination as absolute, sex radicals see sex as an opportunity to either destabilize power or reinforce it. For this latter group, practices like s/m, prostitution, pornography, and other dissident sexual practices are much more complex than wholesale exploitation and can be used in subversive ways to assert a woman's choice and agency, as well as to enhance her experience of pleasure. Thus, sex radical feminists, like Gayle Rubin, resist subjecting sexual pleasure to extrinsic criteria and argue that oppression on the basis of gender is distinct from oppression on the basis of sexual practice.⁴²⁴

Domination, Submission, and the Psychological Substance of Erotic Pleasure

The unconscious and its indiscriminate sexual impulses had been exposed. The thoroughly essential nature of sex, gender, sexuality, and even desires had been questioned and rejected. And now the roles and goals of sex in the lives of women were being scrutinized and revised to liberate and reveal the political dimensions of even the most personal and intimate aspects of women's lives. Female sexual pleasure was a hot

⁴²⁴ Kathleen Sands, "Uses of the Thea(o)logian: Sex and Theodicy in Religious Feminism," in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 8 (spring 1992): 10.

topic for radical and sex radical feminists. This issue of pleasure was made more complex because the ubiquitous relational dynamic between the sexes – that of domination and submission – extended to the bedroom, marrying sexual arousal and pleasure to *both* the experience of dominating or submitting to one’s partner(s). So pervasive were these roles in eliciting pleasures not even sex-same partners were immune. For example, some radical feminists pointed to the existence of butch-femme roles and s/m practices in the lesbian community, arguing that both amounted to compliance with patriarchy and the habituation of women to abuse and domination in sex as in all areas of life.⁴²⁵

In 1983, an edited text, *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, was published, containing writings by a number of influential pro-sex feminist thinkers. Among them was feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, whose article “Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination” bracketed the condemnation of gendered power dynamics in sex, and instead took an exploratory, psychoanalytic approach to understanding the relationship between power dynamics and sexual excitement. She is interested in the cultural association of sexual dominance with men and sexual submission with women and chooses to analyze sadomasochistic sexual relationships and fantasies with the assumption that they are the most intense expressions of dynamics that run through *all* relationships of arousal. When it comes to women’s sexual experience, Benjamin is convinced that *erotic pleasure* is intrinsic to their participation in s/m sexual relationships, including assuming the submissive role.

⁴²⁵ Ibid, 10.

Between Freud and Benjamin: Sexual Stimuli in Psychodynamic Theory

Part of what Benjamin argues in “Master and Slave” and later in her book, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (1988), is that women’s complicity as typically submissive partners (to more or less degrees) in sexual relationships is less about objectification and victimization and more about a deeply rooted motivation that is bound to erotic pleasure. Her claim is much more complex than it appears on the surface and stands in a long line of critiques of classical psychoanalytic theory, which *challenge Freud’s claims to pleasure as the primary motivation of the libidinal or sexual drive*. Over the course of the nineteenth century, these critiques were so strong that they provoked a theoretical shift (one of many) in psychodynamic theory. Collectively known as object relations theory (ORT), these proposals properly concerned themselves with how *object relations*, or the nature of relationships with real or internalized objects and/or primary caregivers, determine libido.

Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell define ORT, in its broadest sense, as theories or aspects of theories that “...[explore] the relationship between real, external people and internal images and residues of relations with them, and the significance of these residues for psychic functioning.”⁴²⁶ In other words, these theories concern the influence of actual experiences with or interpretations of real people or objects on psychological development. Brian Dines and Angelina Perrett add that ORT “treats relations with objects, rather than the expression of instincts, as the basic preoccupation of

⁴²⁶ Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 12. It is important to note that Greenberg and Mitchell also identify the complicated nature of the term ORT, which is often used to describe various connotations and denotations in a number of contexts. The term is attached to theorists who do not necessarily agree with one another, and not all self-identified object relations theorists recognize other object relations theorists as such. For the sake of simplicity, the remainder of this chapter will use ORT to situate the theorists to come unless otherwise specified. I will be attentive to drawing out distinctions as progress.

psychoanalytic thinking and clinical work.”⁴²⁷ Thus, one way that ORT distinguishes itself from Freudian classical analysis is by theorizing about the development of one’s personality from *interactions between the self and objects, as opposed to the satisfaction or repression of instincts*. Because children commence relating to their environment immediately after birth, object relations theorists move their primary analysis from Freud’s Oedipal stage of development (3-5 years of age, with a focus on the mother, father, child triad) to *pre-Oedipal experiences*, particularly those occurring between the infant and its primary caregiver.⁴²⁸

As the satisfaction or repression of libidinal instincts began to take a back seat to the primacy of interactions between the self and objects/people, theorists gravitating toward ORT also began to question the *drive for pleasure* as the primary impetus for acting upon an object/person. What then was the impetus for the drive? How did this translate into adult sexual life? And, finally, mostly importantly for my work, what role was pleasure left to play in our sexual experiences and to what extent did it determine the shape of our intimate relationships and our sexual practices?

W. R. D. Fairbairn is a key figure in the shift in psychoanalytic thinking from pleasure-driven human beings to the human being driven by the need for connection.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁷ Brian Daines and Angelina Perrett, *Psychodynamic Approaches to Sexual Problems*, (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000), 58.

⁴²⁸ Many ORT theorists retain aspects of Freud’s drive theory and the importance of Oedipal conflicts, but they hypothesize that psychosexual development begins at earlier stages in the infant’s development.

⁴²⁹ Greenberg and Mitchell argue that although Melanie Klein’s work begins a transition from Freud’s classical drive/structure model to a relational/structure model, Fairbairn “provides the purest and clearest expression of the shift from the drive/structure model to the relational/structure model.” Greenberg and Mitchell, 136, 151. Greenberg and Mitchell acknowledge Klein’s work as a key transition to work like Fairbairn’s. They also site Harry Stack Sullivan’s “interpersonal psychiatry,” in addition to Fairbairn, as a definitively transitional figure between models. Contemporary ORT theorist David E. Scharff finds Fairbairn’s theory the most helpful for understanding attachment and the psychological processes unfolding in infancy that ultimately impact adult sexual relationships. In *The Sexual Relationship: An Object Relations View of Sex and the Family*, Scharff draws extensively on the nature of primary emotional bonds and how sexual relationships both reflect the internal world of individuals and influence these worlds, He

In *Becoming Attached: First Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love*,

Robert Karen, a former child psychotherapist, argues,

Fairbairn was the first to argue that what Freud had underestimated in all this was the need for other people. [Fairbairn] argued that libido, or sexual energy, was not pleasure-seeking, as the classical theory held, but person-seeking.⁴³⁰

In other words, Fairbairn's claims departed from classical theory because he did *not* view attachment as secondary to the infant's use of objects as a vehicle for reducing libidinal tensions, satisfying impulses, and providing pleasure. Instead, Fairbairn saw attachment, or relation-seeking, as primary in the infant's development, and ultimately key to its survival.⁴³¹ Subsequently, Fairbairn claimed that motivation in both infancy and adulthood did not result from the quest for bodily pleasures, but from the "search for and maintenance of contact with others."⁴³²

Fairbairn's shift in understanding the workings and aims of libido and the function of pleasure altered psychological renderings of human motivation and, subsequently, perspectives on the origins of illness and mental health. Human motivation could now be envisioned as the search for and maintenance of relations with other individuals. Fairbairn characterized development as a gradual move from "infantile dependence" to "mature dependence," marked by a "transitional" stage in-between. He

also makes use of Bowlby, Mahler, Klein and Winnicott. See David Scharff, *The Sexual Relationship: An Object Relations View of Sex and the Family*, (London: Routledge, 1982).

⁴³⁰ Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached: First Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 39. Karen attends to Fairbairn in the context of explaining Fairbairn's importance to the work of attachment theorist John Bowlby.

⁴³¹ Greenberg and Mitchell, 156.

⁴³² Ibid. Fairbairn's contribution is distinguished from Klein because although Klein argued that objects were built into impulses from the start (as opposed to being added to impulses secondarily), she still posited the ultimate aim as pleasure – the object served as a means to an end. Fairbairn also argued that the object was built into the impulse from the start; however, he proposed that "the main characteristic of libidinal energy is its object-seeking quality. Pleasure is not the end goal of the impulse, but a means to its real end – relations with another." Greenberg and Mitchell, 154.

intentionally chooses “dependence” to describe this mature posture as opposed to independence because, he said, “a capacity for relationships necessarily implies dependence of some sort...characterized neither by a one-sided attitude of incorporation nor by an attitude of primary emotional identification.”⁴³³ Fairbairn held that relationships *always* necessitate a reciprocating other, one whose response we are dependent on for relationship without imposing ourselves entirely or identifying too strongly with the other. The important point here is that relationship is a bi-directional process. Not only does it take two active individuals to participate in a relationship, but it also requires reciprocity.

In light of Fairbairn’s proposal, the origins of mental health issues arise from *complications in relationships with others* (or internalized others/objects), as opposed to conflicts over pleasure-seeking impulses or instincts derivative of the death instinct. The need, at baseline, is for contact, and often children (and the adults they become) will go to great lengths to satisfy this need. For example, if a child gains pleasure from an exchange with her parent, she will participate in activities with the parent. But if the parent neglects the child, or offers painful and unfulfilling contact, the child persists – she does not turn away. She needs the parent, and, as a consequence, will integrate her relations with the parent “on a suffering, masochistic basis.”⁴³⁴ She will hold out hope for a satisfying response from her parent, internalizing the parent, who is both exciting and depriving. She will cling to this hope/internalized object to avoid abandonment, her greatest fear. As this little girl becomes a young woman, she will choose love objects that will ultimately fail to meet her needs. Devotion to these “ancient internal attachments”

⁴³³ W. Ronald D. Fairbairn, *Psychoanalytic Studies of Personality*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD, 1952), 145.

⁴³⁴ Greenberg and Mitchell, 173.

result in sorrow and suffering, and change continues to be thwarted by reluctance to betray these attachments.⁴³⁵

Fairbairn greatly influenced attachment theorist John Bowlby. Bowlby's conceptual model is similar to Fairbairn's commitment to a relational model over Freud's drive model. In fact, Bowlby, who Peter Fonagy claims was among the first to recognize that "the human infant enters the world predisposed to participate in social interaction,"⁴³⁶ appropriates aspects of Fairbairn's theory. For example, Bowlby explains that behaviors in infancy such as crawling, calling, babbling, smiling, clinging, following, and non-nutritive sucking all serve to keep the baby feeling secure, cared for, and attached to the mother. This perspective runs contrary to an interpretation of these behaviors as driven by instinct and motivated by pleasure. In Bowlby's model the child is driven by the need for attachment and motivated by security.⁴³⁷ Whether the initial goal is generated by a biological need for proximity or a psychological need for safety and security, participation on the part of the primary caregiver(s) in providing for the child's biological and psychological needs is paramount for healthy development. Bowlby adds that healthy development is frustrated when the child experiences the primary caregiver as inconsistent, anxious, or unreliable. Similarly, early object loss or implicit and explicit

⁴³⁵ Ibid, 174.

⁴³⁶ Peter Fonagy, *Attachment Theory and Psychoanalysis*, (New York: Other Press, 2001), 7.

⁴³⁷ Karen, however, stresses in his summary of Bowlby's work that many of these behaviors are *originally* aimed at survival, as opposed to creating love or emotional functioning in later life, but they eventually "coalesce to form a broad mosaic of attachment behavior." Karen, 96-98. Fonagy, in a similar vein, points out an important distinction at the molecular behavioral level between Bowlby's thought and that of ORT theorists, including Fairbairn. "The goal of the child is not the object, for example, the mother. The goal that regulates the system is initially a physical state, the maintenance of a desired degree of proximity to her," he explains. Fonagy, 8. Here, Fonagy draws attention to Bowlby's concept of the physical goal, which eventually becomes a psychological goal related to connectedness to a caregiver.

threats of abandonment by a parent (or loss of security) all contribute in important ways to anxieties and insecurities about attachment in future relationships.⁴³⁸

Recognizing the unconscious nature of both competing claims, what more can be said about pleasure if motivation in both infancy and adulthood does not result from the quest for sexual pleasures but from the search for and maintenance of contact with others? How plausible does this seem? Fairbairn retained a prominent role for pleasure in his theory, but it is pleasure insofar as it relates to feelings of connectedness and survival. Remember, for Fairbairn, *pleasure is a means to an end and not simply an end in itself*, as drive theory might suggest. Erogenous zones, because of their biological capacity to produce pleasures, become “pathways to the object” or channels for attachment to and relations with significant objects.⁴³⁹ This may be just as true of genitalia in adulthood, as with the breast/mouth relationship in infancy.⁴⁴⁰

Fairbairn’s work gives us a reason for making connections between sensuous pleasure and attachment in infancy, as well as in adulthood. Recall his claim that the nature of relationships with objects *determine* libido. He explains,

...the function of libidinal pleasure is essentially to provide a sign-post to the object. According to the conception of [fundamental] erotogenic zones the object is regarded as a sign-post to libidinal pleasure; and the cart is thus placed before the horse.⁴⁴¹

In other words, theory that proposes that objects serve the purposes of the libidinal drive for pleasure misunderstand the proper order of things, namely that bodily pleasures function to establish sought after connection with others, both in infancy and across the

⁴³⁸ Scharff, 17.

⁴³⁹ Greenberg and Mitchell, 157.

⁴⁴⁰ Greenberg and Mitchell suggest in their assessment of Fairbairn’s work, if “healthy maturity is a capacity for a rich and intimate mutuality with another, then the genitalia offer themselves as perhaps the most intense and felicitous medium for such exchange.” Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ Fairbairn, 33.

lifespan. However, Fairbairn also argues that activities that serve pleasure as an end in itself are defensive, a way to cope with the failure to make connections with others. According to Greenberg and Mitchell, Fairbairn asserts that pleasure seeking without regard for relations with objects marks a “breakdown in the more basic search for pleasurable relations with an other...reflective of a deterioration of natural (object-related) libidinal functioning.”⁴⁴² If this is true, relationships with objects or others that are motivated primarily by pleasure and not by connection signal a problem with the “natural” ends for the drive.

It would seem to follow that any form of attachment rooted in sexual pleasure as opposed to a sense of security and connectedness, would fail to blossom into the trust and love that characterizes the “norm” for healthy sexual relationships between adults. It is not hard to see how this “problem,” with its requisite details, could easily be framed as pathology, and in adulthood would constitute a sexual dysfunction, compulsion, addiction, or paraphilia. In this theoretical framework, to pursue sex with another for the purposes of sexual pleasure is problematic or abnormal. It is psychologically unhealthy.

These claims bring a few important points to mind. First, one can see how this theory, applied to adult sexuality, could create a discourse on sexuality elicited from the motivations and pleasures of the sexual experience itself. Foucault might point out the subsequent categorization of those for whom pleasure is the primary motivation, and those for whom it is not. The deployment of this discourse of sexuality would indicate the impropriety of the former and the appropriateness of the latter. Also, the priority on pleasure in Freud’s drive theory and the priority on connection in Fairbairn’s work, raise the question as to why persons cannot be both pleasure and person seeking! In fact, this is

⁴⁴² Greenberg and Mitchell, 157.

something that Freud, if we look closely at his theoretical shift to *Eros* – the life instincts – tries to work out and understand. ORT, which understands pleasure as a side effect of the desire for connection or security, seems to miss this important dimension of why we do some of what we do. Being motivated by pleasure in ORT retains a negative interpretation.

These claims are also reminiscent of the spiritual detriments and dangers of pursuing sex for pleasure articulated by the theologians in the last chapter. I have seen this same sentiment alive and well in faith communities today. For example, a couple I was seeing for pre-marital counseling in my clinical practice relayed the experience of discussing the lack of sex in their relationship with their pastor. The pastor passed no judgment on the couple for their pre-marital sexual activities. When the busy clients told the pastor that they sometimes had sex quickly to release tension and feel better about the fact that they were having less sex, the pastor encouraged them to be intentional about making time for “making-love.” The pastor explained to them that their “quickies” were not “love-making” and that only the latter satisfied God’s intention for sex, a time to be intimate that is intentional and focused on connection and drawing partners closer together. The pastor also warned that continuing to use sex this way would lead to greater intimacy problems for the couple. In this case, sex for the pleasure of tension (and guilt) release was not properly spiritual; it is not God’s intention for sex.

In sum, the importance of relationships and the social nature of human beings move to the forefront in ORT. Pleasure falls to the wayside. I would argue that is part of what has made ORT so advantageous for scholars in other fields for whom the essentially social nature of human beings is paramount to arguments for social justice and living in

just relationships in the context of community. As we will see in the next two chapters, this is especially true for feminist theologians and sexual ethicists when devising frameworks for sexual ethics that include pleasure. What they fail to take into consideration is the way that Jessica Benjamin develops and complexifies the *tensions* and *paradox* inherent in our sociality and their necessary relationship pleasure.

Necessary Tensions: The Pleasure in “The Two of Us”

In “Master and Slave,” Benjamin calls our attention to the sexual images (for her the porno news stands in the early 1980s) that surround us, typically depicting women aroused by and taking pleasure in submitting to another in a sexual scenario. Women, she says, “in the bonds of love.” But Benjamin suggests that in reality this slave is not always a woman, nor is she always heterosexual. Rather, “the fantasy of erotic domination permeates all sexual imagery in our culture.”⁴⁴³ S/M is erotic domination in its most explicit form – a controlled and ritualized form of violence, which combines love with desires to control and submit. Although s/m is expressed in sexual fantasies and in institutionalized, voluntary sexual practices, Benjamin insists that “this fantasy flows beneath the surface of ‘normal’ adult love.”⁴⁴⁴ Without denying the influence of culture, Benjamin suggests that the origins of these desires and their pleasures lie in the experiences of early infancy, bound to a yearning for mutual recognition.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴³ Jessica Benjamin, “Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 281.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Intersubjective theory: the balance within and the recognition between

Benjamin begins where the other object relations theorists begin, with the first bond or interactions between the child and her primary caregiver, typically the mother. She focuses on two developmental tasks, assertion and recognition. She argues that assertion of the independent self and recognition of the other's independence, together in a delicate balance, affect the state of a self that is aware of the distinctiveness of other selves.⁴⁴⁶ From birth, the mother experiences her child as belonging to her, though no longer part of her. Though the child is dependent, she is still separate from the mother and has her own destiny. Language akin to 'mutual recognition' between infant and mother is common in research that explains this bond, including 'emotional attunement,' 'mutual influence,' 'affective mutuality,' and 'sharing states of mind.'⁴⁴⁷

Benjamin distinguishes her theoretical perspective from Margaret Mahler's separation-individuation theory and other British object relations theorists (including D. W. Winnicott), both of whom insist that the initial state of the mother-infant bond is characterized by an undifferentiated (or symbiotic) unity.⁴⁴⁸ Instead, Benjamin finds resonance with Daniel Stern, a psychiatrist and psychoanalytic theorist best known for his text, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (1985). Stern argues that the infant is never totally unified with the mother and, from birth, has an innate capacity "to be interested in and to distinguish itself from the world of others."⁴⁴⁹ Benjamin nuances the developmental tasks after birth, arguing,

⁴⁴⁶ Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and The Problem of Domination*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 12.

⁴⁴⁷ Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, 16.

⁴⁴⁸ Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1985), 240-241.

⁴⁴⁹ Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, 18.

...the issue is not only how we separate from oneness, but also how we connect to and recognize others; the issue is not how we become free of the other, but how we actively engage and make ourselves known in relationship to the other.⁴⁵⁰

In other words, from its first breath the baby does not struggle to separate from its mother, but is figuring out how to engage, how to be recognized as an independent subject, and how to recognize others in their own subjectivity.

Thus, Benjamin's view is *intersubjective*, drawing together the notion of an active, social infant, who responds to and distinguishes between others, as well as the value and need of the self for self-cohesion.⁴⁵¹ The intersubjective view maintains that individuals *grow in and through relationships* with other subjects. The other is also a subject. The organization of the psychic world focuses on the subject's relation to another subject, as opposed to an object. "The intersubjective view, as distinguished from the intrapsychic, refers to what happens in the field of the self and other," explains Benjamin.⁴⁵² Put differently, the intersubjective is concerned with *the relationships between active subjects*, as opposed to relationships with internalized objects. The intrapsychic view, however, is still of great importance, and Benjamin considers both views complementary views of the psyche.

Benjamin asserts that intersubjective theories share the central importance of *recognition* to self-development. A person comes to a sense of her own subjectivity in the presence of another who recognizes her acts, feelings, intentions, existence, etc.

"Recognition is the essential response," explains Benjamin, "the constant companion of

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Here Benjamin points out the work of Heinz Kohut, the founder of self-psychology, who argued for the self's need for the mirroring-other in the task of self-cohesion. Benjamin gives credit to Jürgen Habermas, Colin Trevarthen, and Daniel Stern for their use of intersubjectivity. Because of its use in describing both a capacity and a theoretical standpoint, she uses "recognition" when speaking about capacity and "intersubjectivity" when speaking about theory. Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, 19-20.

⁴⁵² Ibid, 20.

assertion... Recognition is, thus, reflexive; it includes not only the other's confirming response, but also how we find ourselves in that response."⁴⁵³ In other words, subjectivity is dependent on recognition – not only the other's recognition of me as a subject, but also my recognition of the other's subjectivity, which is in fact the condition of my being recognized in the first place.

For Benjamin, the key to individual subjectivity *and* being in relationship is the *need for mutual recognition*, the need for both recognizing and being recognized. As a consequence, in the first bond the infant, in time, must recognize the mother as a subject in her own right. This idea departs from much psychological theory that posits the mother as an object who satisfies needs, an object of attachment, and/or an object of desire. Thus, Benjamin attempts to explicate a theory to interpret how the *capacity for mutuality evolves*, insisting that from the beginning there are always at least two subjects.⁴⁵⁴ In this way, she distinguishes herself from Stern's intersubjective view, which describes a moment in which the infant recognizes the other's subjectivity. Incorporating, but expanding this understanding, Benjamin claims a *spectrum of intersubjective development*, inclusive of Stern's decisive moment.

However, the need on the part of both child and mother to self-assert and recognize the other – the development of the capacity for mutual recognition – is not without its tensions. Neither is the ongoing process of mutual recognition, which extends into adulthood. On the one hand, Benjamin explains that the ideal balance between assertion and recognition allows for one to be either fully absorbed by or fully receptive

⁴⁵³ Ibid, 21.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid, 24.

to the other – to be together (dependent) or alone (independent).⁴⁵⁵ The negative cycle of recognition, on the other hand, makes the feeling of being alone (free) contingent on destroying the other, or the feeling of being connected (dependent) contingent on surrender to the other.

Consequently, there is a *paradox* embedded in the aim of mutual recognition, one that strikes at the heart of the need of the self for the other. Benjamin explains,

...at the very moment of realizing our own independence, we are dependent upon another to recognize it. At the very moment we come to understand the meaning of ‘I, myself,’ we are forced to see the limitations of that self. At the moment when we understand that separate minds can share the same state, we also realize that these minds can disagree.⁴⁵⁶

This paradox brings about a struggle for control. We want to assert ourselves, but require the other to meet our need for recognition. Thus, a vision of recognition between equal subjects gives rise to the need to *sustain the tension* between contradictory forces – our need for both recognition and independence. The frustrating irony is that the subject is outside our control and yet we need him/her. *Benjamin argues that the decisive problem in development remains recognizing the other.* Establishing the self necessitates recognition by the other, but achieving such recognition means acknowledging that the other exists for himself and not just for me.⁴⁵⁷

This struggle between assertion and recognition in childhood is a “painful and paradoxical fact,” explains Benjamin.⁴⁵⁸ The child’s struggle for autonomy is confounded by the need to be recognized as independent from the very people on whom she is dependent. *This is the paradox of recognition.* One way out of this tension is to assert

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid, 28.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid, 33.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid, 36.

⁴⁵⁸ Benjamin, “Master and Slave,” 283.

one's self without recognizing the other's subjectivity. I assume that the other is dependent on, controlled, and possessed by me. *This denial of dependence is the problem of domination.* If I continue to assert myself without recognizing the subjectivity of the other, the tension necessary in the dance of mutual recognition begins to break down until I am alienated and isolated – independent, but with no one to confer my subjectivity.

Destruction, survival, and pleasure

Benjamin uses British object relations theorist D. W. Winnicott to elaborate further the problem of and resolution to recognizing the other. Her primary source is his essay, "The Use of an Object," in which the ability to "use an object" is dependent on having destroyed it. In Winnicott's theory, to "use an object" means that it "must necessarily be real in the sense of being part of shared reality, not a bundle of projections."⁴⁵⁹ In other words, by using of an object, the child, for example, is able to experience the object or other as having an independent existence outside of the child. *The object is real.* But using objects is dependent on having developed a capacity for such. Winnicott identifies the development of this capacity as part of the shift to the reality principle.

As a theorist whose proposals are replete with paradox, Winnicott suggests that in childhood, the road to the ability to use objects, or to be in relationship with real others and things, first requires the object's destruction. In fact, Winnicott argues that the child is "all the time destroying [the object] in (unconscious) *fantasy*."⁴⁶⁰ But how is it that destroying the object makes for its subjective existence? Benjamin usefully interprets,

⁴⁵⁹ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, (London: Tavistock Publications Ltd, 1971), 118.

⁴⁶⁰ Winnicott, 120-121, italics in original.

“Winnicott is saying that the object must be destroyed *inside* in order that we know it to have survived *outside*; thus we can recognize it as not subject to our mental control.”⁴⁶¹

The object must survive its demise in the internal world if it is to come to exist in external reality. This paradox informs Benjamin’s paradox of recognition: in surviving destruction, the object (let’s say Mom) not only becomes real, but having been affected, confers existence of the child. *The self makes a difference*. Without survival, if the object/mother is completely negated, the child herself is negated. “For then there is no one there to recognize us, no one there for us to desire,” sums Benjamin.⁴⁶²

Per Winnicott’s theory about the transition to using objects, Benjamin suggests that the child actually experiences the survival of the object *as pleasurable*.⁴⁶³ To the child’s delight, existence of the other outside of the child’s control confers the child’s own existence. Benjamin interprets Winnicott’s theory to suggest a revision in the psychoanalytic concept of reality. Recall that for Freud the “reality principle” replaces the “pleasure principle” as the ego increasingly negotiates between the id and the external world, thus, *quelling full satisfaction* of the id’s self-gratifying impulses. In Benjamin’s intersubjective view, the “reality principle” is really a “positive source of pleasure, *the pleasure of connecting with the outside*, and not just a brake on narcissism or aggression.”⁴⁶⁴ In other words, the child enjoys discovering that there is a world outside of her-self that confers her subjectivity.

Both child and caregiver are now capable of mutual recognition and assertion.

They can be attuned to one another, which reintroduces the idea of *pleasure as pleasure*

⁴⁶¹ Benjamin, *Bonds of Love*, 38.

⁴⁶² *Ibid*, 39.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid*, 38.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 41, emphasis mine. As a consequence, reality is discovered as opposed to imposed on the ego by the pressures of the external world.

in being with the other. For example, Benjamin argues that when the baby crawls away from her caregiver to explore some toys, and then turns back to make a connection with her caregiver, she is not only checking to see that her caregiver is still there (security), but looking to see if the caregiver is *sharing* her feelings of excitement, fear, etc. generated by the exploration. This sense of sharing feelings not only reassures the child, but “it is a source of pleasurable connection.”⁴⁶⁵ Benjamin’s analysis emphasizes that in this way we *matter to one another*.

In sum, the roots of personality development and the nature of human relationships, read through the lenses of Benjamin’s intersubjective theory and aspects of ORT, seek to modify a thoroughly intrapsychic approach like Freud’s. Benjamin upholds the value of needs gratification and soothing for establishing the reliability of the caregiver; however, she maintains, “*being with the other* cannot be reduced to the experience of *being regulated* by another.”⁴⁶⁶ Recognizing that Freud’s drive theory has been amended already by both ego psychology and ORT, she argues that these approaches do not fairly address the active, reciprocal, and mutual nature of the exchange between infant and caregiver – the paradoxical balance between assertion of the self and recognition of the other.⁴⁶⁷

Recognizing the other is a constant reminder of difference and a continual awareness that this difference is what makes it possible to *be with* another – for there to be “the *two* of us.”⁴⁶⁸ Thus, Benjamin’s insights reshape how we think about the “threats” of internal and external processes. In Freud’s classical psychoanalytic theory, “threats” –

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid, 31; Stern, 144-145. Intersubjective theory introduces attunement – a shared emotional state. Recall that the desire to remain attuned can result in submission to the other’s will.

⁴⁶⁶ Benjamin, *Bonds of Love*, 46, italics in original.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid, 47, italics in original.

of the demands of society, religion, etc. – ultimately leave the individual in a state of unhappiness, malaise, and discontent. For Benjamin, the relationship between the individual and external reality is no longer one characterized by domination, but rather one that actually provides the condition for freedom.⁴⁶⁹

Now the pain is for pleasure...⁴⁷⁰

One of Benjamin's primary goals is to understand domination, the dynamic between dominant and submissive roles, and the reason why some individuals voluntarily submit to erotic domination, attempting to achieve freedom through slavery and release via submission of control.⁴⁷¹ In her pre-Oedipal theory of development, Benjamin alludes to the correlation between attunement in the pre-Oedipal phase of life and mutual recognition in adult erotic life. She explains,

In erotic union we can experience that form of mutual recognition in which both partners lose themselves in each other without loss of self; they lose self-consciousness without loss of awareness. Thus early experiences of mutual recognition already prefigure the dynamics of erotic life.

Put differently, just as intimacy between the mother and child must balance the tensions between assertion and recognition as the child gains awareness of the external world and differentiates herself from other selves, intimacy between mature adults balances the *same tensions between self-assertion and other recognition*, the “oneness of harmonious

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid, 48. Benjamin wonders about Freud's creation of a place for the instinctual force of *Eros* as an effort to resist the pervasiveness of the struggle for control between the individual and culture. Whereas the intersubjective view offers a theory of the need for recognition, growth in relationship, mutuality and pleasure in attunement, she argues that Freud's *Eros*, as a life force that aims to create unities for the benefit of community, “fails to have a place in psychic structure.” Ibid. Benjamin's argument against Freud on this point would be strengthened by some elaboration on this claim or a footnote that goes beyond simply citing the entirety of *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Though I must also confess that in my read, Freud's own elaboration on the origins and role of *Eros* is not always clear.

⁴⁷⁰ Rhianna, in lyrics to *S&M*, Def Jam, 2011.

⁴⁷¹ Benjamin, *Bonds of Love*, 52.

attunement and the ‘two-ness’ of disengagement.⁴⁷² The presence of this dynamic tension makes mutual recognition a continually evolving process – a balancing act, as opposed to a linear trajectory of development. The scales can tip one way or the other, meaning partners can overemphasize one need or the other, as long as the tension is sustained.

Adult sexual love provides an opportunity to reenact and work out the conflicts between assertion and recognition that began during that early period in life characterized by intense intimacy and dependence.⁴⁷³ As in infancy, the site of control/assertion and abandon/recognition is the *body*. Benjamin tracks the *breakdown of tension* between self-assertion and recognition in one of its most recognizable forms – adult, erotic domination and submission. In the fantasy of erotic domination, subjugation takes the form of violating the other’s body or physical boundaries. Benjamin explains that this violation becomes a way of representing a struggle to the death (hopefully in metaphor) for recognition.⁴⁷⁴ Simply put, in sadomasochistic fantasies and relationships, submission becomes a pure form of recognition, while violation/domination becomes a pure form of assertion. In this relationship, the dominant partner continues to assert his desire for independence, while the submissive partner, who longs to be recognized, settles for submission (including physical pain) rather than face the psychic pain of loss and abandonment.

⁴⁷² Ibid, 50. Winnicott, in his essay “The Capacity to Be Alone,” in *Playing and Reality*, draws an analogy between the child who is learning to be alone by the experience of being alone in the presence of another and the experience adult partners have after satisfactory intercourse. Just as the child takes pleasure in this form of disengagement for a time, partners can enjoy being alone alongside their partners in the post-coital moment, enjoying solitude that is free from ‘withdrawal’ – “a defensive organization implying an expectation of persecution.” According to Winnicott, the enjoyment of being alone in the presence of another is an experience of health, and the capacity to be alone is a sign of emotional maturity. Winnicott, 29-31.

⁴⁷³ Benjamin, *Bonds of Love*, 51.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid, 55.

Pure domination presumes a subject already caught in omnipotence, unable to experience another's subjectivity because of some previous breakdown of the tension between self and other. Numbness characterizes this experience – an alienated form of differentiation. This partner seeks to “recreate the tension through distance, idealization, and objectification, and risks repeating the original breakdown unless and until the other makes a difference.”⁴⁷⁵ Recall Benjamin's application of Winnicott's theory of ‘use of an object’: Destruction is a way of differentiating the self. Thus, she explains

...the controlled practice of sadomasochism portrays a classic drama of destruction and survival. The thrill of transgression and the sense of complete freedom for the sadist depend on the masochist's survival.⁴⁷⁶

In other words, controlled s/m practice relives the drama of destruction and survival that ultimately, with much pleasure, confers subjectivity – that one is in fact independent and makes a difference. The sadist can experience this survival as love. Without survival, *there is the elimination of tension* – deadness, numbness, and the exhaustion of sensation.

Just as the desire to break through to the other captures sadism, so the desire to be discovered underlies masochism.⁴⁷⁷ And just as sadism is associated with failed childhood destruction (the parent with no boundaries), masochism is associated with failed destruction of another kind. The child herself, by way of punishment or withdraw, does not survive. As Benjamin explains, this hidden self longs to be recognized – to be reached, penetrated, found, released – “a wish expressed in the metaphor of violence as well as in metaphors of redemption.”⁴⁷⁸ Strikingly, in a complementary fashion, which

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid, 68.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid, 72.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid, 73.

obscures mutuality, the masochist's desire to experience her authentic self with another parallels the sadist's desire to get outside himself into a shared reality.⁴⁷⁹

From her analysis, Benjamin emerges with a number of important points. First, the aforementioned dynamics at work in s/m relationships or fantasy not only constitute domination, but are also the dynamics that make mutuality possible – the tension between self-assertion and recognition. Second, “the dynamic of destruction and survival is the central pattern of erotic union.”⁴⁸⁰ Furthermore, it is the source of our pleasure. Recall Freud's insistence that *Eros* and the aggressive instinct often are alloyed together; thus, *Eros* is not totally free from aggression. Benjamin argues that what makes sexuality erotic is “the survival of the other with and despite destruction.”⁴⁸¹ *Eros* plays with fantasies of power and surrender. “The idea of destruction reminds us that the element of aggression is necessary in erotic life,” Benjamin explains. “[It] is the element of survival, the difference the other can make, which distinguishes erotic union, which plays with the fantasy of domination, from real domination.”⁴⁸²

So what is Benjamin really concluding here about sex and pleasure? *Erotic pleasure* is intrinsic to participation in s/m sexual relationships, including assuming the submissive role. Both partners seek to break out of their own isolation – to be recognized and to recognize the other. They seek to renew the tensions that confer subjectivity and relationship. But balancing this tension is also true of all sexual union where the tensions inherent in mutual recognition are the source of sexual pleasures. The elimination of this tension in real domination amounts to the destruction of the other. Benjamin alludes to

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Ibid, 74.

pleasure in annihilation of the other as perversion. My reading of this is that this kind of relationship amounts to abuse.

Benjamin's psychological explanation of mutual recognition as a critical developmental task provides valuable insight into understanding the nature of sexual desire and sexual pleasure, especially as it reveals the complexity, tensions, and paradox inherent in maintaining intimate relationships across the lifespan. Also, by demonstrating the similarities between our desires at play in s/m relationships and in "normal" erotic union, she blurs the hard lines that culture draws between abusive and oppressive sexual relations, recreational sexual relations, and loving sexual relations. She also troubles the notion of mutuality as a static state. Rather, mutuality is dynamic, involving the constant negotiation of tensions between self-assertion and recognition.

Freud, Foucault, and the Feminists: Crucial Considerations

Freud's theory of sexuality was culture shaping. Foucault's critique of sexuality was culturally deconstructive. The feminists' debates in the "sex wars" wrestled with the deconstructive move to contemplate a way forward for sexual life, sexual pleasure, and the potential availability of power to those whose subjectivities were systematically dominated and denied. Benjamin considered these same aspects of the current sexual regime from a psychodynamic perspective, but considered the reasons *why* subjectivities might be systematically surrendered voluntarily and why the fantasy of dominating and submitting possessed such thrilling pleasure for participants. She also suggested, with a psychological lens, that all erotic union negotiates a similar tension as participants strive

to mutually recognize one another. Without the necessary polarization observed in s/m fantasy, the balance between self-assertion and recognition is always at play.

I have suggested that these cultural discourses – even if indirectly – have contributed to why communities of faith continue to fear and, thus, restrict sexual pleasure to (and assume it in) married intercourse. Freud reinforced the ubiquity of the sexual impulses. Foucault questioned the instinctiveness of prevailing norms that Christianity held so dear. The feminists explicitly questioned and even condemned the priority on married, heterosexual, reproductive, “vanilla” sexual intercourse – the Christian gold standard. In true psychoanalytic fashion, we could hypothesize the Christian response – especially by the Christian right – has reacted to the anxiety and tumultuous emotions generated by the current cultural climate with a reaction formation, or defensively insisting even more passionately on compulsory heterosexuality.

At this point, it makes sense to return to theological discourse, to see where in the midst of cultural upheaval concerning sexual norms and sexual pleasure theological scholarship considers the critical discourse explored in this chapter. I suggest that we might find such considerations initially in emerging feminist theological scholarship, forging its way on the scene in the 1970s and 1980s.

CHAPTER FOUR

TO EROS IS HUMAN: SEXUAL PLEASURE AND FEMINIST THEOLOGY⁴⁸³

At the end of Chapter Two I concluded that Christianity's theological legacy related to the interpretation of sexual experience is androcentric, heterosexual, and overwhelmingly negative. Any suspected dualism between the flesh and the spirit was reinforced theologically and perpetuated, whether Augustine and his successors intended this or not. Sex and its pleasures were tied firmly to the body, nature, and experience in the material world and divorced from spiritual pursuits, investment in rational knowledge, and the things of God. Christianity inherited and preserved the *gendered nature* of this split – women were associated with the material and men with the spiritual.⁴⁸⁴ Either sex could choose (per Augustine and Aquinas) or be chosen (per Luther and Calvin) to devote his or her life to spiritual pursuits, requiring mandatory abstinence from the bodily pleasures that “most unloosen the human spirit.”⁴⁸⁵ The pain of this renunciation promised far greater pleasure on the spiritual plane of existence.

Though roughly 1,600 years have passed since Augustine wrote *Confessions*, I contend that any significant opposition to the dominance of a male-center interpretation of human sexual experience in theology does not occur until the dawn of feminist

⁴⁸³ “To Eros Is Human” is the name of a “discontinued” shade of nail polish by OPI, a manufacturer of nail products for salon professionals. Described as a raspberry red shimmer, it was part of OPI's Greek Isles Collection. Despite my vast collection of OPI, I am grateful to my friend and colleague, Leanna Fuller, who discovered the polish during a pedicure. The name captures the essence of feminist theological interpretations of *eros*.

⁴⁸⁴ For example, Galen – an extremely influential second century physician and philosopher, who was greatly shaped by Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics – claimed females had less heat and vital spirit, and embodied the essence of the material, while men possessed great capabilities in succeeding in the spiritual realm. See Brown, 10.

⁴⁸⁵ Aquinas, *ST, II-II*, 191.

theological reflection in the latter half of the twentieth century. As a result, I look to these resources in search of critical works related to women's sexual experience, specifically the experience of sexual pleasure. To my surprise, my initial survey of feminist theological resources (from the early 1970s through the late 1980s) came up short of identifying any one particular work that focused exclusively and extensively on sex, let alone sexual pleasure. A small number of works, however, contained the opportunity for addressing sexual pleasure through efforts to reimagine Christian love as *eros*. Commonly taken to connote sexual love, a revision of *eros* sounded promising as a resource for more aptly capturing the nature of love as understood from the experience of women desiring and loving.

As part of a project with explicit feminist positioning, this chapter explores feminist *eros* theologies for how sexual pleasure is articulated and embraced from a women's perspective. I am attentive to if and how feminist theologians engage the concerns of secular feminists embroiled in the "sex wars." Assuming that *eros* retains a dimension of sexual love, I also critically evaluate how these scholars validate sexual love and articulate it theologically.

Because of its association with sexual love, *eros* has a contentious history in the Christian tradition. Therefore, the first section in this chapter briefly attends to the history of *eros* that is eventually subject to re-visioning by feminist theologians. I begin with Plato's *Eros*, which permeated the ancient world as Christianity was gathering coherence. Next, I fast-forward to the twentieth century, to Swedish, Lutheran bishop and theologian Anders Nygren. Nygren critically compared the Platonic concept of *Eros* and the meaning of Christian *agape*, concluding that they were fundamentally opposed *kinds* of

love, and that *agape* was worthy of being untangled from the *Eros* of ancient Greco-Hellenistic thought. Lastly, I address how Paul Tillich eventually countered Nygren. Tillich, a highly influential Protestant theologian, argued that *agape* and *eros* were not irreconcilable and that, although the differences between these expressions of love should not be ignored, both point to *qualities* of a love that is ultimately one. Tillich was one of the first modern Christian theologians to write affirmingly and extensively on *eros*.

After giving limited attention to these important philosophical and theological legacies, I hone in on the use of *eros* and “*the erotic*” in feminist theology, including its formative resource – black feminist poet, Audre Lorde. Although Rita Nakashima Brock develops a Christology of erotic power, I am compelled to concentrate almost exclusively on Carter Heyward’s work, as she is the only feminist theologian who brings her understanding of *eros* to bear on sexual relationships and sexual pleasure. Her new way of understanding *eros* prioritizes being in relationship and valuing the other and mandates participation in justice and the healing of all beings. The sacred, *Eros*, is part and parcel of all of life, the flow of erotic energy in our pleasures, mutual relationships, and political action. Sexual love is no longer subordinated to other expressions of love, and sexual pleasure is not only affirmed, but also charged with an ethical purpose.

After drawing out themes in these new definitions of *eros*, my final section critically evaluates the implications of feminist *eros* theology for sexual pleasure. I will show how feminist *eros* provides a substantial corrective to the sex-negative legacy in the Christian tradition, even as it falls short of providing a viable – if not impossible – way forward for sexual pleasure and its relationship to ethics.

Philosophical & Theological Legacies: Plato, Nygren & Tillich

Plato's Eros

Plato's *Symposium* contains the most celebrated discussion of *eros* in the literature of classical philosophy. His reflections on *eros* undergird aspects of Augustine's thought and have proven influential to theological explorations of and distinctions between various forms of love, including Anders Nygren's comparison of *agape* and *eros* and Paul Tillich's doctrine of the erotic. Thus, the importance of Plato's thought to theological renderings of *eros* and to the debate concerning various forms of love in the Christian tradition cannot be underestimated.

Plato's interpretation of *eros* comes to the reader through a dialogue between Socrates and the wise prophetess, Diotima, in the *Symposium*. What our modern context takes to be constitutive of sexual love or desire has a more complex meaning in the *Symposium* and includes, but transcends, sexual desire. First, Diotima's teaching covers the being and nature of the demigod, *Eros*.⁴⁸⁶ When Socrates inquires about the role of *Eros* in human life, Diotima defines the demigod's activity as cultivating and animating a desire for the possession of the beautiful, the good, and the true. She explains, " 'All desire of good and happiness is only the great and subtle power of love...love maybe described generally as the love of the everlasting possession of the good' ."⁴⁸⁷ *Eros* love,

⁴⁸⁶ He is " 'A great spirit, and like all spirits he is intermediate between the divine and the mortal...He interprets between gods and men...he is the mediator who spans the chasm which divides them, and therefore by him the universe is bound together...through Love all the intercourse and converse of gods with men...is carried on.' " (202e-203b) Diotima bolsters her explanation by recounting *Eros*' origins as the child of Poros (Plenty) and Penia (Poverty), resulting in a nature that is neither mortal or immortal...never in want and never in wealth...a mean between ignorance and knowledge. Plato *Symposium* 203b-203e.

⁴⁸⁷ Plato *Symposium*, 205d-206a.

therefore, desires the beautiful or the good. The gain to the individual in possessing the good/beautiful is happiness, and the desire is to possess this good/beauty interminably.

Diotima also teases out a hierarchy related to the object of longing as it pertains to *Eros*. Not only does *Eros* animate and guide human beings' sexual drive, but it also motivates their yearning for wisdom and spiritual beauty.⁴⁸⁸ At the lowest stage, the lover desires the beloved because the beloved is physically beautiful. But this lower form of *Eros* fails to endure as the lover becomes aware that others, in addition to the beloved, also possess physical beauty. Because *Eros* yearns for the everlasting possession of beauty that brings happiness, the lover eventually recognizes that the beauty possessed by the beloved will fade. Upon this realization, other kinds of beauty appear superior to physical beauty and hold greater promise – the beauty of the soul exemplified in moral virtue and intellectual excellence, for example. To avoid becoming attached to lesser beauty, which cannot provide enduring happiness, the lover must progress to the next level where more substantial beauty constitutes the basis for love.⁴⁸⁹ But further reflection on the desire to possess superior forms of beauty reveal that this sort of beauty also perishes, as the beloved will eventually die, taking her most admirable traits with her.

Eros continues to guide the soul upward through ascending stages of love. Diotima explains that the pinnacle of *Eros* is desiring that object which is perfectly beautiful or good – Absolute Beauty, the highest level of ascent. Having ascended to such heights with the help of *Eros*, the soul “ ‘bringing forth and nourishing true virtue will

⁴⁸⁸ Alexander Irwin, *Eros Toward the World: Paul Tillich and the Theology of the Erotic*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 41.

⁴⁸⁹ Alan Soble, “Classical Sources,” in *Eros, Agape, and Philia: Readings in the Philosophy of Love*, ed. Alan Soble, (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 42.

properly become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may,' ” she explains.⁴⁹⁰ The height of *Eros*, therefore, is the love of absolute, everlasting beauty, or the divine. Sexual love is *not* a dimension of this level of *Eros*. Thus, *Eros* guides a journey to happiness that begins with love of one beautiful material being, leads to love of all material beauty, progresses to love of one immaterial form of beauty, then all immaterial beauty, and culminates in love of Absolute Beauty.⁴⁹¹ As one ascends this love ladder, *Eros* is implicated in the pursuit of philosophical wisdom and virtue. Insofar as *Eros* empowers the pursuit of wisdom, it participates in human rational activities.

Still, sexual love and its pleasures retain a place in Plato's treatment of *Eros*. Sexual love, provoked by physical beauty, is the lowest stage. However, it is still meaningful and gives an individual his first glimpse of the “Beautiful.” Alan Soble, an American philosopher who studies the philosophy of sex, suggests that “...because the response to [physical beauty] is sexual, it is a powerful perception that induces a further search for Beauty.”⁴⁹² In other words, the *Eros* fueled by sexual desire and attraction functions as the starting point and impetus for glimpsing Beauty and beginning the journey toward higher levels of loving. Progression up the ladder, however, necessitates leaving sex and the material world behind. Pursuing wisdom and virtue, a rational pursuit, must rise above sex and its pleasures. Thus, one can conclude that the pursuit of the sensual pleasure is *irrational* because the gains of wisdom or virtue are impossible.

In sum, Plato's *Eros* holds a place and a value for sexual romantic love and desire (also called *Vulgar Eros*), while subordinating it to higher forms of *Eros* love (also called

⁴⁹⁰ Plato *Symposium* 212a.

⁴⁹¹ Farley, 172.

⁴⁹² Soble, 44.

Heavenly Eros).⁴⁹³ Sexual love, however, is a stage to be outgrown as one cultivates a yearning for wisdom and spiritual beauty. This emphasis on resignation of the sexual/material/lower in favor of the pursuit of the spiritual/higher is a philosophical position that heavily influenced theologians like Augustine and Aquinas and their expectations for sexual life.

Nygren's Problem

Anders Nygren, a Swedish, Lutheran bishop and theologian, is best known for his work, *Agape and Eros*. This work, published in the early 1930's, fueled an ongoing debate on the relationship between *agape* and *eros*, especially among Protestants throughout the twentieth century. His goals in the text are to investigate the meaning of the Christian idea of love and trace the shifts that it has undergone in the course of history.⁴⁹⁴ He is especially concerned with the influence of the Platonic conception of *Eros* that permeated the ancient world when the Christian understanding of *agape* was taking shape.⁴⁹⁵ Nygren's directs his critique at how Christianity has attempted to express itself in Platonic terms, a "problem of *Eros* and *Agape*," which he argues challenges the whole of Christian history. His investigation of the content of both *Eros* and *agape* lead him to conclude that the two forms of love are really two different, irreconcilable types of love. This conclusion distances *Eros* from any association with divine and Christian love, *agape*.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹³ The distinction between Vulgar *Eros* and Heavenly *Eros* is explained in the *Symposium* by Pausanias.

⁴⁹⁴ Anders Nygren, trans. Philip S. Watson, *Agape and Eros*, (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), 27.

⁴⁹⁵ While Nygren agrees with Friedrich Nietzsche that the idea of Christian love functioned as a "transvaluation of all ancient values," he questions the impact over time of the ancient scheme of values, wondering whether *Agape* was "bound to lose something of its original force." Ibid, 30.

⁴⁹⁶ Nygren asserts that although the Greek word *agape* precedes its use in the New Testament, he is concerned with its development as the fundamental motif of Christianity found in the synoptic gospels, the

Though fundamentally opposed, Nygren argues that the comparison between *eros* and *agape* can be made around the nature of the fellowship between humanity and the Divine and the formative influence on ethical life. *Eros* is an upward movement of humanity's way to the Divine, whereas *agape* is a downward movement of God's way to humanity. The fellowship with the Divine initiated by *eros* is dominated by humanity. Thus, continuity exists between the Divine and humanity that allows humanity to draw near to the Divine. The fellowship between God and humanity typified by *agape*, however, is centered in and initiated by God. The chasm between God and humanity is absolute, bridgeable only by God, who makes fellowship possible when out of God's *agape* God reaches down to humanity.

In further contrast, as far as *eros* is acquisitive love, *agape* is giving; *eros* is egocentric and *agape* is unselfish; *eros* recognizes value in its love object and loves it, whereas *agape* loves first, thereby creating value in its object. In sum, Nygren denies any value judgment between the two loves, emphasizing his demonstration of difference in *type* as opposed to difference in *value*.⁴⁹⁷

Nygren's point is that *agape*, not *eros*, is the only love that constitutes God's love for humanity – *the standard for Christian love*. God does not desire or want. God is not motivated to love by any value inherent in humanity. God cannot ascend higher.

Conversely, *eros*, not *agape*, captures only humanity's striving toward God, "human

Pauline epistles, and the Gospel and First Epistle of John. These same scriptures, however, fail to be a resource for better understanding *eros*. Although the oral tradition that eventually becomes the Christian New Testament was reiterated in and gathered coherence during a time when *eros* was part of the cultural milieu, this particular Greek word for love does not appear in the canonical Biblical texts. It is *agape* that appears as the kind of love that best captures both God's love for humanity and the expectation for loving one's neighbor. Jesus features prominently as someone whose teachings, life experiences, and death demonstrate the nature of *agape* love. Many know that *agape* is traditionally used to describe the ideal for Christian love, analogous to God's love. Intended to be imitated, it is characterized as unconditional, unselfish, and self-sacrificial.

⁴⁹⁷ Nygren, 210.

want and need seeks for satisfaction in the Divine fullness.”⁴⁹⁸ While he concedes that man [sic] can love other things besides God, insofar as he does *only* this, he “chooses the lower instead of the higher and cheats himself of the highest satisfaction.”⁴⁹⁹ *Agape* cannot describe humanity’s love for God because love for God is never unmotivated or spontaneous; it is always first and foremost awakened by God’s love.

Additionally, Nygren argues that *eros* is essentially self-love and leaves very little room for neighbor love. He recalls the egocentric character of *eros* and reminds his reader that any love toward the neighbor is really directed at the dimension of the neighbor that participates in the beautiful or good. Ultimately the neighbor is left behind, a “stepping-stone to higher things.”⁵⁰⁰ *Agape*, conversely, has no place for self-love. It is the source of neighbor-love; it is “God’s own *Agape* which seeks to make its way out into the world through the Christian as its channel.”⁵⁰¹ Finally, because God bridges the gulf between God’s self and humanity, God excludes all human choice as a basis for divine/human fellowship. Christian love, modeled on God’s love for humanity, is captured only by *agape*. Though Nygren resists calling a Christian adherent’s subsequent love for God *agape*, he also insists that humanity comes to love God (through God’s *agape*) in a way that does not resemble *eros*’ egocentric, acquisitive character. This love for God must be expressed with different words that convey its quality of self-surrender as response to Divine love.⁵⁰² With this distinction, Nygren definitively separates out Plato’s *Eros* from Christian love. God’s love is *agape*; God’s *agape* is the basis for

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid, 212.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid, 212.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid, 214.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid, 218.

⁵⁰² Ibid, 219.

divine/human fellowship; God's *agape* prompts a love for God in return that is *not eros*, but something more akin to self-surrender.

What is Nygren's assessment of the place and importance of sexual love in the distinctions he makes between *eros* and *agape*? According to him, although it may be tempting to simply equate *eros* with sex and sexual love, and *agape* with heavenly love, such a distinction does not do justice to the fullness of Plato's *Eros*. Recall that *Eros* is a movement from *vulgar Eros* to *heavenly Eros*, from a sensual (sometimes sexual) attraction to beauty in the material world, to a love for Ideas and all immaterial beauty, culminating in love of Absolute Beauty. Nygren suggests that beauty in the sense-world serves to awaken *eros* in the soul so that the soul might look beyond the material beauty and ascend towards that which is the very essence of *eros*.⁵⁰³ Can we take this to mean that Nygren understands sexual desire and sex to have a place in *eros*, so long it we move beyond it? Here, he is not so clear.

Elsewhere in *Agape and Eros* Nygren explains that *eros*, directed upwards as it longs and strives for the heavenly world, is different from sensual love, which drags the soul downward and binds it to the material world.⁵⁰⁴ In this instance, he appears firmer in his distinction between sexual love and *eros*. Later, he indicates that Plato's *Dialogues* contain a difference in tone with respect to the relationship between the sense-world and the super-sensible, but he is not persuaded that Plato intends to overcome this sharp dualism. Nygren concludes that the appropriate interpretation is that *eros*, insofar as it strives for the spiritual, does not affirm the material world but "*is itself a form of flight*

⁵⁰³ Ibid, 173.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid, 176-177.

from the world.”⁵⁰⁵ Again, it seems fair to suggest, therefore, that sexual love and its pleasures have some degree of value, but only in so far as they awaken us to or remind us of the supersensible, the divine, Absolute Beauty.

In sum, Plato’s *Eros* for Nygren does not see sex as an end in itself, nor does sexual love have a spiritual dimension. It is not even necessarily essential to the spiritual pursuit, as nowhere does Nygren suggest that vulgar *Eros necessarily precedes* heavenly *Eros*. When it does, vulgar *Eros* is meant to be discarded and transcended. Sexual desire is not compatible with or comparable to spiritual desire. With respect to Christian *agape*, Nygren maintains that human sexual desire or vulgar *Eros* have no place. If this were the case, he says, “the problem of *Eros* and *Agape* would be easily solved.”⁵⁰⁶ In addition, he claims that sexual desire has no place in a discussion of love in a religious sense, not in the context of *agape* or *eros*. For Nygren, the problem of *eros* and *agape* actually stems from the perceived similarities and syntheses between heavily *Eros* and *Agape*. *Vulgar Eros does not pose a threat for Christian Agape*. These conclusions leave one wondering how Nygren understands sexual desire and pleasure in the Christian life if it stands so definitively outside of the standard for Christian love.

Tillich’s Love in Unity

As Nygren’s claims were taken up in the years to come, the antithetical relationship he posited between *agape* and *eros* endured. By the 1950’s, even in more liberal Protestant theological circles, *agape* and *eros* retained an antagonistic relationship. This included the radical difference between Christian love and sexual love, as well as

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid, 179, italics in text.

⁵⁰⁶ Nygren, 51.

the hierarchy of the former over the latter. Sexual desire and pleasure had no spiritual dimension, just as Christian love retained an asexual quality. During this time Paul Tillich, one of the most influential Protestant theologians of the twentieth century, argued for a relationship between human erotic love and divine *agape* that opposed Nygren's conclusions.⁵⁰⁷ Tillich asserted, first and foremost, that *agape* and *eros* were not irreconcilable and that, although the differences between these expressions of love should not be ignored, both pointed to *qualities of a love that is ultimately one*. If Christian love had up until this point been defined by *agape* to the exclusion of *eros*, he was suggesting that *eros* maintained an important, if not essential role in understanding the form and content of Christian love – a multidimensional unity of *agape, eros, philia, and epithymia*.

In *Eros Toward the World: Paul Tillich and the Theology of the Erotic*, Alexander Irwin argues that *eros* plays a central and critical role in Tillich's thought. Irwin asserts that far from an aside, Tillich discusses the theme of the erotic frequently and in detail in a large number of his writings. "[Eros]," Irwin explains, "is a concept of central importance to Tillich's understanding of human embodiment and selfhood, creativity, ethics, and the religious impulse."⁵⁰⁸ *Eros* is a divine-human power, a longing to connect and to overcome estrangement between persons, fractures between persons and the world, and alienation from God. Irwin explains,

...[Tillich's *eros*] a form of love in which a broad range of what have traditionally been described as 'higher' and 'lower' types of experience – love for God, communal ties and cultural creativity, communion with

⁵⁰⁷ "Tillich does not mention Nygren by name in his more important discussions on the quality of love, but his language makes perfectly clear to whom his criticisms are addressed," explains Irwin. Irwin, 23.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

nature, libidinal desire and sexuality – are brought together in a nonhierarchical constellation.⁵⁰⁹

In other words, Tillich collapses any hard distinctions and hierarchies between different “types” of love, including sexual love.

Because one of the goals of my project is to target discourse on sexual pleasure in the Christian tradition, and because I contend that discourse on *eros* presents an opportunity to understand trends in the affirmation or condemnation of sexual love, desire, and pleasure, I concentrate specifically on Tillich’s understanding of the place of sexual love in his larger scheme for explicating *eros*. He emerges as a defender of sexual love, who wants to distinguish it from *eros*, while maintaining its essential relationship to both *eros* and *agape*.

Tillich begins his text, *Love, Power and Justice* (1954), by firmly opposing the necessary distinction between *agape* and *eros* prevalent at the time in public discussion.⁵¹⁰ As opposed to “types,” he writes about the “qualities” of love, which he claims are present to a more or less degree in every act of love. While distinguishing the qualities of love – *epithymia* (or libido), *philia*, *eros*, and *agape* – he also establishes their relationship to one another. In explaining his ontology of love, he describes love as the drive toward *the unity of the separated*. The drive toward unity, or the hope for reunion, “presupposes separation of that which belongs essentially together,” he explains.⁵¹¹ Separation assumes a unity, so that estrangement necessitates the quality of having been

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid, 17.

⁵¹⁰ *Love, Power and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* is a compilation of lectures Tillich gave as the Firth Lectures in Nottingham, England, and as the Sprunt Lectures in Richmond, Virginia. In this small text, Tillich attempts a basic ontological analysis of the three concepts – love, power and justice – addressing their structural relation to each other and their common root in the nature of being itself. He follows this analysis with application of the unity of these concepts in personal relations, group relations and in relation to God (the ultimate relation, or being-itself).

⁵¹¹ Paul Tillich, *Love, Power and Justice*, (hereafter: LPJ) (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 25.

at one time a unity. “Love,” Tillich says, “manifests its greatest power there where it overcomes the greatest separation. And the greatest separation is the separation of self from self.”⁵¹² Here, he explains that love is at its strongest when it is able to overcome the most radically separated beings, namely individual persons, who, though radically estranged, are bearers of the most powerful love. The act of love brings the estranged together. Grounded in this ontology of love, he asserts that *love is one*, driving toward the reunion of the separated.

Because Tillich foregrounds *eros*, he takes great care in deconstructing the confluence of the erotic and the sexual/libidinal common in popular language. In the development of Christianity, he maintains that the reduction of *eros* to the sexual was already at work in the creation of the New Testament, best evidenced by its exclusion. He claims that there are two different qualities of love undergirding this confusion – *epithymia* and *eros*. These qualities, however, are not entirely independent of one another. *Epithymia*, a Greek word for desire, is traditionally considered the lowest quality of love, identified with physical, sensual self-fulfillment and the desire for sexual pleasure.⁵¹³ To the argument that *epithymia* seeks pleasure as its ultimate ends, Tillich counters,

[All living beings] desire food, movement, growth, participation in a group, sexual union, etc. The fulfillment of these desires is accompanied by pleasure. *But, it is not the pleasure as such which is desired, but the union with that which fulfills the desire.*⁵¹⁴

In other words, *epithymia* or pure physical desire is driven primarily by the desire to overcome separation; pleasure, when this desire is fulfilled, is the *necessary outcome* as

⁵¹² Ibid, 25.

⁵¹³ Ibid, 28.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid, 29, emphasis mine.

opposed to the motivation. This understanding strikes me as very similar to critical claims in ORT at the time, which insisted that libido was primarily person-seeking, not pleasure-seeking.

Tillich concedes that both pleasure and pain are the consequences of fulfilled and unfulfilled desire respectively, but a life that follows this pleasure-pain principle perverts love's ultimate goal – “union with that which is separate from it, though it belongs to it.”⁵¹⁵ He defines *epithymia* as the “normal drive towards vital self-fulfillment... which is not lacking in any love relation.”⁵¹⁶ More so, it is a quality of love that is part and parcel of every love relation. *Epithymia* is recognized as the desire for union to which pleasure is secondary. Here one finds an affirmation of sexual pleasure, but one that does not affirm sexual pleasure as an end in itself. Recall that this resistance to sexual pleasure as an end in itself is a theme in Aquinas's view of sensual pleasure and similar to ORT's modifications of Freud's drive theory. Sin is the consequence of pursuing pleasure as an end in itself in Aquinas' system, while mental illness was indicated as the consequence by object relations theorists like Fairbairn.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid, 29.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid, 30. Tillich has a very intriguing section in *Systematic Theology*, Volume Two, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 51-54, in which he returns to “concupiscence” to properly distinguish between libido as a dimension of man's [sic] existential predicament and libido as a dimension of love in man's essential nature. He cites this confusion as cause for the ambiguity of the Christian attitude toward sex. First, he argues that Freud's explication of libido, “the unlimited desire (endless, never satisfied striving) of man to get rid of his biological, especially sexual, tensions and to get pleasure from the discharge of these tensions,” fits with the Christian interpretation of man's predicament – his estrangement – which seeks pleasure through other beings. However, Tillich argues that Freud's analysis is insufficient from a theological perspective, which must also account for human being in light of his essential nature or created goodness. In this essential relation to self and world, libido is not concupiscence. Libido, united with love, is directed toward a definite subject with whom it wants to unite. It wants the other being, as opposed to seeking pleasure through the other being. This is libido as love, not libido as concupiscence. Recall that for Freud, libido is only creative in so far as it is repressed or sublimated – no creative *eros* includes sex. Tillich says this much, without the next logical step – namely that sexual experience that truly seeks the other has creative potential. The point that he does drive home is that libidinal desire, as part of our essential nature, is not concupiscence, but love.

The second quality of love undergirding the confusion of *eros* with the sexual is *eros* itself. Tillich shows frustration that the effort to demonstrate dissimilarity between *agape* and *eros* has been exacerbated by the identification of *eros* and *epithymia*. “Certainly,” he says, “there is epithymia in every *eros*. But *eros* transcends epithymia. It strives for a union with that which is a bearer of values because of the values it embodies.”⁵¹⁷ Thus, *eros* transcends yet includes *epithymia*. Upholding the classical, Platonic meaning of *eros*, the values that Tillich has in mind include beauty and truth, which are embodied in nature, culture, and the divine.⁵¹⁸ “Love drives towards union with the forms of nature and culture and with the divine sources of both,” he says.⁵¹⁹ With this definition of *eros*, he affirms the erotic impulse in Christian life.

Tillich is most adamant about *eros toward God*, insisting that without *eros*, love toward God is impossible to comprehend, dissolving into obedience, which is not love. Perhaps “obedience” was the word that Nygren was looking for when attempting to describe a love for God that is *not eros*, but something more akin to self-surrender. Tillich exclaims, “Without the *desire* of man to be reunited with his origin, the love toward God becomes a meaningless word.”⁵²⁰ In sum, Tillich suggests that *eros* captures and helps us to experience and understand humanity’s love for God. Without it we are unable to make sense of the nature of our fellowship with the divine. In a tradition that has long held *agape* as the sole essence of divine/human fellowship, Tillich’s inclusion of *eros* is radical.

⁵¹⁷ Tillich, *LPJ*, 30.

⁵¹⁸ Tillich is greatly influenced by and draws from Plato’s classical *Eros*, identifying the erotic as a unique and important force in human life. “Eros,” he says, “has the greatness of a divine-human power. It participates in creation and in the natural goodness of everything created.” Ibid, 117.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ Ibid, 31, emphasis mine.

Taken together, *epithymia* and *eros* are distinct, yet always in relationship to one another; they are qualities of love that strive to overcome separation. Tillich's suggestions indicate that sexual desire (and its subsequent pleasure) are not evil insofar as they seek reunion and resist using the other as primarily a means for pleasure.⁵²¹ His discussion does not posit a hierarchical ordering of *eros* and *epithymia*. The latter is not a lower quality of love, though the former transcends it. All *eros* necessarily contains elements drawn from libidinal dimension of life; however, the erotic is not identified exclusively with these elements.⁵²² In other words, *eros* can include sex, but is itself more than sex. *Eros* motivates many other human experiences where the drive to overcome separation is the motivating force.

When these concepts begin to get murky for me, I think of *epithymia* as the embodied passion, or the desire for physical reunion, moving in *eros*, and *eros* as the desire motivated by value as the basis for the desire for union.⁵²³ *Eros*, for Tillich, ties together what has traditionally been thought of as higher and lower forms of love (sexual love and seeking after the divine, for example), as well as the human experiences and feelings that accompany them.

Finally, what is the relationship between *agape* and *epithymia* in Tillich's ontology of love? First, understanding *agape* requires acknowledging that the other qualities of love – *epithymia*, *eros*, and *philia* – contain ambiguities of self-centeredness. *Agape* "...enters from another dimension into the whole of life and into all qualities of

⁵²¹ Ibid, 117.

⁵²² Irwin, 7.

⁵²³ Tillich says, "...in abbreviated form: Love as *libido* is the movement of the needy toward that which fulfills the need. Love as *philia* is the movement of the equal toward union with the equal. Love as *eros* is the movement of that which is lower in power and meaning to that which is higher. It is obvious that in all three the element of desire is present." Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume One, (hereafter: ST 1) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 280, italics in original.

love...[it] cuts into the libido, eros, and philia qualities of love and elevates them beyond the ambiguities of their self-centeredness,” contends Tillich.⁵²⁴ In *Systematic Theology, Volume I*, Tillich explains *agape* as the love that transcends the other three, “namely, *the desire for the fulfillment of the longing of the other being*, the longing for his [sic] fulfillment.”⁵²⁵ *Agape* is the dimension of love, originating in God, which grounds each quality of love in care for the fulfillment of the other, moving the desire for union beyond self-interest alone.⁵²⁶ *Agape* is the ultimate criterion for love.

I deduce that Tillich imagines *agape* as God’s love that enters into the human experience of loving, including sex, and transforms it, perhaps completes it, and grounds it in concern for the fulfillment of the other. Recall, according to Tillich, that libido is good in itself, “a normal drive towards vital self-fulfillment.” This desire is corrupted insofar as it seeks only pleasure and bypasses the center of the other person, indicating its separation from the other qualities of love. Based on Tillich’s understanding of *agape*, I surmise that sexual desire, as an example of *epithymia*, contains *agape* as that dimension of love that allows desire for the other to be wholly centered on union with pleasure as a natural consequence.⁵²⁷

Unfortunately, I have no choice but to “surmise” on these conclusions. Despite his focus on *eros* and his consideration of a place for sexual love in religious life, Tillich steers clear of talking explicitly about sexual experience in his work. The fear and anxiety that surrounds talking about sex, so common in the Christian legacy, comes to mind

⁵²⁴ Tillich, *LPJ*, 33, 116.

⁵²⁵ Tillich, *ST I*, 280, emphasis mine.

⁵²⁶ In addition, Tillich affirms that *agape* in its traditional sense, as opposed to the other three qualities of love, extends itself independent of the characteristics of the other. *Agape* also affirms unconditionally and is universal with respect to its attention to the other.

⁵²⁷ Irwin, 118. Also see pages 99-120.

immediately. Were there still risks and doubt about expounding on this practice theologically? Irwin suggests that Tillich's avoidance of sex in his writings on *eros* reflects Tillich's own anxieties about his ongoing sexual indiscretions in his private life. He was unfaithful to his spouse, Hannah Tillich, who published a memoir after his death, *From Time to Time*. The memoir exposed his sexual indiscretions and the great suffering they caused Hannah and his family. Irwin connects Tillich's personal shortcomings to gaps in his theological system. "The broken connection between *eros* and justice in Tillich's private life points to a rupture in the theologian's intellectual vision of the erotic," Irwin claims.⁵²⁸

Finally, how is *agape* shaped by *epithymia*? Irwin finds that desire as an erotic element in relation to God must remain part of theological vocabulary for Tillich. Even though *agape* as it originates in God consists of pure, disinterested, and unambiguous love, which is neither attracted nor repulsed by its object, Tillich asserts that this experience is always external to the realm of possible human experience and comprehension.⁵²⁹ This reality makes it impossible for us to imagine God's *agape* without passionate, erotic elements. *Agape* as desire points the way to a new form of fellowship between human beings and God, suggestive of a dynamic interdependence characterized by erotic passion.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁸ Ibid, 118.

⁵²⁹ Ibid, 80.

⁵³⁰ Ibid, 81.

The New Eros in Feminist Theology

First published in 1960, feminist theologian Valerie Saiving's article, "The Human Situation: A Feminist View," reminded readers that Christian love, defined as *agape*, consisted of unbounded self-giving and self-sacrifice. *Agape* was considered a virtue and often juxtaposed with the sin of pride, an attempt to overcome the anxiety aroused by the human condition. Saiving, however, pointed out that gender roles differentiated the "human situation" for men and women. The feminine dilemma was opposite that of the masculine. Women, especially mothers, were all too familiar with *agape's* self-sacrificial, self-transcending love. Contrary to being prideful, Saiving suggested that *women sinned by surrendering their selfhood*.⁵³¹ Since her article many feminist theologians have considered the detriments and complexities of traditional *agapic* or self-sacrificial love for women.⁵³²

But if not *agape*, how should the feminist perspective explain the substance of Christian love? In the late 1980s, a few feminist theologians who sensitive to how a theological priority on self-sacrifice encouraged the submission of women attempted to redefine Christian love by revisiting and redefining *eros* and the erotic. For example, one entry point was to reformulate the doctrine of God based on new metaphors for the sacred. In *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (1987), feminist theologian Sallie McFague explored three new models of God fitting for our current

⁵³¹ See Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1979), 25-42.

⁵³² For example, Rita Nakashima Brock, in her constructive proposal for *eros*, rejects *agape* entirely on the basis of its unidirectional, dispassionate trajectory. Bonnie Miller-McLemore has explored the complexities of self-sacrifice in "Generativist, Self-Sacrifice, and the Ethics of Family Life," in *The Equal Regard Family and its Friendly Critics: Don Browning and the Practical Theological Ethics of the Family*, eds. John Witte, Jr., M. Christian Green, and Amy Wheeler, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 17-41.

context.⁵³³ Recognizing that the metaphor of ‘God as Lover’ might provoke resistance to attributing the qualities of passion, desire, and eroticized longing to God, she encouraged readers to consider what it would mean for God to passionately desire creation. The model of ‘God as Lover’ prioritized *eros* and attributes for God that ran counter to the classical characteristics of *agape* love and its disinterested, unmoved, self-sacrificial subject. McFague used Tillich’s *eros* – the love that desires union with the valuable – to flesh out this metaphor.

McFague’s model had theological and ethical consequences for humanity. For example, ‘God as Lover’ meant that God needed the world, and God’s need for us demanded our response.⁵³⁴ God’s *eros* was paradigmatic for humanity. It emphasized the importance of bodies; therefore, attention to the survival of all beings was paramount. McFague argued that attention to all bodies “undercuts the heavy anthropocentrism of traditional Christian theories of redemption.”⁵³⁵ Thus, justice in this model stretched beyond the need for care in human relationships to care for the cosmos. Salvation was understood in an ecological, evolutionary context. In other words, reunion required integration of *all the parts* of the organism, or McFague’s overarching metaphor of ‘the world as God’s body.’⁵³⁶ Helpers (or lovers), she said, “work to restore right relationships, proper balance among the parts.”⁵³⁷ Finally, McFague suggested that *eros*

⁵³³ Weary that traditional metaphors for God, such as King, Father, and Lord, have been unhelpful and destructive, not only to women but to the creation as a whole, McFague employs a metaphorical theological methodology to suggest a number of new models. She argues that models need to be tested, tried, and evaluated, as this approach to theological reflection is heuristic, limited, and always strives to be timely. The goal of metaphorical theology is to find better models, while understanding that no single model will ever capture the one and only truth about God.

⁵³⁴ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 134.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid*, 147.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid*, 69-78.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid*, 148.

in the service of healing emphasized resistance to wounding or harm done to bodies, as well as identification with those who suffer. To act in ways that God does as a lover means to “work toward healing the world’s divisions and the freeing the world’s oppressed.”⁵³⁸

Whereas McFague’s brief attention to *eros* was part of a larger project that supported metaphorical theology, other feminist theologians devoted entire projects to redefining Christian love as *eros*. In an ongoing effort to address the explicit and implicit sexist, racist, and heterosexist assumptions in Christian theology, they creatively expanded upon the theological importance of the theme of erotic love. Similar to McFague, they strongly emphasized the relationship between *eros* and concrete justice-making in interpersonal relationships. Unlike McFague, they left Plato and Tillich behind to develop their own definitions for *eros* based on women’s experiences of desiring and loving and used these experiences as primary sources for doing theology. Erotic power fostered connection, was found in concrete, mutual relationships – including sexual relationships – and was necessarily morally motivating.

Eros in Secular Feminism: Lorde’s Influence

Secular feminist discourse on *eros* was a valuable source for feminist *eros* theologians. Recall from Chapter Three that feminists in the “sex wars” who appealed to *eros* fit into the “radical feminist” camp. They comprised the subgroup that Wendy Chapkis referred to as the *pro-positive sex feminists*. These feminists argued that some sexual practices – those that entailed love, commitment, trust, and mutual sexual pleasure – were possible when an *eros* free from the distortions of patriarchy was uncovered.

⁵³⁸ Ibid, 153.

Adrienne Rich, Susan Griffin, and Haunani-Kay Trask, for example, offered interpretations of *eros* that had significant appeal for feminist theologians. The most influential interpretation, however, was that of black lesbian feminist poet, Audre Lorde. Sandra Friedman and Alec Irwin assert, “Audre Lorde has served as a touchstone for almost all womanist and feminist writing on the erotic.”⁵³⁹ Indeed, Lorde’s small essay, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” is a foundational source from which two feminist theologians, Rita Nakashima Brock and Carter Heyward, construct theological projects that center feminist *eros*.

In “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Lorde suggests a fresh, dynamic, empowering, and ultimately relational understanding of the erotic. She is inspired to offer a corrective to “vilified,” “devalued,” and “purely sexual dimensions” of the word, which have promoted female inferiority and aroused contempt for and the suspicion of women. Imploring all women to forgo its suppression, she calls for them to embrace the erotic, the “power which rises from our deepest and no rational knowledge.”⁵⁴⁰ This power is deeply connected to both sensation and feeling, as well as subsequent satisfaction – a “lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.”⁵⁴¹ For Lorde, the erotic is no longer bound to the sexual, but is a resource for women to draw on in all areas of life. It is bound to deep fulfillment and prompts the desire for satisfaction.

⁵³⁹ Sandra Friedman and Alec Irwin, “Christian feminism, eros, and power in right relation,” in *Cross Currents*, 40 (1990): 388.

⁵⁴⁰ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The erotic as power,” In *Weaving the Visions: New Paradigms in Feminist Spirituality*, eds. Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), 208. This article was originally published in 1984.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid*, 210.

According to Lorde, the erotic serves a number of important purposes. It lessens the threat of difference between individuals as they share in the joy of a common pursuit together; it widens and draws one's attention to her capacity for joy and satisfaction outside of that which has been socially and culturally prescribed (marriage, god, an afterlife); and, as a function of the latter, it puts one in touch with her deepest cravings and a desire to resist settling for the "convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, or the merely safe."⁵⁴² Lorde contends that when women begin to attend to their deepest feelings and longings, they will fail to be satisfied and will be moved to resist the suffering, self-negation, despair, depression, and self-denial fostered by the suppression of their erotic power. This recognition prompts the pursuit of genuine change in individual lives and in the world.

Finally, the erotic facilitates mutuality in relationships with others. Lorde explains,

...when we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences.⁵⁴³

In other words, she is adamant that erotic power facilitates genuine sharing that resists using others as objects to satisfy our own needs, as well as allowing ourselves to be used. The erotic makes mutual pleasure and connection between individuals possible.

Given that Lorde's short piece is a mainstay in the development of *eros* in feminist theology, I want to point out a number of notable points before moving on. First, the *primal nature of erotic power* is implicit in Lorde's description. The erotic is pre-

⁵⁴² Ibid, 210-211. Lorde, who does not identify as a theologian, talks about *eros* as a "life-force." She images *eros* in non-theistic ways and says that *eros* does not have to be called "god. Lorde, 211; Friedman and Irwin, 393.

⁵⁴³ Lorde, 212.

existing, essential to womanhood, unexpressed, unrecognized and, ultimately, repressed by the self and oppressed by male models of power. It is not socially constructed, but rather what women fundamentally possess and how they are meant to relate at their deepest level. It is good and uncorrupted despite is repression or suppression. Being in touch with one's erotic power cultivates the desire for more of the good that erotic power promises.

Second, although it has been used to define sexual experience – “relegated to the bedroom alone,” says Lorde – I deduce from Lorde's essay that the erotic maintains a role in deepening sexual experience for women, perhaps calling them to tap and express their repressed sexual desires. Maybe *eros* calls them to demand pleasure in sexual experience! I would even argue that given the imperative that erotic power should facilitate genuine sharing with others and resist the objectification of self and other, Lorde would advocate for erotic sexual encounters that promote mutual joy and satisfaction in ways that distinguish these feelings from their illusory, hollow counterparts. If this is the case, I wish she had communicated it.

Lorde, however, does not indulge my desire as it would defeat one of the main points of her essay: the experience of the erotic is *pervasive*, available to women as a resource in *all areas of life*, and should not be confined to the sexual arena alone. By bracketing off sexual experience in this piece, she aims to disassemble women's association with the purely sensual/sexual, perhaps a necessary move given the objectification and abuses women have suffered as a result of such affiliations. In addition to enlarging the scope of erotic power and its pleasures, she also suggests that sexual pleasure bears no qualitative difference in comparison to the deep satisfaction and

joy that permeates all creative endeavors. The two differ only in quantity.⁵⁴⁴ In other words, one might experience more (or less) pleasure in the context of sexual activity, but the pleasure is not distinct or set apart from the pleasures obtained from satisfying other creative hopes for the self or the community. With this claim, pleasure in sex loses a degree of its distinctiveness.

This leads to a third point, namely the nature of those experiences that oppose, repress, or deny the power of the erotic. Lorde is critical of the association of the erotic with sensation and, hence, the pornographic. For example, she says, “Pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.”⁵⁴⁵ She also labels the objectification of others or the self, to the detriment of sharing and feeling toward mutual satisfaction and joy, as “pornography and obscenity – the abuse of feeling.”⁵⁴⁶ Taken together, those who refuse the consciousness of feeling, at any time, are reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd.⁵⁴⁷ Insofar as the erotic for Lorde is that which connects sensation and feeling, aids women in opening themselves up to a source of power and knowledge, and is itself the substance of mutual connection that deepens the power and knowledge of those in relationship, *pornography and abuse constitute its absence*. This suggests that sexual experiences and pleasures that do not consist of a mutual connection that deepens the power and knowledge of those in relationship are *not properly erotic*; they are pornographic and abusive. Thus, sexual experiences and their pleasures are either erotic by Lorde’s definition or pornographic.

⁵⁴⁴ For example, Lorde equates the experiences of writing poetry and making love.

⁵⁴⁵ Lorde, 209.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid, 212.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

Finally, insofar as erotic power promotes resistance to suffering, self-negation, despair, depression, and self-denial, it prompts the pursuit of genuine change in the world. Though she does not go into any great detail, Lorde's meditation on the erotic points toward its connection with healing, political action, and justice – not just for individual women, but for all women. Remember, erotic power is unmistakably good; it resists the bad and opens one up to the greater needs and goods for the self and the community. I would add that when it is at work in relationships, even in the face of difference, erotic power supposes a harmony of needs between the self and others that can be met in truly mutual relationships.

Again, I cannot overstate the importance of Lorde's work to feminist *eros* theology. All of the qualities she attributes to the erotic – its essential, positive character, its meaning beyond the explicitly sexual, its pornographic antithesis, and its orientation toward justice and mutual satisfaction – are crucial to feminist theological interpretations of *eros*.

Reclaiming Eros: Grounds for Revision & New Theological Meanings

A year after McFague's *Models of God*, feminist theologian Rita Nakashima Brock, a Japanese-Puerto Rican immigrant American, published *Journey's By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (1988). Her entire project focuses on a new interpretation of *eros* to offer a feminist Christology. Her goal is to radically de-center the symbol of Christ, a symbol she identifies as a major problem for feminist theology. Especially sensitive to the dimensions of Christology that perpetuate patriarchal family structures

and abuse, her feminist Christology provides sources for healing for women and children affected by abuse, including sexual abuse.

Brock argues that the patriarchal family holds prominence among the institutions complicit with, influencing, and being shaped by theological assumptions. As a result, she places the family and its relational matrix at the core of her critique and constructive proposal. She maintains that her focus on the family stems from a baseline conviction that we are relationship-seeking beings, who in the processes of bonding and separating from primary caregivers, learn to love, lose, co-exist with others, flourish, and grow.⁵⁴⁸ The reality of erotic power serves as the basis for this claim and the key for constructing a new Christology.

To explain her understanding of *eros*, Brock first makes a distinction between two forms of power. First, there is power that is socially constructed - the hierarchical power arrangements characterized by dominance, control, and power over. Second, there is the power that we are born with, what she calls *erotic power*. Erotic power is not the *eros* of contemporary culture, equated with lust and sexuality. Rather, it is

The fundamental power of life, born into us, heals, makes whole, empowers and liberates. Its manifold forms create and emerge from heart [the true self], that graceful, passionate mystery at the center of ourselves and each other...the power of our primal interrelatedness...involving the whole person in relationships of self-awareness, vulnerability, openness and caring.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁸ Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1988), 4. Brock's theological anthropology rejects notions of sin connected to self-assertion or denial of dependence of God, which is always prior to the relationships that shape people, whether given at birth or permeated through all human existence. Rather, she imagines sin as a symptom of the relational nature of our existence, in which we are damaged or damage by others in the context of our unavoidably relational existence. "Sin," she concludes, "is not something to be punished, but something to be healed." See Brock, 6-7.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 25-26.

Eros grounds and springs from the centered or true self and is characterized by openness to the world and one's full range of inner feelings. This posture differs from the need to dominate or control others, as well as the impulse to lose the self in the needs and feelings of others. Brock reiterates that this true self "is the root of intimacy and connection, and springs from and enhances erotic power."⁵⁵⁰ Participating in safe, enduring, nurturing relationships with others is a lifelong process that nurtures erotic power. Brock says, "[Erotic power] is a relational source of our vulnerability and connectedness to the world...Erotic power creates and sustains connectedness...intimacy, generosity, and interdependence."⁵⁵¹ It also fuels caring and healing in our relationships with others.

Brock explicitly points to Lorde's influence in her work, and one can see that Brock's description of erotic power is replete with the themes I pointed in Lorde's essay. Erotic power is innate, "born into us." It is the substance of our "primal interrelatedness." It is good and works toward justice – it "empowers and liberates." Like Lorde, Brock is adamant about moving *eros beyond it equivalent to lust and sexuality*. She agrees with feminist Haunani-Kay Trask, who sees the feminist articulation of *eros* as "moving well beyond the identification of passion and love with genital sexuality to a sense of the body and a power that cherishes life in its multiplicities of feelings and forms."⁵⁵² While Brock focuses on the need for attention to the sensual and its role in reclamation of the body, the erotic in her text is much more than just sexual love.

Unfortunately, just as Lorde does, Brock steers clear of indulging the sexual dimension of *eros* from a woman's perspective. She too wants an understanding of *eros*

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid, 33.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid, 37.

⁵⁵² Ibid, 40.

unencumbered by the *eros* of contemporary culture, the lust of a male-dominant society.⁵⁵³ Because Brock's work centers on sources for healing for women and children affected by abuse, including sexual abuse, one could see a reason for excluding discussion about the sexual dimension of *eros*. The sexual abuse of women is guided by power arrangements characterized by dominance, control, and power over, not mutuality inspired by her definition of erotic power. And, like Lorde, Brock is more concerned with pointing to sexual experiences that are *not erotic* by her definition.

In her book, *Casting Stones: Prostitution and Liberation in Asian and the United States*, Brock and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite protest against prostitution, which exemplifies the anti-erotic or anti-sexuality, the absence and antithesis of the erotic.⁵⁵⁴ They explain, "... the sex industry at work is strikingly devoid of any feeling, especially something so mutually compelling as desire. And it is markedly devoid of any healing, integrating experience of human sexuality, beauty, or passion."⁵⁵⁵ Brock and Thistlethwaite argue that sexual abuses and experiences like sex work do not contain erotic elements because – per the feminist redefinition of *eros* – feelings, mutual desire, healing, and the integration of sexuality, beauty, and passion properly belong to *true erotic experience*. Like Lorde, Brock and Thistlethwaite contend that sexual experiences that are not erotic by this definition constitute the *anti-erotic*.

Taken together, Brock's work is not a resource that deals positively with the sexual dimension of *eros* from a woman's perspective. She avoids it completely. Brock, like Lorde, also simplifies sexual experiences into those that are properly erotic and those

⁵⁵³ Ibid, 26.

⁵⁵⁴ Rita Nakashima Brock and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Casting Stones: Prostitution and Liberation In Asia and the United States*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 230.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

that are pornographic or anti-erotic. Thus, they deny the experience of “true” erotic desire and pleasure in acts and experiences that are ‘pornographic.’ Having reviewed the many positions on sex and pleasure in the context of feminism’s “sex wars,” I am struck that there is little room in Brock’s theology of the erotic for the complexity of erotic experience, including pleasure. Are there not experiences and pleasures that is neither healing nor abusive? Also, given the personal and context dependent nature of sexual activities and desires, it is strange to interpret and impose meaning on sexual experience and pleasure that may have a very different interpretation and meaning for the consenting participants. Because Brock’s subjects in *Casting Stones* are prostitutes, I am left wondering about erotic pleasure in the context of poverty. Brock’s one dimensional interpretation of *eros* makes this analysis impossible.

Carter Heyward’s Eros

When it comes to feminist *eros* theology, any elaboration of the erotic in so far as it pertains to positive sexual experiences and pleasure is left to Carter Heyward. Heyward’s approach to the erotic and the theology she constructs around it must have amounted to going rogue when it came to theologizing about sex in the theological disciplines. Her redefinitions in light of her theological understanding of *eros* are so unique that she includes a glossary at the end of her text *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*, which explains to her reader what she means when she uses words like sex, sexuality, *eros*, and god.

While McFague converses with Plato’s *Eros* and is greatly influenced by Tillich’s theology of *eros*, feminist *eros* theologians like Brock and Heyward do not appropriate

Tillich's thought in their innovative recovery of *eros*. In fact, Heyward cites Tillich as a "paradigmatic modern liberal," and argues that he fails to take into consideration the social and relational basis of both human and divine Being. As a result, she claims that he does not recognize "the theological significance of the material, embodied, and economic grounds of human being."⁵⁵⁶ This has profound implications for human and divine participation in *concrete acts of justice making*, something Heyward positions at the core of her explanation of erotic power. Subsequently, she criticizes Tillich and liberal Christianity for its complicity in the face of sexism, heterosexism, racism, and any other -isms. While she shuns both the content and consequences of Tillich's theology as a whole, Heyward ironically neglects to critique his use and assessment of *eros* in her own treatise on the erotic. The reader is left wondering if Irwin is correct when he argues that Tillich's use of *eros* is often neglected. Or perhaps Heyward does not find Tillich's attention to *eros* compelling enough to overcome the implications of his theological system as a whole.

In any case, within a year of the publication of Brock's *Journey by Heart*, Carter Heyward, a lesbian feminist Christian priest and educator, published *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (1989). At the time, Friedman and Irwin claimed that this text represented "the most thorough and challenging discussion of *eros* in the Christian feminist/womanist literature."⁵⁵⁷ That same year, Heyward published two other essays – "Sexuality, Love, and Justice" and "Pain and Pleasure:

⁵⁵⁶ Carter Heyward, *Touching our Strength: The Erotic Power and the Love of God*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989), 64, italics in text. In other words, Heyward disagrees that a God who remains free from the possibility of relationality, material need, and sensuality is able to constitute our "ground of being." Tillich's conception –God above God – distances the divine from the realities of human struggle, including, she adds, "the passions, problems, and confusions of human sexuality." Ibid, 67.

⁵⁵⁷ Friedman and Irwin, 391.

Avoiding the Confusions of Christian Tradition in Feminist Theory.” Both essays pointedly applied her understanding of “the erotic” to sexuality, including sexual experience and pleasure.⁵⁵⁸ Like Brock, Heyward remains in the Christian tradition (she prefers “christian”), while calling for 1) serious critiques of how Christian symbols, doctrine, and practice have been shaped by the dominant ideology of Western culture, and 2) accountability for how they have perpetuated the patriarchal ideals manifest in sexism, heterosexism, and racism. As part of the tradition of feminist liberation theology, Heyward’s work seeks radical change in and transformation of theology, doctrine, and symbols that promote violence and abuse and support relationships between individuals and social groups that are characterized by dominance and control.

While Brock’s text focuses on Christology, *Touching Our Strength* is a text committed to constructing a sexual theology that holds together sexuality, spirituality, and the struggle for justice. Heyward’s concept of the “erotic” is the glue that binds these themes together, as well as the power that makes them possible. Hers is a new way of thinking theologically about human nature in relation to the human predicament, as well as what heals us and moves us toward flourishing – all goals of pastoral theology. Unlike Brock, Heyward also reflects more explicitly on the political nature of power. In the context of her larger hope for recognizing and embracing erotic power, she offers a new and provocative way for thinking about sex and understanding sexual pleasure.

⁵⁵⁸ Both essays were published in edited volumes. “Sexuality, Love, and Justice” can be found in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, edited by Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ. “Pain and Pleasure: Avoiding the Confusions of Christian Tradition in Feminist Theory,” co-authored with Beverly Wildung Harrison, was first published in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, edited by Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, and published again in 1994 in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, edited by James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow.

Heyward's Critique: Sexuality, the Sado-masochistic Shape Society, and Sex

For Heyward, caring and healing as it relates to erotic power is a function of our sexuality, the medium through which we participate in and grasp the erotic. Because erotic power motivates justice-making, our sexuality - as Heyward defines it - holds the key to liberation. To make sense of these claims, one must understand how the distortion of our sexuality has prevented us from living into the fullness of our humanity.

First, Heyward rejects sexual essentialism, the claim that our sexual relations, including our sexual feelings, are natural, inevitable, universal, and biologically determined. Instead, drawing on Foucault, she maintains that historical forces shape our sexual feelings and experiences. She argues, like Brock, that relationships in our society are rooted in the dynamics of control and subjugation, fueled by the need for the possession of power over the other. Since no experience of power, sexual or otherwise, is intrinsic to a person or relationship, experiences of power-in-relation are socially constructed.⁵⁵⁹ Sexuality, she argues, is a social construction, and as such, has become a site where power-over is used to control and abuse, especially in a capitalist economy.

According to Heyward, relations in general that are characterized by dominant and submissive participants cultivate alienation, a feeling of being lost to one's self and others. She contends that when individuals and groups of individuals strive to possess power-over each other, freedom becomes more important than justice.⁵⁶⁰ Those with power-over experience alienation as a natural construction of reality and take significant steps to preserve their illusion of freedom.⁵⁶¹ They possess what Heyward calls "alienated power," a power that is not shared, but strains to be possessed. The counterpart to

⁵⁵⁹ Heyward, *Touching our Strength*, 39.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 52.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid*, 53.

alienated power is “alienated powerlessness,” a shared experience of massive resignation and collective depression, a social force that dashes hope and saps creative energies.⁵⁶² Injustice, manifest in the violence and abuse, is the tragic consequence of this sadomasochistic way of relating. In fact, Heyward refers to this larger cultural ethos as “sadomasochistic” because alienated powerlessness makes our vision for relating feel limited to either positions of domination or submission.⁵⁶³ However, just because we feel limited in modes of relating does not mean that we are powerless to choose differently. This illusion is crucial to Heyward’s solution to the problem of sadomasochistic dynamics.

Unfortunately, alienated power profoundly shapes sexuality. Feminist theorists have demonstrated that what we have come to accept as “normal” human sexuality is male gender domination posturing as the norm. Sexism, for example, is a structure of alienated power, a disconnection between men and women fostered by men’s control over women’s lives and sexuality. According to Heyward, sexism supports ideals and norms for heterosexual romantic love, marriage, family, traditional values, the authority of traditional religious teachings, the stability of the social order, and the security of the nation.⁵⁶⁴ Heterosexism, she argues, is a logical extension of sexism. In order to control women’s sexual activity, men must impose their own – they must always be and stay on top, and every man must do his part to preserve the this hierarchy, lest men risk the crumbling of the aforementioned institutions as they know and benefit from them.

Although this construction of sexuality has ramifications for life outside of explicitly sexual experiences, the sexual sphere is a powerful and often private venue for

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ Ibid, 56.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid, 58.

the abuse of women and for experiences devoid of pleasure. It is also a dimension of life where the distinction or tension between pleasure and pain can be blurred, confused, or conflated. In “Pleasure and Pain,” Heyward and Beverly Harrison assert that the larger, cultural dynamics of sadomasochistic relating shape sexual desire and pleasure. In this article they pay brief homage to secular feminists on both sides of the sex wars. Heyward and Harrison, like feminists on both sides of the sex wars, argue that the play between dominating and submitting in sexual relationships largely serves to enhance the pleasure of *both* men and women in our society – the latter traditionally learning to take pleasure in the experience of submission, surrender, or pain.

As theologians, Heyward and Harrison critically implicate the Christian tradition, which historically made pleasure chiefly available through pain. They trace the history of the influence of dualistic anthropology that positioned the higher (spirit, male, light, good) over the lower (flesh, female, dark, evil) and encouraged spiritual practices that necessitated pain (in form of the denial of the sensual pleasure) for attaining the pleasure of salvation.⁵⁶⁵ Though not nearly as explicit, they also argue that modern Christian theologies maintain these dynamics through a gender hierarchy that encourages women to live for others and to find pleasure in continual self-sacrifice.

The thrust of Heyward and Harrison's argument in “Pleasure and Pain” is that, at the level of personal erotic experience, the difference between what hurts and what is pleasurable has become difficult to discern. They explain,

Physiologically, the line between pain and pleasure is at times a fine one. It is not surprising that human beings learn a psychological preference for

⁵⁶⁵ Carter Heyward and Beverly Harrison, “Pain and Pleasure: Avoiding the Confusions of Christian Tradition in Feminist Theory,” in See *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, eds. James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 133-137.

an eroticism that is tinged, if not with pain, with tension that is close to pain.⁵⁶⁶

As a consequence, erotic experiences that generate sexual desire and pleasure necessitate tension – the tension between possessing and being possessed or the need for a split between the self and other. In other words, in our culture sexual experiences are erotic precisely because of this tension. Heyward and Harrison argue that it is difficult *not* to imagine the loss of this tension as the diminishment or elimination of erotic power, sexual desire, or sexual pleasure.⁵⁶⁷ Put differently, we can only conceive of and experience sexual desire and pleasure as it relates to the titillating tension between possessing and being possessed.

Heyward's Erotic Power: Mutuality, Sharing Power, and the Sacred

Heyward's corrective to this restrictive and alienated notion of sexuality and erotic sex is a new understanding of erotic power and its sacred character. She insists on breaking down the tensions that inhibit mutual power sharing and dissolving the “pernicious dualisms between sex and God, sexuality and spirituality, body and spirit, and pleasure and goodness.”⁵⁶⁸ Heyward's proposal requires rethinking our sexual relationships, our friendships, and what it really means to be “lovers.” In the process of claiming the centrality of the erotic, she collapses any distinction between agapic, philial, and erotic love, arguing that love is at once both human and divine. Finally, she insists that the flow of erotic power as love has an essential relationship to justice, a relationship that implicates all sexual experiences in the pursuit of justice.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid, 141.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid, 142.

⁵⁶⁸ Heyward, *Touching our Strength*, 4.

In *Touching Our Strength*, one of the premises of Heyward's project is that preferences for 'sodomasochistic' power relations stem from a deep fear of mutuality. "Fear of mutuality," she explains, "is the fear of our intrinsic interrelatedness, the fact that literally I am nobody without you."⁵⁶⁹ She claims that human beings are inherently relational – beings who become persons, grow, and change as persons, and even die as persons in and through relation.⁵⁷⁰ Heyward also indicates that our intrinsic interrelatedness can be the source of our growth or our demise. A growth-fostering relationship is mutual, while a relationship that lacks mutuality fosters disconnection and leads to alienation.⁵⁷¹ Here, Heyward sounds remarkably like Jessica Benjamin, but without the detailed depth psychology to back up her claims.

Thus, mutual relationships are the growth fostering, egalitarian opposite of sodomasochistic relationships. It follows for Heyward that the "erotic" is our embodied yearning for mutuality, the desire in every part of our being that seeks relationships that foster our own growth, as well as the growth of those with whom we are in relationship. "Mutuality," she explains, "is sharing power in such a way that each participant in the relationship is called forth more fully into becoming who she is – a whole person with integrity."⁵⁷² Taken together, erotic power is an incarnate desire to share power and grow together as persons. Misguided notions and fear of the erotic, including those perpetuated by the Christian tradition, contain, she insists, a fear of facing our longing for mutual relationships based on our essential interrelatedness.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid, 21.

⁵⁷⁰ Heyward hammers this point home throughout her text and supports her contention with relational psychology (Jean Baker Miller) and relational theology (which takes its lead from Martin Buber's essential connectedness of "I" and "Thou").

⁵⁷¹ Heyward, *Touching our Strength*, 14-15.

⁵⁷² Ibid, 191.

Heyward's understanding of erotic power is deep and full, infusing and shaping every dimension of her theological anthropology and her understanding of the divine, as well as the substance of human/divine fellowship. She expounds,

The erotic is our desire to taste and smell and see and hear and touch one another. It's our yearning to be involved...in each other's sounds and glances and bodies and feelings. The erotic is the flow of our senses, the movement of our sensuality, in which we experience our bodies' power and desire to connect with others. The erotic moves transpersonally among us and also draw us more fully into ourselves.⁵⁷³

In this passage, the sensual and material nature of *eros* comes to the fore. Reminiscent of Lorde, the erotic for Heyward is the desire to connect physically, emotionally, and spiritually with other individuals. Each dimension of connection bears equal importance. Embodied connection is no longer frowned up, but assumed. Similar to Brock's description, the erotic "moves transpersonally," in the creative space of "play" between our own subjectivity and the other.

Like both Brock and Lorde, the erotic for Heyward celebrates embodiment, as well as incorporating, yet moving beyond explicitly sexual desire, activity, and pleasure.⁵⁷⁴ "Eroticism is my participation in the universe...the deepest stirring of our relationality, our experience of being connected to others." Heyward declares.⁵⁷⁵ Thus, true erotic power craves connections and relationships that are mutual, where power is shared and openness to equality exists in all relationships. Mutuality for Heyward is *not simply reciprocity*, but an experience with the other that calls one forth into a full and

⁵⁷³ Ibid, 187.

⁵⁷⁴ Friedman and Irwin, 391.

⁵⁷⁵ Heyward, *Touching our Strength*, 25, 55.

whole sense of being. It is empowering. “To speak of the erotic,” says Heyward, “...is to speak of power in right relation.”⁵⁷⁶

In a profoundly theological move, Heyward asserts that to speak of the erotic is also speak of God, the Sacred, the divine, or love. *The erotic is sacred power*. “God is our power in mutual relation. It is with and by this sacred power that we are able to nurture relationships as resources of growth as co-creative women and men,” she explains.⁵⁷⁷ For her, God or the Sacred, makes mutual, life-giving relationships possible. God is love, the power and sustainer of mutual relations, and is embodied literally when we participate in mutual relationships with others. “Insofar as we do this, we ‘god’ (verb),” she says.⁵⁷⁸ Similar to Brock, the Sacred for Heyward is no longer “above,” but in and in-between. This understanding of the divine does not bind experience of the sacred to Christian experience exclusively; rather, the sacred takes various forms and images and is felt most personally in the struggle for mutuality. Thus, the erotic provides a window onto the spiritual, or as Heyward puts it, it is “the root of our theological epistemology,” or the basis of our knowledge and love of God.⁵⁷⁹ *Eros*, as opposed to traditional *agape*, is central to being, doing, and living out Christian theology and ethics.

Heyward’s Passion: the Erotic and Justice

Recall that Heyward’s overarching aim in her *eros* theology is to construct a sexual theology that holds together sexuality, spirituality, and the struggle for justice, claims that she indulges in her essay, “Sexuality, love and justice.” Having explicated

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid, 3.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid, 188.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid, 189.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid, 99.

her take on the first two concepts, I now turn to the third, and its necessary political dimensions.

Leaving behind the popular cultural notions of love as sweet, sappy, warm and fuzzy feelings, Heyward insists that love “is not a ‘feeling’ that precedes right-relation...we act our way into new feelings, new emotions, new ideas. The act is love. The act is justice. Good feelings about love and justice may come later.”⁵⁸⁰ Here, love is justice in the form of doing and being intentional about living in and into mutual and just relationships with others. Where there is no justice, there is no love. We are, Heyward suggests, fundamentally called to be “lovers” in the world.⁵⁸¹ Drawing from her own experience as a lesbian, deprived of the symbols and categories used to express romantic love, she argues that it is the “special privilege of lesbians and gay men to take very seriously, and very actively, what it means to love.”⁵⁸² Her claims rests on the fact that lesbians and gay men have no other word to express their relationships with others than that of “lover.”

A passion for justice, according to Heyward, is the basis for rage against injustices couched in love and for compassion for our own participation in injustices.⁵⁸³ Because the love of God – the erotic - is manifest in mutual, right relationships with others, she urges that political, economic, educational, business, and religious structures that do “not support love, justice, mutuality, and cooperation in human life should be undone.”⁵⁸⁴ Heterosexism, for example, is one among many forms of discrimination that

⁵⁸⁰ Carter Heyward, “Sexuality, Love and Justice,” in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, eds. Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), 295.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid*, 294.

⁵⁸² *Ibid*.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid*, 296.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 297.

must be torn down. In sum, Heyward claims that loving, insofar as it is “erotic” – exemplary of God’s love and the power of right relationship – is a revolutionary act.

Heyward’s Climax: The Erotic and the Redemption of Sexual Pleasure

Whereas Lorde and Brock refrain from addressing the explicitly sexual dimension of erotic power, the erotic as articulated by Heyward contributes to a discourse on sexual pleasure and the Christian sexual ethics that dictate its affirmation. First, Heyward redefines sexuality as “our embodied, relational response to erotic/sacred power.”⁵⁸⁵ In other words, sexuality is the character of our response when we participate in affecting mutual relationships and justice. Though we often associate sexuality with our genitals, our response does not necessarily need to involve sharing genital pleasure. “Sexuality is expressed not only between lovers in personal relationship, but also in the world of an artist who loves her painting or her poetry, a father who loves his children, or a revolutionary who loves her people,” she explains.⁵⁸⁶ This broad understanding of sexuality and the potential for great satisfaction in response to the erotic parallels Lorde’s contention that sexual pleasure bears no qualitative difference in comparison to the deep satisfaction and joy that permeates all creative endeavors. Heyward suggests that this kind of participation involves embracing difference as we look toward common strengths, shared vulnerability, and relational pleasure. She cautions, however, that such efforts do not necessarily avoid pain, as the desire for mutuality is almost always punished in a social order characterized by domination and alienation.

⁵⁸⁵ Heyward, *Touching Our Strength*, 194.

⁵⁸⁶ Heyward, “Sexuality, Love and Justice,” 295.

Out of this broad redefinition of sexuality, Heyward defines sex as “touching toward one another’s genitals,” or stimulating another physically out of our embodied, relational response to our erotic power.⁵⁸⁷ She claims that love-making (in all its forms) should always be justice-making. Sexual activity, if it is truly erotic, moves toward the mutual sharing of power in relation. She argues that sex,

...generates more energy...for passionate involvement in the movements for justice in the world...turns us simultaneously into ourselves and beyond ourselves. In experiencing the depths of our power in relation as pleasurable and good, we catch a glimpse of the power of right relation in larger, more complicated configurations of life together. Good sex involves us more fully in the struggle for justice – as, or with, people of color, women, differently abled people, ethnic and religious minorities, elderly people, and other earthcreatures.⁵⁸⁸

For Heyward, the mystical quality of sex has necessary ethical dimensions. The experience of mutual relating in sex generates a pleasure that stimulates a desire for sharing power with and supporting equality for every person and every living thing.

With no less of a mystical framework, Heyward addresses orgasm specifically. She proclaims, “Sexual orgasm can be literally a high point, a climax in our capacity to know, ecstatically for a moment, the coming together of self and other, sexuality and in other dimensions of our lives.”⁵⁸⁹ In other words, orgasm is an intense, momentary, epistemological event, in which the ontological reality of the interconnectedness of the body-self, the world, its creatures, and the divine is glimpsed. In this case, sexual pleasure is the medium for this thoroughly embodied and mystical experience, which profoundly shapes our ethical responses to others and the world.

⁵⁸⁷ Heyward, *Touching Our Strength*, 194.

⁵⁸⁸ Heyward, *Touching Our Strength*, 4.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 33.

The significance of orgasm for Heyward is a complete inversion of Augustine's interpretation of climax. Whereas she interprets orgasm as the pointed experience of synthesis and union with the self, the other, and God, he underscores it as the epitome of disconnection and alienation within the individual, between persons, and from God. For Augustine, sexual pleasure is a moral problem. Whereas for Heyward, not only does erotic sex participate in mutual sharing and connection between partners, but it inspires and motivates participation in the lives of others to tear down unjust structures that support domination and control at all levels of human social relations. Orgasms motivate political action. For Heyward, the experience of sexual pleasure sparks an impulse to action that recognizes the need for justice, mutually in relationships, and ethical responsibility. Although sex represents only one dimension of our sexuality, it carries significant potential, *almost expectation*, that it motivate participation in overcoming the alienation that exists between all beings. Ironically, both Augustine and Heyward attribute significant importance to sexual pleasure and exemplify a degree of insistence and vigilance as to the ends of our sexual pleasure.

Contrary to Augustine and her theological predecessors, Heyward is exceedingly affirming when it comes to sexual pleasure. She argues that understanding sexuality historically makes it possible to consider sexual pleasure as good and morally right, without the need for justification. At the same time, we must remain aware of the sadomasochistic shape of our context, what she calls "a praxis of alienation," and the ways that it shapes our capacity for sexual pleasure. *This is a very significant dilemma.* Recall that Heyward and Harrison argue that in our culture the tension between dominating and submitting in sexual activity is eroticized. Both men and women find

pleasure in their respective roles in this sexual dynamic. For Heyward and Harrison, this is problematic pleasure. But given this dilemma, how does one unlearn this experience of sexual desire and pleasure?

For Heyward and Harrison, the way out of the eroticization of the tension between the self and other in sex is participating in the “full eroticization of mutuality.” In “Pain and Pleasure,” both scholars commit to this possibility. In arguing for the full eroticization of mutuality, they prove themselves to be the only feminist *eros* theologians in my review to engage secular feminist in the “sex wars.”⁵⁹⁰ In fact, they fiercely oppose movements in feminist theory that encourage women to claim their personal power, arguing that a commitment to a woman’s self-possession continues to “reflect a dualistic apprehension of embodied power and thus an erotic split.”⁵⁹¹ Heyward and Harrison insist,

...the erotic split is the ground upon which we learn to feel as pleasurable or sexually stimulating that which in fact is the source of much pain to us: our alienation from one another, as people who have difficulty *feeling* power by *sharing* it...it is rare in this culture to experience power when shared as *genuine power* because we are inured to perceiving as powerful anything...that does not appear ‘over against’ us or someone else.⁵⁹²

In other words, they argue power differentials in sexual relationships, although pleasurable, leave us alienated from one another and block our ability to experience sharing power as sexually stimulating or erotic.

Thus, Heyward and Harrison oppose feminist theory that encourages women to take control of their sexual experiences and pursue their own personal pleasure because doing so only succeeds in supporting the bias that personal pleasure is realized in

⁵⁹⁰ The interaction is brief, and in the second publication of this article, where it is not clear in the text against which theorists in particular the two are arguing.

⁵⁹¹ Heyward and Harrison, 142, emphasis mine.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

independence from the other. They oppose any kind of erotic activity and pleasure that thrives on an exchange of power, regardless of the gender roles. Continuing to support the dichotomy of either belonging to self or to other only perpetuates the association of the erotic and its pleasures with the tension between the self and other.

Against any notion of individual personal empowerment, Heyward and Harrison stand by the full eroticization of mutuality. What constitutes a real erotic sexual experience is shared power, where the tension between self and other possession dissipates and ceases to be a titillating factor and source of pleasure. Tension must be eliminated. On this point, Heyward and Harrison criticize “individual feminists,” who continue to insist on the need for relational tension. Depending on the version of “Pleasure and Pain” one is reading, it is more or less clear that they are criticizing Jessica Benjamin. Against Benjamin, they contend that if good sex is fated to bear the mark of the tension between self-possession and other-possession, then it will most likely be rare, found only when a delicate balance between the two is struck.⁵⁹³ Good sex in the context of Heyward and Harrison’s fully eroticized mutuality, however, *lacks the quality of balance*. Its aim is not an exchange of power or a matter of reducing or resolving emotional and physical frictions and tensions. Rather, good sex and its pleasures are sensuously empowering and contribute to the well-being of both partners, *simultaneously*.

Heyward and Harrison insist,

The pleasure of sex is its capacity to enhance sensuality; the full-body orgasm feels good because it increases a sense of well-being, of integrated bodily integrity. The pleasure in making love comes from experiencing one’s own sensuous empowerment while being present to that of one’s lover. Good sex involves a simultaneous enhancement of one own and one’s lover’s well-being. Good sex does not involve simply one partner

⁵⁹³ Ibid, 143.

giving and the other receiving, one empowering and the other being empowered.⁵⁹⁴

Put differently, real erotic sex fails to be moved by the roles of controlling or submitting. It is moved by and made pleasurable by the experience with one's lover – the experience of being more profoundly connected to our sensuous selves, which cultivates a greater sense of well-being. Heyward and Harrison argue that both partners experience this at the same time while touching and being touched. They insist that as long as what brings us pleasure in our sexual relationships is an exchange of power, sex binds us to “the zero-sum experience of personal power in which one person's gain is another's loss.”⁵⁹⁵ More so, they warn us that continuing to participate in this kind of sexual relationship leaves us open to being stimulated by having power leveraged over us, as well as exerting power over others. This kind of sex is ethically problematic.

As I have stressed already, Heyward's final word on sexual pleasure in the context of her foundations for sexual ethics is a positive one. Her sentiments stand in a striking opposition to Christianity's negative legacy. Orgasm no longer points directly to that which has gone awry in the fellowship between humanity and God, and sexual desire and pleasure are no longer inherently problematic. Heyward argues that the pleasurable nature of sex is never a reason to judge it as wrong. Sexual pleasure is intrinsically good – an assertion that must be made in the face of Western Christianity's insistence that sexual desire and pleasure are narcissistic, perverse, dirty, or dangerous. Equating sexual pleasure with the perverse, or constructing it as such, she suggests, has exacerbated misogynistic and erotophobic values to the detriment of growing our capacity to

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid.

experience, understand, and trust our erotic power.⁵⁹⁶ Heyward claims that the perversion of our erotic power in this way leads to “pornographic” values: the belief that *eros* separates us from God, is morally and spiritually reprehensible, is a reason for shame and guilt, and is revelatory of our selfishness and sin.

Heyward maintains that learning to value the erotic and sexual pleasure as intrinsic goods necessitates the risk of participating in the kind of mutual sexual relationship described above. “In a sexually alienated social order, such a commitment constitutes a revolutionary act,” she insists.⁵⁹⁷ This is serious business. The risk in remaining complicit, of experiencing ongoing alienation from our erotic, sacred power, is participating in the production of “anti-erotic or pornographic” psyches and lives, where bodies and feelings are subject to domination, coercion, and violence.⁵⁹⁸ Heyward also asserts, “Any unequal power relationship is *intrinsically abusive* if it does not contain seeds both of transformation into a fully mutual relationship and of mutual openness to equality.”⁵⁹⁹ Like Lorde and Brock, Heyward believes that any kind of relating, including sexual activity, that does not realize or aim toward the mutual sharing of power retains a ‘somasochistic’ character and can only be understood as anti-erotic or pornographic.

⁵⁹⁶ Heyward, *Touching Our Strength*, 133.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 135.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 95.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 35.

Tensions in the Feminist Theological Promise of Eros

Neglecting Sex in the New Eros

My analysis of feminist projects grounded in a new theological vision for *eros* reveals that they have much *broader aims* in mind than the redemption of women's sexual desire and pleasure. Lorde and Brock both state that they are expanding understandings of the erotic beyond sexual love. This in itself is not necessarily problematic. For example, Brock's *eros* concerns itself with healing and the need to engage one another in ways that honor our primal interrelatedness – our erotic power – as the resource for developing as persons who are able to affirm our needs and our selves without harming others. Although she elaborates on the sensual dimension of the erotic and the unequivocal need to reclaim the body and its needs, she does not linger on the potential role of erotic power in sexual relationships and steers clear of exploring how this new way of thinking about Christian love applies specifically to women's sexual experiences. Her goal, like Lorde's, is to move the conception of the erotic beyond its association with the purely sexual, an association exacerbated by the lust of a male-dominated society.

The lack of attention to women's sexual experience in Lorde's and Brock's works, however, generates a tension. On the one hand, both rightly want to sever women's historically essential ties to the sexual realm – ties that have exacerbated women's association with all things "less than," including nature, the material world, and the body. Recall the preference for the spiritual over the bodily in the Christian tradition and in the philosophical basis for *eros* addressed earlier in this chapter. It is not a stretch

to imagine that these feminist intentionally bracket an elaboration on women's sexual experience in an effort to break from the patriarchal conflation of the feminine with the sexual. The absence of attention to women's sexual experience more broadly in feminist theology could be accounted for by the same intent – to avoid reifying female inferiority, contempt, or suspicion in relation to the sexual.⁶⁰⁰

On the other hand, these projects offer no redemption for female sexual life, including desire and pleasure. Lorde and Brock effectively lay the groundwork for a return to the erotic in female sexual experience. They encourage women to embrace their experience as a resource of practical wisdom, as a guide for living joyfully and justly in the world. They claim neglected aspects of female experience – the body, the senses, feelings, and intuition – as valuable resources for knowledge about the self and the world, which are essential for thriving and living community with others. Their new definitions of the erotic intentionally reclaim these historically demonized and belittled dimensions of human experience, treated as such precisely because of their association with the feminine. But despite all of these positives, neither Lorde or Brock return to sex! Is the explicitly sexual too risky or too dangerous to reclaim on woman's behalf? Ignoring sex in a return to *eros* misses the opportunity to criticize male-centered interpretations of desire, sex, and pleasure and to speak on behalf of women's sexual experience. For projects that look to effect healing and practical wisdom, how can a new definition of the erotic that neglects to address sex hope to offer healing and guidance to women for whom sex has been a less than joyful, satisfying, or healthy experience?

⁶⁰⁰ The resistance may have been a silent response the growing emphasis at the time on the diversity of women's experience. Thus, feminist theologians took care to resist speaking for all women their own particular social location, recognizing that sexual pleasure is particularly subjective and personal. This second hypothesis seems less likely since feminist were free to write about their experiences and just needed to be clear about their own historical social location.

Reconstructing *eros* to stretch and deepen beyond sexual love loses some of its force and relevance in our current context if scholars cannot return to its explicitly sexual dimensions. This leaves us wondering, how does this new definition of *eros* change sex? How does it change sex for women? What light does it shed on female desire and pleasure? The missing discourse on female sex and pleasure is even more curious to me because both of these women were writing at the height of the secular feminist “sex wars,” when other feminist scholars were wrestling with the role of sexuality and pleasure in women’s oppression and liberation. The social construction of female desire and pleasure and how to respond given aspects of this reality were huge issues in this debate. For Brock, especially because she is a theologian, to produce a book length manuscript on feminist *eros* and neglect a discussion on sex when secular feminists are so deeply invested in the topic, gives the impression that Christians still are unable to talk about sex and sexual pleasure.

Eroticizing Mutuality in a Sadomasochistic Context

What Lorde, Brock, and even McFague fail to address is taken up with intentionality and intensity in Heyward’s work. Although she too expands the erotic beyond explicitly sexual experiences, she also invites readers to consider a new and challenging way of thinking about our sexual experiences in light of erotic power. Hers is not only a call to imagine the necessarily sacred character of sex and sexual pleasure, but to resist and reconsider the relational dynamics that turn us on and please us sexually. Heyward challenges us to consider a new way of relating in our intimate relationships by living into the *phantasie* of “genuine” erotic sexual experience.

Drawing on her belief that sexuality is socially constructed, Heyward views the horizon of our sexuality as open, changing, and relationally dynamic – able to be shaped in the future, though grounded in the present.⁶⁰¹ In *Touching Our Strength* and “Pleasure and Pain,” she adopts Dorothee Sölle’s concept of *phantasie*, a reality that is more than simple fantasy. “Phantasie,” Heyward explains, “is generated by the collective power of human beings actively to ‘imagine’ a present-future and, in so doing, to begin to create it among ourselves.”⁶⁰² Thus, she charges her readers to press beyond sadomasochism by participating in sexual phantasie, recognizing ourselves and others, each as subjects of our own lives, capable of experiencing and sharing power in being touched, delighted, and moved by others without the need to objectify or be objectified.

Living into this sexual phantasy, Heyward claims, recognizes that the *greatest pleasure leaves tension reduction behind* in favor of personal power that belongs to both partners “who know deeply that sharing common goods, such as pleasure and self-esteem, generates more rather than less power and pleasure for all.”⁶⁰³ The solution for moving beyond the sadomasochistic shape of our culture – sexual phantasie – is necessarily political and spiritual. From a theological perspective, this is motivated by and increases erotic power, the movement of the sacred in us and between us, the love that takes the shape of justice in the world.

Unfortunately, the contradictions in Heyward’s work make the details of her solution difficult to imagine. For example, if the reader agrees with Heyward’s assessment of our reality, shot through and through with sadomasochistic dynamics that deform our lives and our sexual relationships, then her proposal for the “full eroticization

⁶⁰¹ Heyward, *Touching Our Strength*, 42.

⁶⁰² Heyward and Harrison, 144.

⁶⁰³ *Ibid.*

of mutuality” in our sexual phantasies takes on an eschatological character. At times in *Touching Our Strength*, Heyward tries to minimize the tension between the ideal and the real. She admits that it must be through our existing experience of sadomasochistic eroticism that we must reach toward mutuality.⁶⁰⁴ Therefore, erotic sex, insofar as it reaches toward power sharing, also entails “encountering brokenness and pain in the journey toward safety and tenderness,” Heyward explains.⁶⁰⁵ This gives the reader pause, confused about what this sexual experience actually looks like! In my read, Heyward wrestles with relegating eroticized mutuality in sex to the “already, but not yet.”

Heyward’s solution to the social construction of sex and the substance of its pleasures – the need to eroticize mutual sexual relations – affects her larger proposal on two fronts. First, similar to Lorde and Brock, sexual acts in which power appears not to be shared – the use of pornography, leather practices, and various forms of sadomasochistic sexual practices – are relegated to the pornographic and cannot be conceived of as properly erotic. The problem with this is that many women attest to the consensual use of these practices and to experiencing intense eroticism and pleasure in the practice. Regardless of the voice these women would give to these experience, the meaning is imposed from without. It’s pornographic.

Second, suggesting as Lorde, Brock, and Heyward do that women can access their innate yearning for mutuality implies that there is an intrinsic good hidden within female sexual experience and female sexuality to which one can return. This yearning and the pleasure that accompanies it is intact and unaffected by external, social forces. Implicit in this claim is the denial of the very depths to which social and historical forces have

⁶⁰⁴ Heyward, *Touching Our Strength*, 106

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 108.

constructed bodies, sexuality, sex, desire, and mostly *eros* itself. Foucault, who is clearly an influence on Heyward, argues that sexuality is historically constructed; however, he rejects the notion of a core to sexuality to which we can return. He also maintains that the concept of sexuality as central to human life is a construction itself. More so, as I have already touched on, Foucault's commitment to a way out of the current sexual regime is ambiguous. But even scholars, like Mark Vernon, who argue that Foucault does imagine a way out through sexual pleasure, understand the acts and pleasures to be something novel – a creation of something new as opposed to a discovery of something essential, hidden, and original.

Tensions in Idealizing Eros

The essential character of *eros* – Lorde's "power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge," Brock's "fundamental power of life, born into us...the power of our primal interrelatedness," and Heyward's "embodied yearning for mutuality, the desire in every part of our being that seeks relationships" – may not be as radical as it appears on the surface. Kathleen Sands, a scholar with expertise in religious studies, American studies, and women's studies, argues that Heyward misinterprets Foucault when she associates the historicity of sexuality with the radical freedom to shape our sexual future.⁶⁰⁶ Similar to my suggestion above, Sands points out that Heyward errantly assumes that although sexuality is historically shaped, somehow its normative structure – the pleasures generated by mutual sexual relations and justice-making – remains the

⁶⁰⁶ Kathleen Sands, "Uses of the Thea(o)logian: Sex and Theodicy in Religious Feminism," in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 8 (spring 1992): 20.

same.⁶⁰⁷ Sands insists that Heyward's position denies the *necessary* link between sex and domination or abuse, predicated on the argument that conditions of finitude and patterns of social life shape and limit our physicality.⁶⁰⁸ In other words, sexuality is already shaped, and perhaps limited by, patterns of domination and submission.

In fact, Sands impressively champions a critique of feminist *eros* theology that I am shocked to see dismissed in Christian sexual ethics that draw heavily from feminist *eros* theologies. Sands' critique rests on what she calls the "ideal *eros*" promulgated by feminist theologians, including Brock and Heyward. Sands faults the theologians for an uncritical use of a view of *eros* borrowed from radical feminists, like Lorde, whose small essay, Sands argues, "has become virtually canonical" for feminist scholars of religion.⁶⁰⁹ For this reason, Sands insists that feminist theologians missed participating in the feminist sex wars, where radical and pro-sex feminists debated the complex and controversial interpretations of *eros*. Sands asserts that both sides of the secular feminist sex wars oppose Heyward's conclusions. Though radical feminists and pro-sex feminists have different solutions to the problem, both agree on the necessary link between sex and domination, which denies female sexuality its intrinsic goodness.

Simply put, an ideal or essential *eros* is strongly aligned with the natural and not the social. The risk of idealizing *eros* is that it sets up a "good" that is beyond the influence of circumstance.⁶¹⁰ Subsequently, an essential *eros*, which makes mutuality in sexual relationships possible, always remains untroubled and uncomplicated by the

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid. .

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid, 11.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid, 26.

potential conflicts of human needs and motivations that make relating mutually, or sharing power, at times challenging if not impossible.

Between Essential Eros and the Pornographic: The Challenge of Tragic Eros

For Heyward, the erotic is the divine, the sacred in us and between us. God is the desire for mutuality and the shared power between persons that affects justice. Thus because the erotic is wholly good and invulnerable, God is wholly good and invulnerable. In Heyward's system there is erotic sex, and there is violence. There is good sex, and there is pornographic sex. The assumption is that when power is shared in sex, God is the substance of that connection, eliminating conflict and allowing all needs and desires to be fulfilled. If mutuality could just be eroticized, the most rewarding sexual pleasures would be the fruit of this sexual activity. Where *eros* abounds there is no room for sin. Sin in feminist *eros* theology describes social and structural sin, most recognizable in relationships where power is not shared but unequally distributed.

Sands seizes on these claims – the need to align the erotic with power, the good, the moral, and the sacred – identifying within *eros* theology a theodicy. Theodicy, whether part of androcentric theology or, here, in *eros* theology, is a theological system that defends God, insists on God's goodness and omnipotent nature, and assures Christian adherents that God and God's goodness are ultimately victorious in the end. Sands argues that *eros* theology preserves a theodicy that redefines the good by embracing that which patriarchal Christianity has traditionally cast out as evil or inferior and then, identifies these formally inferior goods as divine or sources of divine revelation.⁶¹¹ Among Sands'

⁶¹¹ Kathleen Sands, "Tragedy, Theology, and Feminism in the Time After Time," in *New Literary History*, 35 (winter 2004): 8.

most valuable critique of *eros* theology when it comes to moralizing about sex and sexual pleasures, is the problem she suggests with sustaining a theodicy. She correctly points out that insofar as *truly erotic sex* is completely disengaged from sin, it leaves us disengaged from the realities of life and its tragic character.⁶¹²

Tragedy, Sands maintains, touches the very core of our humanity, and sex, I will add, is not spared. Sands uses the term *tragedy* to “refer to stories or ways of telling stories that highlight conflicts of elemental goods and powers.”⁶¹³ Tragedy is the possibility that the goods and powers that constitute the basic conditions of life for which we strive or against which we struggle *will conflict* given the individual vulnerability of each, as well as the conflicts that arise among them collectively.⁶¹⁴ Human goods and powers are vulnerable to circumstance, and conflicts arise that although out of our control leave us suffering while seemingly innocently at fault.⁶¹⁵ Sex strikes me as an elemental good or power that is continually subject to this kind of vulnerability. Though I have seen many clients who have suffered sexual abuse – a clear instance of pornographic as defined by Lorde, Brock, and Heyward – many other careseekers have brought sexual struggles that are more akin to Sands’ understanding of tragedy.

For example, I once did couple’s counseling with a heterosexual couple struggling to keep their relationship together. There were many dimensions to their strife, including sexual problems. In time, I learned that penile-vaginal intercourse without the use of a condom had been the most enjoyable for of sex for the male client. This couple enjoyed a mutually pleasurable sex life, in which the female partner often indulged her lover’s

⁶¹² Sands, “Uses of the Thea(o)logian: Sex and Theodicy in Religious Feminism,” 27.

⁶¹³ Ibid, 12.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

⁶¹⁵ See Sands, “Tragedy, Theology, and Feminism in the Time After Time,” 50-51 for connections to original sin.

desire for sex without the use of a condom because she was taking birth control pills. When the couple discovered that they were pregnant, a crisis ensued. They were not planning on having a baby, and the pregnancy put pressure on their relationship.

Although this couple did not use the word “tragedy” to describe their experience, the application of Sands’ definition is illuminating, even pastoral. In some sexual acts our need for pleasure and resistance to reproduction meet head-on. Recognizing that pleasure can be good and that children can be good, goods in this case conflicted. The couple was left feeling confused, angry, and guilty. They did not want to have children at this point in their relationship, but they wanted to enjoy the intimacy of sex. They were victims of circumstance who participated in the outcome – an outcome for them that was not joyful or pleasurable. To idealize this experience as erotic or demonize it as pornographic does not capture the complexity of the pleasure, disappointment, and incommensurability of the goods involved. Thus, the denial of tragedy in sexual life (as in all of life) does not reflect lived human experience. Against feminist *eros*, my experience as a caregiver demonstrates that every struggle in sexual life cannot be attributed to domination or an imbalance in power dynamics.

In response to the “ideal *eros*,” Sands advocates for a “tragic *eros*” – the recognition that we are fragile, embodied creatures, whose relationships always have the potential for conflict and suffering by the very nature of our existence as relational beings. Precisely because the human good is social and material, the possibility of tragedy must always exist, bringing with it the potential to diminish our capacities for love, trust, compassion, and loyalty.⁶¹⁶ So too erotic desire and pleasure are “exposed to

⁶¹⁶ Sands, “Uses of the Thea(o)logian: Sex and Theodicy in Religious Feminism,” 12.

the elements and vulnerable to tragedy.”⁶¹⁷ Tragedy also means that moral goodness is vulnerable to circumstance, and that evil must be acknowledged as something capable of causal power, not just a privation of the erotic – a consequence of theodicy.⁶¹⁸

But the reality of tragedy should not provoke a state of hopelessness. In the context of tragedy, there is acceptance, but also protest, says Sands.⁶¹⁹ Naming evil as part of the order of things may be incoherent, but it is conventionally the hallmark of tragedy – accusing the deities of evil.⁶²⁰ Because evil is real, it can be “protested with the force of one’s existence,” Sands explains.⁶²¹ As a result, morality in tragic *eros* becomes a venture of fallible mortal beings. While feminist *eros* insists on a return to our primal nature of connectedness and looks toward sharing of power in mutual right relationship (the eschatological promise), Sands reminds us that tragedy “is concerned with the construction of meaning in the midst of the human story.”⁶²²

Pastoral caregivers bear witness to the effects of domination and abuse. But they also bear witness to suffering that is the stuff of tragedy – the frailty that part and parcel of the human condition. Making meaning in the midst of this suffering and constructing the hope out of despair is the heart of pastoral theology and care. As Bonnie Miller-McLemore contends of pastoral theology, we must “attend to the ‘messy, dirty, earthy side of life’: ‘life lived in engagement with this world, is messy, conflicted, rough, dynamic, and weather-beaten.’”⁶²³ Tragedy captures the realities of the present time and

⁶¹⁷ Ibid, 12.

⁶¹⁸ Sands, “Tragedy, Theology, and Feminism in the Time After Time,” 48-49.

⁶¹⁹ Sands, “Uses of the Thea(o)logian: Sex and Theodicy in Religious Feminism,” 12.

⁶²⁰ Ibid, 12.

⁶²¹ Ibid, 12.

⁶²² Ibid, 13.

⁶²³ Carol Hess, “Education as an Art of Getting Dirty,” in *The Arts of Ministry: Feminist-Womanist Approaches*, ed. Christie Cozad Neuger, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 75-76, quoted in Miller-McLemore, “The Subject and Practice of Pastoral Theology,” 191.

moment, where Sands insists that we must to come to grips with feeling both victimized and at fault because although we may be undeserving of the damage done to us in tragic circumstances, we are ultimately corrupted by it.⁶²⁴

In the context of “tragic *eros*” we realize that our desires may conflict with the desires of others and that these tensions can be experienced as suffering *or* delight. However, equating *eros* with the true and the good makes it difficult for feminists like Heyward to accept the *reality* of destructive or conflicted desire. *Eros* is ultimately a power that calls for moral choice and discernment, as is sex. Though Sands understands that Heyward’s intent is to infuse theology with the mystery of *eros* (and not impose a moral rule on sex), she opposes the conflation of the mystical and moral dimensions of sex, which she argues, “overburden sex with intrinsic moral reasoning and deprives it of the extrinsic moral discernment it requires.”⁶²⁵ Tragedy, Sands argues, is what helps us to honor the relative autonomy of sex and sexual pleasure, which has the *potential* to carry a variety of goods and powers. For this reason, to insist as Heyward does that sex should *always* express love or justice is a flawed moral demand.

With respect to sexual ethics, Sands asserts that an “ideal *eros*” relegates feminist theological reflection on sex and sexual pleasure to one-size-fits all sexual ideals, and, consequently, keeps feminist theologians from better understanding the actual sexual experiences of women, from asking what function sex is really serving in their lives and their communities, and ultimately, from aiding in the cultivation of practical sexual wisdom. While the image or metaphor of caregiver as a moral guide may be up for debate in pastoral theology, the emphasis on understanding, context, community, and

⁶²⁴ Sands, “Uses of the Thea(o)logian: Sex and Theodicy in Religious Feminism,” 13.

⁶²⁵ *Ibid*, 21.

participating in the cultivation of practical wisdom is central to the current pastoral theological paradigm. Thus, when it comes to suffering and flourishing in sexual experience, pastoral theology should be weary of idealistic proposals.

Tragic Eros and the Tensions in Mutual Recognition

To her credit, Heyward takes the conceptual steps that Tillich neglects, making serious efforts in her personal life to actualize her vision for erotic relationships, to realize power in mutual relating, and to resist relationships characterized by any kind of power differentials. She put her theory into practice. Not surprisingly, she struggled, and what I interpret as proof of the ambiguities of *eros*, she interprets as the challenge of living into erotic power in a sadomasochistic society. Heyward chronicles her experience in a book entitled *When Boundaries Betray Us: Beyond Illusions of What is Ethical in Therapy and In Life*. It includes her first-person recollections of her experience and analysis of her struggle, while exposing some of the problematic features of her demands on the erotic.

Heyward actually drafted *Touching Our Strength*, one of the primary texts in my analysis above, in the midst of coping with a relationship that was failing to actualize the erotic power and potential she was adamantly convicted that it possessed. Soon after, she published *Boundaries* and pointed to her experience as proof of the difficulties in overcoming patriarchy's resistance to mutual relating. In *Boundaries*, Heyward reveals her interactions and frustrations with her lesbian psychotherapist who refuses to cross the professional boundary from caregiver to friend. Heyward is adamant that maintaining such boundaries resists the flow of erotic energy and shared power and amounts to the

perpetuation of violence and abuse in a relationship that should be mutually empowering and healing. She aims to expose the problematic nature of boundaries in regards to the erotic, a form of separation that Heyward attempts to overcome by insisting that her therapist respond to her long after the termination of the therapeutic relationship. Her defiance of boundaries prompted critical responses from across professional and academic disciplines.

While some critics of Heyward addressed her work with psychotherapeutic or professional ethics concerns, K. Roberts Skerrett saw *Boundaries* as “an account of the praxis that both inspired and was informed by Heyward’s theological ideas.”⁶²⁶ In her analysis, Skerrett takes serious issue with Heyward’s conception of *eros*, an interpretation that enables and supports Heyward’s “right” to continue to push against the resistance offered by her therapist’s consistent “NO” to Heyward’s pleading for an erotic friendship. Heyward insists that her therapist, who is given the pseudonym “Elizabeth Farro,” is denying her own feelings, including sexual attraction and a desire for an erotic friendship/relationship with Heyward. Heyward by her own admission is emotionally, spiritually, and sexually attracted to Farro. Though Farro insists that she does not share these feelings and adamantly tells Heyward that they will never be friends, Heyward continues to send Farro poems and letters and to push Farro to engage her and admit her own yearning for mutual relationship. Farro tells Heyward that the pursuit is violating and abusive.

The thrust of Skerrett’s critique is that Heyward’s theory of a boundary defying *eros* – at the level of phantasie – does not take seriously the *very real tensions* that exist

⁶²⁶ K. Roberts Skerrett, “When No Means Yes: The Passion of Carter Heyward,” in *Journal of Feminist Studies of Religion*, 12 (spring 1996): 74.

between the self and the other.⁶²⁷ Interestingly, Skerrett's analysis of Heyward and Harrison's "Pain and Pleasure" comes from the version of this article that appeared in 1989, in the edited volume *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*. Another version of this article appears in the edited text *Sexuality and the Sacred*, published in 1994. While the latter article never mentions Jessica Benjamin specifically, the former article, according to Skerrett, pointedly takes Benjamin to task for failing to recognize 1) the social nature of the self, 2) the importance of community to human well-being, and most importantly, 3) the possibility of community without tension as the ground of the self.⁶²⁸ Heyward and Harrison are disappointed in Benjamin's "Freudian pessimism," exemplified, they say, by the ongoing conflict or choice between assertion and recognition, making the best hope for *eros* "a delicate balance" between dependency and autonomy that fails to reflect their vision for a "sensuous, eroticized culture."⁶²⁹ Heyward and Harrison balk at any suggestion that there is a social need for any erotic repression.

Correctly pointing out that Benjamin does in fact support the Heyward and Harrison's first two critiques, Skerrett agrees that Benjamin's proposal for an "erotic praxis of mutual recognition" is supportive of the *tension* between being recognized and recognizing, between asserting one's self and respecting the other. In other words, as I explained in Chapter Three, deep erotic satisfaction in Benjamin's proposal is based on "true differentiation," being able to recognize the other without canceling out the self, and being to assert one's self without canceling out the other. The erotic praxis of mutual recognition involves a self that engages with others as both "separate from" and "in

⁶²⁷ Ibid, 79-80.

⁶²⁸ Skerrett,

⁶²⁹ Heyward and Harrison, "Pain and Pleasure: Avoiding the Confusions of Christian Tradition in Feminist Theory," in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, eds. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 164-165.

common with” the self. Benjamin insists that this tension must be tolerated at the risk of boundary violation. Skerrett points out that Heyward and Harrison dismiss Benjamin’s proposal, insisting instead that any understanding of *eros* that presupposes tension between the self and other is sadomasochistic and must be challenged. Similarly Heyward and Harrison reject any sensual eroticism that is stimulated by playing with the tensions between self-assertion and recognition. They insist that Benjamin does not go far enough in breaking with patriarchal models of eroticism.

Thus, Heyward’s conviction that the expression of genuine erotic power eliminates the tension between the self and other subsequently legitimizes her ongoing violation of Farro’s boundaries, continuing to assert herself over against Farro and failing to respect and recognize Farro’s feelings and desire to be left alone. Skerrett argues that Heyward herself succeeds in being *complicit* with models of eroticism perpetuated by the Western tradition. For example, ignoring women’s boundaries ignores a history of women’s bodied-selves being represented as “unbounded,” boundless flesh, with “barely a membrane to delineate a woman as subject,” Skerrett explains.⁶³⁰ Though she has additional critique to support this argument, Skerrett comes back to perhaps the most problematic dimension of Heyward’s *eros* – its lack of ambiguity and its denial of suffering. Heyward’s self-assertion, when it bumps up against Farro’s “NO” to an erotic relationship, generates both.

An even deeper analysis of Heyward’s concept of erotic power challenges her one dimensional, static understanding of mutuality, or what Miller-McLemore calls “sloppy mutuality.” Though primarily concerned with the complexity of mutuality in relationships between children and adults, as well as in family systems, Miller-

⁶³⁰ Skerrett, 83.

McLemore challenges “muddled understandings of mutuality” in a variety of relationships and circumstances, including “acts of lovemaking.”⁶³¹ For Heyward erotic power is the substance of mutual relationships and mutual relating; however, her “ideal *eros*” subsequently idealizes mutuality, relegating any ambiguity to the abusive and pornographic. Miller-McLemore, however, skillfully teases out the complexity of mutuality in everyday life. While she supports mutuality as a “generic way to talk about the norm of Christian love,” her analysis, against Heyward and others, insists that “mutuality is an ideal in process and a term that resists essentialist definitions.”⁶³² More so, “The fact that Christian love as mutuality cannot be fully realized in every relationship at every moment does not *ipso facto* rule that particular relationship abusive or wrong-headed.”⁶³³

Miller-McLemore’s critique of essentialist definitions of mutuality takes into consideration the impact of temporary inequalities and “transitional hierarchies,” the role of duty, responsibility, authority, and sacrifice on the part of adults and a degree of self-centeredness on the part of children, and the “inevitability of failure, harm, and reconciliation.”⁶³⁴ Again, though she concentrates on the parent-child relationship in fleshing out each of these points, some are pertinent to thinking about the variances in and between sexual relationships. For example, intimate partners routinely experience transitional or temporary imbalances of power in their relationships. This can be on account of illness, age, emotional maturity, different responses to transitions in the

⁶³¹ Miller-McLemore, “Sloppy Mutuality: Just Love for Children and Adults,” in *Mutuality Matters: Family, Faith, and Just Love*, eds. Herbert Anderson, Edward Foley, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, and Robert Schreiter, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 132.

⁶³² *Ibid.*, 128.

⁶³³ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

marital or family life cycle, etc. Also, failure and emotional injury are prevalent in sexual relationships. I routinely saw clients, for example, who despite good intentions failed at times in their hopes for maximizing the physically intimate part of their relationship. The man who suffered from premature ejaculation or erectile dysfunction and his frustrated partner who felt deprived or responsible exemplified what for all intents and purposes was a mutual endeavor with “tragic” consequences.

Miller-McLemore offers the wisdom of a pastoral perspective when she reminds her reader “...mutuality over the long haul means repeated failure and injury and hence leads almost inevitably to questions of paradox and grace.”⁶³⁵ Thus, it is not the mutuality in relationships is impossible, it is just difficult in the midst of the realities of daily life. Sex, insofar as it part of the routine of living and constantly exposed to the elements, will always present opportunities for failure, as well as opportunities for forgiveness and ultimately grace. It is hard work! Just as Heyward suggests that when we participate in the flow of erotic power in mutual relationships we “god,” Miller-McLemore conceives of mutuality in its verb form – “an always-evolving process rather than an object that people obtain.”⁶³⁶ Thus, with respect to sex, the bumps and pitfalls along the way do not always amount to abuse.

In sum, Heyward, in her insistence on mutuality in sexual activity, assumes stable, equal, adult relationships. My knowledge of these kinds of relationships comes mostly from text books and not from my clinical practice, my family system, or even my own experience in friendships and intimate relationships. My experience echoes Miller-McLemore’s and Benjamin’s assertions: participating in mutual relationships is not a

⁶³⁵ Ibid, 131.

⁶³⁶ Ibid, 132.

static state, it is an evolving process, a constant negotiation of tension between assertion and recognition, in which there are bound to be failures. Rarely are there prolonged periods of time relationships that exhibit the kind of stability and equality upon which Heyward insists. Miller-McLemore puts it well, even unknowingly channeling Benjamin's psychoanalytic explanation of some of the unconscious dynamics in sexual activity, when she says that the subjects of mutuality include "the child in all of us."⁶³⁷

Here & Now: Beyond the Legacy, Stopping Short of the Eschaton

In the Christian tradition, sexual desire, sex, and sexual pleasure were all reasons for shame. To willingly indulge, especially and primarily for the sake of pleasure, amounted to serious sin, and exacerbated, first and foremost, the brokenness in one's relationship to the divine. Frequent sex beyond what was necessary for procreation was a sure route to dirtying one's body and soul, that which properly should be used to honor God. Nygren argued, as recently as the twentieth century, that *eros* did not have a proper place in Christian love.

To the contrary, feminist *eros* theology succeeds in breaking the historical bonds that have bound sexual desire and pleasure to shame, defilement of body and soul, and separation from the God. In efforts to move past the association of the erotic with genital sexuality, as well as the feminine, Brock expands the meaning of *eros* love and minimizes the attention, positive or negative, given to sexual love. However, there is still reason to believe that proposals that regard *eros* as the standard for Christian love imagine that sexual experiences, which are open to the movement of erotic power, contribute to

⁶³⁷ Herbert Anderson and Susan B. W. Anderson, *Regarding Children: A New Respect for Childhood and Families*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 10-11, quoted in Miller-McLemore, "Sloppy Mutuality," 133.

human flourishing. These experiences are positive, pleasurable, and not only benefit the individual, but also the community insofar as they encourage interpersonal relationships characterized by mutual care and concern.

There is no question that Heyward's vision for the erotic is affirming of sexual pleasure. For this she should be commended, especially given the resistance of her fellow feminist theologians. Her proposal also opens up to consider the sexual dimensions of other kinds of relationships, like friendships – another radical suggestion worthy of consideration. Heyward's proposal pointedly demonstrates how sex and its pleasures can contribute to human flourishing, as well as prompt moral motivation and a desire to see justice actualized in the world. She maintains that how we treat and relate to our intimate partners has a direct bearing on how we treat and relate to others. Thus, to effect justice, mutuality in sexual experience must be eroticized and participation in the tension-filled, relational dynamic of domination and submission must lose its arousing and titillating qualities. When mutuality in sexual relationship is achieved, real erotic sex, far from separating partners from God, thoroughly embodies the presence and movement of the divine.

Such a complete reversal of the understanding of *eros*, however, must give us reason for pause. These interpretations draw on women's experience to invoke an essentialized interpretation of *eros*, one that is a natural dimension of human being, wholly good, and invulnerable to historical interpretations of sexuality. While I do not deny the experiences of feminists like Heyward, I argue that this theoretical *eros* struggles to touch practical ground in a context that at this present moment is aroused by and thrives on the negotiation of power.

In addition, an essential *eros* is an *eros* love without internal strife or conflicts of interests, desires, and needs. Supported by the tensions highlighted in Benjamin's psychoanalytic perspective on mutual recognition, Sands' philosophical and theological perspective on tragedy, and Miller-McLemore's pastoral perspective on mutuality, I have argued that to assume that sharing power dissolves the contours of our individuality or that goods themselves cannot conflict in relation, idealizes the reality of life together. Our human frailty is a source of conflict and suffering *and* constitutes a condition of our relationality.

I heartily agree with Sands that a "seismic tension" lies at the heart of Heyward's *eros*, namely the friction between her normative yearning for mutuality, which grounds all desire, and actual erotic sexual experience, which Heyward concedes is guided by the tensions between possessing and relinquishing power.⁶³⁸ In a fleeting moment, however, Heyward opens herself up to other ways of working within this dilemma, giving ambiguous support for sadomasochistic sexual experiences. Baring the intentional abuse of bodies and psyches, with or without consent, she imagines sexual sadomasochistic fantasy or activity as "struggling together in the tensions and pathos of being more or less in control of our lives, dreams and destinies," an experience that seems to her "deeply human in an honest, poignant, even at times playful way."⁶³⁹ A reader like myself begs her to say more. Unfortunately, Heyward does not unpack her insight.

The challenges of tensions and paradoxes that riddle our formative years and pervade our everyday, often mundane, activities – *including sex and its pleasures* – are critical to pastoral theology, which responds to and works to give meaning to the

⁶³⁸ Sands, "Uses of the Thea(o)logian: Sex and Theodicy in Religious Feminism," 19.

⁶³⁹ Heyward, *Touching Our Strength*, 109.

suffering and ambiguity in our everyday experiences of life together. In the next chapter, I turn toward pastoral theology's most fruitful and valued source for reflections on sex, sexual pleasure, and the meanings of and potentials for both – contemporary Christian sexual ethics. I wonder about the influences of feminist *eros* theology and its difficulties with tension and paradox. As I unravel the moves necessary to embrace sexual pleasure in an framework for Christian sexual ethics, I will keep mind the extent to which Christian sexual ethics is shaped by Heyward's *eros* and how this might affect the inclusion and interpretation of sexual pleasure in a sexual ethic for the here and now.

CHAPTER FIVE

A PASSION FOR JUSTICE: SEXUAL PLEASURE AND CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN SEXUAL ETHICS

Since James Nelson's foundational text, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (1978), theologians, biblical scholars, and those with an interest in theological ethics have tried to better understanding human sexuality. At the time, Nelson articulated a *sexual theology*, a theological anthropology that embraced embodiment, both as God's ultimate relation to the world in Christ's incarnation and as the foundation of what it means to be human. Being embodied meant we existed and related to one another in all of our beautiful, God-given physicality. Nelson leveraged a firm critique of the enduring hierarchy of the mind and spirit's reign over the body perpetuated throughout Christian history. The body and its many pleasures, including sexual pleasure, needed to be reestablished as gifts from God, providing opportunities to grow in faith, friendship and love of neighbor.

Embodiment set the tone numerous for attempts throughout the 1980s, 1990s and into the new millennium to better understand the richness, complexity, and spiritual nature of human sexuality and sexual experience. Many theological ethicists attributed responsibility for deforming and limiting the relationship between spirituality and sexuality to a collaboration between Platonic philosophy and Western Christian theology. They also demonstrated how many of these assumptions still undergird contemporary theological positions and practice. Some sought to provide new resources, some revived

doctrine already present in the tradition, and some did both to construct new frameworks and priorities for Christian sexual ethics as a whole.

I applaud the work done by the scholars under consideration here. Their work is testimony to how truly misinformed Raymond Lawrence was when he argued, “There have been no giants in the field of sexual ethics in the five hundred years since Luther,”⁶⁴⁰ and, more so, that no major voice had reflected on sexual pleasure as a gift of God.⁶⁴¹ To the contrary, these scholars make rich contributions to a loving and just approach to sexuality, including an affirmative stance on sexual pleasure. Many offer proposals that claim exactly what Lawrence contends has been missing, namely that sexual pleasure is a good gift from God.

It will come as no surprise that James Nelson and Carter Heyward are foundational figures for all of the theological ethicists in this chapter. Nelson and Heyward paved the way for feminist, gay, and lesbian theologians and theological ethicists to affirm their own sexual pleasure, to demonstrate the essential ties between pleasure and spirituality, and to begin to see sexuality as a site where justice and love are necessarily bound to one another. Some of the scholars in this chapter take-on Heyward’s challenge by suggesting that personal sexual ethics must always motivate and concern justice-making in our political life as a community. Personal sexual pleasures, in other words, should inspire a passion for justice.

In my assessments of these proposals, three interrelated themes emerge: 1) the importance of embodiment to theological anthropology, 2) the insistence on mutuality as a necessary quality of relationship, including sexual relationships, and 3) the necessary

⁶⁴⁰ Lawrence, xix.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid, 153.

relationship between personal sexual experience and a public commitment to social justice. Sexual pleasure is implicated in the context of each as it makes its way into the framework for a Christian sexual ethic for our time. Thus, this chapter is organized into three large sections, each covering one of the three themes – embodiment, mutuality, and justice – as I chart sexual pleasure’s rise from the definitive mark of original sin to an energy for liberation and transformation.

I find these proposals radical and compelling; however, I am weary that where idealism abounds, subtle *tensions* fall to the wayside. In identifying these tensions it is not my intention to negate the valuable contributions of these resources – resources of which pastoral theology and pastoral care are in great need. Embracing our embodiment, advocating for mutual relationships, and maintaining a connection between sexual ethics and social justice are all crucial for a pastoral theological response to sexual suffering. My critical concern is that these proposals remain grounded in the here and now and are, therefore, sensitive to the particularities of individual sexual experience.

The Gift and Grace of Embodiment

Nelson on the Condition for Wisdom and Meaning-making

James Nelson’s *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, is, in the very least, a footnote in almost every contemporary text that addresses Christian sexual ethics.⁶⁴² His early work anticipates later developments, including the *eros*

⁶⁴² *Embodiment* and a number of Nelson’s subsequent texts had a profound influence on Christian sexual ethics. Nelson is the author of *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience* (1983) and *Body Theology* (1992), as well as co-editor of the first edition of *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection* (1994).

theologies explored in Chapter Three. In *Embodiment*, Nelson argues that Christianity needs to whole-heartedly embrace sexuality and embodied experience as God-given and good. In the preface, he challenges the historically unidirectional nature of Christian reflection about sexuality, namely the persistent question, “What does Christian faith have to say about our lives as sexual beings?”⁶⁴³ Though he maintains the importance of this inquiry, he argues that ample time deserves to be spent exploring a “companion query,” namely: “What does *our experience as sexual human beings* mean for the way in which we understand and attempt to live out the faith?”⁶⁴⁴

This methodological approach to theological reflection – taking as one’s point of departure lived, embodied, human experience and trusting in its capacity for revelation of the things of God – resonates deeply with pastoral theological method. It is no wonder that I first encountered this book in a pastoral theology class entitled “Sexuality: Ethics, Theology, and Pastoral Practice.” The sexual ethicists in this chapter also take their lead from Nelson and his emphasis on the particularity of human sexual experience, a methodological move that in itself confirms the value of our embodiment as a source of spiritual and practical knowledge and wisdom.

Nelson redefines “sexuality,” broadening the concept in such a way that it has become foundational for Christian sexual ethics. Sex must be distinguished from sexuality, and the word sexuality, *our sexuality*, must be more deeply understood.⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴³ James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 8.

⁶⁴⁴ Nelson ultimately sees his efforts in the text as moving toward a *sexual theology*, a term which he argues is more appropriate for capturing the multi-directional nature of the relationship between Christian faith and sexuality than the “too-narrow focus of traditional sexual ethics.” Ibid, 9, emphasis mine.

⁶⁴⁵ Here he is critical of Freud (in his early work), whose reductionistic and thoroughly biological view of motivation for human behavior conceived of sexuality too broadly. Freud, who understood all human behavior to be undergirded by libidinal energy, the life force oriented toward the achievement of sexual pleasures, had an intense impact on cultural understandings of human motivation. However, Nelson argues

According to Nelson, sex is a biologically based need that is oriented toward procreation, pleasure, and the release of tension, typically via genital activity that culminates in orgasm. Sexuality includes sex, but is more comprehensive, constituting a very basic dimension of personhood. He explains,

Sexuality is our self-understanding and way of being in the world as male or female. It includes our appropriation of attitudes and characteristics which have been culturally defined as masculine and feminine. It involves our affectional orientation toward those of the opposite and same sex. It includes our attitudes about our own bodies and the bodies of others. Because we are bodied-selves, our sexuality reminds us of our uniqueness and particularity: we look and feel differently from any other persons. Sexuality is a sign and symbol of our call for communion and communication...our need to embrace others, physically and spiritually. It expresses God's intention that we find our authentic humanness in relationship. It is also intrinsic to our relationship to God...Sexuality involves much more than what we do with our genitals. It is who we are as bodied-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual need for intimate communion – human and divine.⁶⁴⁶

In Nelson's weighty definition, one finds that sexuality is the essence of personhood – our biological sex, our sex roles, our sexual attraction, awareness of our body and the bodies of others, and our need for belonging, not only in human and divine community, but also as an integrated body-self. Our embodiment has a spiritual dimension insofar as it is God-ordained and the condition of our relationship with the divine.

In my analysis, Nelson's definition resists the sole affiliation of sexuality with its cultural emphasis on biological sex, gender roles, and sexual orientation.⁶⁴⁷ Interestingly, his definition does this while continuing to embrace the definition of sexuality that

that Freud's theory lacked complexity and remained convinced of biologically rooted motivations for behavior. Ibid, 17.

⁶⁴⁶ Nelson, 17-18. The importance of this definition for the field of Christian sexual ethics cannot be overstated.

⁶⁴⁷ Scholars like Judith Butler and Mark Jordan have pointed out that culture has also reinforced a progression from biological sex to gender expression to sexual orientation that assumed to be linear and determinative/contingent/natural. For example, a biological male, expresses masculine traits and takes on male gender roles, and subsequently develops attraction for those of the opposite sex, women.

modernity has produced and that we, as a result, live into and out. In other words, as Foucault argues, modern society, with the aid of the sexual sciences, has constructed sexuality such that it feels *naturally* central to the human condition – a fundamental dimension of our personhood, even though historical and social forces and discourses constitute it. Nelson’s definition of sexuality suggests just this central, fundamental role – albeit with a theological framework. Sexuality reveals to us the divine intention that human beings are created for relationship. To be human is to be in communication and community with other human beings and God.

Nelson’s God-ordained vision for sexuality is his more obvious theological anthropological claim. Less obvious is his suggestion that human beings are called to embrace others, attending to their physical and spiritual well-being. More so, human beings experience in their psyche, bodies, and souls the need for intimate communion. Taken together, sexuality is our grounds for recognizing that we need others, and they need us. We could say – borrowing from Jessica Benjamin – that it is the grounds for acknowledging that we desire others to recognize us, and, likewise, we are aware of the need that others have to be recognized. Though Nelson is not attending to power in this definition of sexuality, the language of “need” and the tension between our call to embrace versus our need to be embraced necessitates recognition of the presence of power that will need to be negotiated if both the needs of the self and the other are to be met. In contrast with later developments in scholarship, such as Heyward, it is interesting to see that in this formative definition of sexuality, Nelson is describing a tension – one that, given his definition, constitutes a basic dimension of personhood.

Created for community and mutual embrace, sexuality, insofar as it indicates to us our created nature, is a good thing and a gift from the Creator with whom a relationship is also desired. Sexuality is necessarily bodily. Therefore, Nelson demands recognition of the import of the body and the need to conceive of the self as necessarily embodied – a *body-self* – a self that is one – not separate – from its flesh. “The carnal body, the flesh, is the means by and through which we can know objects, persons, and events,” Nelson stresses.⁶⁴⁸ In other words, our bodies are the condition for connection and relationship to others, as well as the medium through which we create meaning in and understand of the world. If there is a crisis in communities of faith with respect to sexuality, Nelson argues that it is firmly rooted in the denial of embodiment, or *body alienation* – the tendency to 1) prioritize and value the mind or spirit over the good of the body, 2) devalue the sensations and feelings generated by the body, and 3) subordinate the body as a tool or instrument of the mind. As pointed out in Chapter Two, these sentiments were common among some of the most influential theologians with regard to sexual pleasures. Nelson adds that this fear/disdain/devaluation of the body comes to find expression in the subordination of women, who are identified with the body, feelings, and sensuality, while men lay claim to the more “worthy” traits of reason and spirit.⁶⁴⁹ These spiritualistic and sexist dualisms comprise what Nelson calls a state of *sexual alienation*. This alienation is the root experience of sin; consequently, one suffers from alienation within the self, from one’s neighbor and, ultimately, from God.

Overcoming this alienation is sexual, urges Nelson. Not that we are saved by our sexuality, but that new life, transformation, and healing occurs when we live into our

⁶⁴⁸ Nelson, 19-20.

⁶⁴⁹ Though not the focus of Chapter Two, sentiments to these ends can be found in Augustine’s, Aquinas’ and Luther’s writings.

entire selfhood – *our sexual body-selves*. Overcoming spiritualistic and sexist dualisms can result in a literal resurrection of the sexual body. Here, Nelson emphasizes the importance of the Incarnation, as well as ongoing incarnation. He explains,

The incarnation of God, the divine presence in and through human flesh, is always a miracle. We celebrate its decisive and normative occurrence in Jesus Christ. We also celebrate faith's conviction that God's incarnation continues to occur...It is the mysterious creativity and renewal of life itself, God's power in our midst...the miracle of the body's resurrection is all the more awesome because it occurs through human gestures, human words, human touch and caress, human intimacy... We experience new life of the body-self as a gift.⁶⁵⁰

In other words, although Christ is a significant instance of God in human flesh, we continue to celebrate God made manifest in our flesh as we communicate God's love to others in the only way we can – with the sounds, gestures, and movements of our bodies. As Nelson simply puts it, "It is in our discovery of what we really are."⁶⁵¹ The language of *gift* emerges here as a new, freeing, and joyful way for Christians to think about embodied, sexual experience.

Nelson on Sensuality: The Physicality of Grace

Affirming embodiment is a premise for affirming sexual and other bodily pleasures. Nelson's pointed attention to sexual pleasure is most developed where he describes growth in sexual wholeness through God's grace. He discusses pleasure in the context of sensuousness and points to the Christian tradition's suspicion and rejection of eroticism, including the fear that celebration of sensuality will lead to depersonalized sex without love or sensual hedonism marked by the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake.⁶⁵²

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid, 73-74.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid, 73.

⁶⁵² Ibid, 85.

But Nelson disagrees, and drawing explicitly on Fairbairn's critique of Freudian drive theory, posits intimacy and connection as the motivating force in sexual experience.⁶⁵³ Pleasure is secondary, a *gift* that makes intimacy in sexual experience possible. Taken together, the gift of pleasure is actually the condition for satisfying the need originally pursued :connection and intimacy. Given this claim, it appears that Nelson is arguing that even if pleasure appears to be the motivation in sexual experience, such motivation belies an unconscious desire for connection, perhaps the connection that Nelson argues allows us to experience true personhood. In sum, Nelson suggests that sensuousness suggests a *physiology to grace*.⁶⁵⁴ In other words, incarnate grace, or grace experienced through the flesh, manifests itself in the sensuous body. Thus, we could say that Nelson introduces *grace* as part of a new theological discourse on sexual pleasure.

It is important to note, however, that Nelson does not fixate on sexual pleasure; rather, he advocates for diffusion of sexuality throughout the entire body, resisting a genital focus that he says is indicative of alienated sexuality. He is drawn to the notion that sexuality is a mode of total intercourse with persons and nature – that the world itself is worthy of eroticization and indulgence in its movements, shapes, sounds and smells.⁶⁵⁵ The movement away from aligning a definition of sexuality with genital sex – similar to the movement away from aligning the erotic with sexual desire and genital pleasure – has much merit. Still, we should keep in mind, per Foucault, that this broad understanding of sexuality reflects the larger contours of the modern sexual regime, in which sexuality

⁶⁵³ Recall from Chapter Three that Fairbairn suggests that the primary motivation for human behavior – or the primary goal of the libidinal drive – is union with or attachment to another. Pleasure is secondary; it is the consequence of attaining union and security and likely enhances this connection.

⁶⁵⁴ This is important because grace is typically considered for its psychological dimensions. Nelson, 86-87, emphasis mine.

⁶⁵⁵ Nelson, 91-92.

pervades the entire human being. What we have in Nelson is a discourse on sexuality that affirms some of the features of the dominant system for organizing sexuality in our current context.

My concern in this project is sexual pleasure – pleasure that is experienced in an intimate encounter that arouses the body and may or may not culminate in orgasm. After all, enlarging the scope of the definition of sexuality does not leave sexual activity behind. Sex remains one of many expressions of a holistic understanding of sexuality as defined by Nelson. Thus, my review of this scholarship continues to focus on what explicitly or implicitly is being theorized with regards to sexual pleasure in both a narrow and expanded sense – narrow in that I am concerned with the physical and emotional pleasure of sexual activity; expanded in that I am looking beyond the priority on heterosexual coitus as the “preferred” or only activity that results in sexual pleasure. The focus on sexual pleasure also resonates with Foucault’s advocacy for pursuing a discourse related to pleasure as a counter-discourse to or “way out of” the modern sexual regime.

Gudorf’s Moral Priority on Pleasure(s)

A focus on sexual pleasure is present in Christine Gudorf’s text, *Body, Sex and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics*, published in 1996. Sexual pleasure, as articulated by Gudorf, is a positive force or power, God’s gift, and a source of God’s transforming grace, which builds up and affirms the personhood of each participant and confirms his or her status as a child of God, beloved by God. It also partners to see themselves as conduits of God’s love to others.

The Problem

In *Body, Sex and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics*, Catholic theological ethicist Christine Gudorf focuses explicitly on sexual pleasure. She asserts that the lack of affirmation of our sexual pleasure, and perhaps pleasure more generally, is grounded in a profound disconnection from the body.⁶⁵⁶ Like Nelson, she identifies the ongoing soul/body dualism still manifest in contemporary cultural and church teachings as a problem that continues to thwart embracing embodiment, including reclaiming sexual pleasure as a positive and necessary aspect of human sexual experience. The theological and philosophical legacy of the dualism between the body and the spirit puts everyone in a position to neglect, dismiss or even demonize his or her bodily needs.

Like Nelson, Gudorf argues that the body needs need to be recognized as part and parcel of who we are, capable of communicating to others and ourselves how we are feeling and what we need.⁶⁵⁷ It is a source of knowledge about ourselves. Our bodies need rest, nourishment, physical closeness, the release of muscles tensions, etc. “We need body pleasure,” she proclaims, and this requires listening to our body about what it experiences as most pleasurable.⁶⁵⁸ Gudorf’s assertions invert the theology and practice of those historical Christians who maximized physical and bodily suffering in an effort to deprive themselves of pleasure. She argues that bodily pleasure is good and not something that separates individuals from the things of God.

Embracing the value and integral nature of the body to personhood, refutes cultural and theological insinuations that the drive for sexual pleasure is irresistible and

⁶⁵⁶ Gudorf is a Catholic scholar with doctoral degrees in both religion and comparative sociology.

⁶⁵⁷ Drawing on Freud, Gudorf also suggests that repressing or denying the body’s messages can be dangerous.

⁶⁵⁸ Christine Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 91, emphasis mine.

necessitates external parameters for restraint. Gudorf argues that this kind of thinking reinforces a body that is disconnected from the intentions and will of the individual. Recall the ongoing antithesis between sexual pleasure and control over the human will and reasoning, particularly Augustine's sentiments that the power of lust causes individuals to lose control and to act irresponsibly. The toll is *spiritual*. Similarly, consider Freud's initial (and more culturally available) assertions that the sexual impulse/libido presses for satisfaction/pleasure and necessitates the constraints of the external world, parents, religion, etc., requiring a degree of sublimation for the *health* of the individual and society.

In actuality, to say that the sexual impulse in mature adults cannot be contained, delayed, or resisted does not do justice to our abilities to control our impulses and respect the wants and needs of others.⁶⁵⁹ Gudorf is critical that this belief supports the sexual harassment and rape of women, as well as excluding women from the pleasures of sex.⁶⁶⁰ Informed by modern sexology, she makes the excellent point that in our intimate relationships, it is the "*control* of sexual pleasure – knowing when and how to post-pone sexual gratification, using techniques to build arousal in self and partner – which intensifies sexual pleasure for oneself and one's partner."⁶⁶¹ Imagine preaching this

⁶⁵⁹ In our culture, Gudorf argues, this false belief reinforces sex negative education. In Christian circles, young people are taught that even minor sexual pleasures (like hand-holding) paves the way for raging lust that will ultimately lead to sexual intercourse.

⁶⁶⁰ Rejecting this historical, theological position, Gudorf draws positively on Freud, reminding the reader that the dominance of the pleasure principle in early childhood gives way to the reality principle, namely our ability to regulate our sexual impulses in the face of societal expectations. Apparently Gudorf is not concerned with the negative bent that Freud's libido itself receives. She is a strong advocate for mutual sexual pleasure. However, there is nothing mutual about Freud's libido. In fact, learning to live in community and participate in mutual relationships is always juxtaposed by the pervasive malaise or unhappiness that Freud argues is owed to the strength of the original impulse which has been sublimated. Mutual satisfaction for libido is not nearly as pleasurable as the satisfaction realized in gratifying the libidinal in its original form.

⁶⁶¹ Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*, 85, italics in original. Still, the control Gudorf suggests is not the rigorous, obsessive control that the tradition insists is needed for raging lust. In fact, angst around the

corrective from the pulpit! Gudorf's point is that a legacy of irresistibility with respect to sexual pleasure, one that casts it as highly problematic and in desperate need of regulation and control, perpetuates fear and angst and blinds us to the real, positive power manifest in our sexual experiences.

The Resources

Loving the body and embracing our embodiment, including bodily pleasures, requires relying on a number of theological and non-theological resources. Although Nelson does not start his theological reflection with traditional resources, he eventually returns to the Old Testament teachings of the goodness of creation and the New Testament proclamation of the divine incarnation in Jesus Christ to affirm embodiment. Like Nelson, Gudorf initially subordinates the tradition to human experience. She insists that Christians have maintained a degree of ignorance with regard to scripture's attention to sexual issues. I agree with her that the Bible is a questionable resource on this front, and its interpretation requires serious discernment.⁶⁶² Because the tradition contains such a negative legacy with regards to sexual matters, Gudorf asserts that ethics related to sexuality cannot start with the Christian sexual tradition. Though she does not disregard theological reflection entirely, but she insists on the importance of context for Christian sexual ethics, including scientific advancements and lived human experience.

control of sexual pleasure can be cause for any number of sexual dysfunctions in relationships. Women, for example, often do not know that they have more control over their sexual response than they might realize. Men sometimes become fixated on control, which can lead to abuse or their own inability to experience sexual pleasure.

⁶⁶² Gudorf reminds the reader that parts of the Biblical text do not always square with the central message of the Bible. In some parts of the text, women and children are treated as property, patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes abound and women are not afforded any sexual autonomy. Ibid, 85.

Drawing on her Catholic heritage with respect to natural law, Gudorf points out that human biology, particularly a women's clitoris, suggests that God intended for sexual activity, at times, to be primarily for pleasure.⁶⁶³ The biological sciences, the social sciences, and the experiences of human individuals and communities all make valuable contributions to understanding human sexuality and deserve consultation. Christian sexual ethics, she argues, must take seriously the consensus among these resources regarding reproduction, sexual response, sexual difference, and the development of sexual identity and orientation, for example.⁶⁶⁴

Foucault, however, reminds us that these same resources also contribute to the sexual discourses that produce and organize sexualities, including sexual norms. One of my major frustrations with Gudorf is that she fails to include Foucault's work, or even mention Foucault in her analysis of sexual pleasure. This surprises me since Foucault essentially argues that the meanings, morals, and truths "extracted" from sexual pleasures have been given over to discourses that have shaped our concept of sexuality. Gudorf does affirm the social construction of sexuality and is quick to point out that science is in no way infallible or value-free in its evolving and shifting conclusions regarding sexuality. However, she maintains that "science – all the scientific disciplines together...have revolutionized human understanding of our sexuality in the twentieth century..."⁶⁶⁵ This statement is sort of true, but there is much to be nuanced. Without using Foucault to more critically consider her resources, Gudorf's analysis lacks, and she is unable to demonstrate the insight that would allow her critically assess her own proposal's contributions to the current sexual regime.

⁶⁶³ Ibid, 89.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid, 3.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid, 6-7.

From Pariah to Priority

In spite of this, Gudorf insists that the Church needs to openly affirm the goodness of sexual pleasure. As I have already demonstrated, many churches today appear to affirm sexual pleasure as part of God's good creation, but then qualify their statements to keep sexual pleasure contained. Gudorf exclaims,

Sexual pleasure feels good...from the pleasure of having our skin touched...to the ecstatic loss of self-consciousness in orgasm. It offers us happiness of acute well-being, freedom from suffering and joy because it offers the possibility of meeting a number of basic human needs.⁶⁶⁶

On these grounds, she claims that sexual pleasure is a pre-moral good, meaning that at baseline it is good, before we morally evaluate its role in any particular situation.⁶⁶⁷ This does not mean that it leads to moral good in all cases, but rather it should be understood as one aspect of the general social good.⁶⁶⁸ She is careful to note that sexual pleasure as a pre-moral good *does not mean* that it is free from misuse, misinterpretation, and abuse.⁶⁶⁹ Still, she advocates for lives and lifestyles that satisfy the human need for pleasure, from being outdoors, to cuddling babies, to enjoying art, to enjoying sex. A message from our bodies about what is pleasurable and what is painful – the wisdom of the body – are important.⁶⁷⁰

⁶⁶⁶ Gudorf, "Sexual Pleasure as Grace and Gift," in *The Other Side*, 34 (1998), 11.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁸ Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics*, 90.

⁶⁶⁹ Gudorf, "Sexual Pleasure as Grace and Gift," 12.

⁶⁷⁰ From a philosophical perspective, her position with respect to pleasure is a form of moral utilitarianism, a middle position close to those of Aquinas and J. S. Mill, namely that "pleasure is a necessary but not sufficient condition for goodness." While agreeing with the experience of higher and lower pleasures, she rejects Mill's and Aquinas' methods of classification, arguing instead that higher pleasures have benevolent consequences for others. Sexual pleasures, rather than being lower pleasures, can serve to communicate respect, admiration, comfort and unconditional love that can free a person and a relationship for "heroic acts of love for the wider community." Gudorf also argues that body pleasure communicates to us our own goodness. "That sense of self-goodness," she explains, "is essential if we are to understand ourselves as beloved by God, and thus able to communicate God's love to others." Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 97-98.

Via a correlational method that draws on science, social science, human sexual experience, and theology Gudorf is also led to define sexual pleasure as a gift and a grace. She maintains that while it is not irresistible, sexuality is still powerful. Thus, she calls Christians to recognize the power of sexuality in their lives, to take notice of the complex connections between how they understand themselves as sexual beings and how they express and satisfy their basic physical and psychological needs and desires. For her, sexuality is a positive force, “a source of transforming grace,” she says.⁶⁷¹

Gudorf distinguishes herself from other sexual ethicists by arguing that sexual pleasure should be *the primary ethical criteria* for evaluating sexual activity.⁶⁷² Though Christians may want to prioritize intimacy and bonding in this conversation, she imagines that this effort evades the question of the goodness of sexual pleasure and fails to see how bonding and intimacy are normally dependent on mutual sexual pleasure.⁶⁷³ This is an interesting move, as it resists attributing the instrumental goodness to sexual pleasure that Foucault argues is so common in the contemporary sexual regime. Gudorf contends that outside of procreation, all the positive functions of sex are dependent on sexual activity being pleasurable. She insists that avoiding and demonizing pleasure has been destructive and unhealthy for our society, and we must admit that the reason we pursue sex is for the pleasure, whether the pleasure of passion or the pleasure of emotional intimacy.⁶⁷⁴

Theologically, Gudorf returns to the Incarnation and draws on the love commandment to interpret pleasure’s goodness. Like Nelson, she insists that the reality of the Incarnation proclaims the goodness of the body and gives us reason to embrace bodily

⁶⁷¹ Ibid, 81.

⁶⁷² Ibid, 114.

⁶⁷³ Ibid, 106.

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid, 115.

expressions of love. She also argues that the difficulties embracing pleasure stems from a theological misunderstanding of the love commandment, one that harps on the pitfalls of self-love and champions sacrifice in neighbor-love.⁶⁷⁵ On the contrary, Gudorf argues that Jesus' injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself tells us that the capability to love one's neighbor begins with love of self.⁶⁷⁶ To understand the needs of the self and how those needs are satisfied, we must love our sexual selves.

Implications For Our Sexual Ethic

Among the important consequences, embracing embodied sexual pleasure in a theological context implicates and rejects the emphasis on procreation that I have already demonstrated to be so prevalent in the Christian legacy.⁶⁷⁷ Gudorf points out that a true affirmation of sexual pleasure calls for an end to procreationism, "the assumption that sex is naturally oriented toward the creation of human life."⁶⁷⁸ Although many communities of faith would disagree that they support procreationism, she shows that it is a "broader and deeper phenomena," which is cultural and often subconsciously pervasive. For example, "real sex" in our culture amounts to coitus, or penile-vaginal intercourse. Other activities, often lumped into the category of foreplay, are not assumed to be ultimately as satisfying as coitus.⁶⁷⁹ Priority on this kind of sexual activity, Gudorf argues, denigrates relationships in which coitus is not possible, including gay and lesbian partnerships, or

⁶⁷⁵ See Mark 12: 30-31.

⁶⁷⁶ Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 115.

⁶⁷⁷ Augustine named it among the goods of marriage and condemned sexual intercourse that did not aim toward these ends. Aquinas found procreation to be the only reasonable cause for having sex, period. Even Luther called procreation, "the end and chief purpose of marriage."

⁶⁷⁸ Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 29.

⁶⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 30.

partners who are disabled and/or elderly.⁶⁸⁰ In addition, coitus may not be the most satisfying sexual activity, particularly for women.⁶⁸¹

Christian doctrines that insist that marriage is the only appropriate context for sex, while endorsing artificial contraception, implicitly support procreationism. Recall that Augustine and Aquinas posited that sex was created for procreation, and as a consequence belonged in marriage, the context that could provide for the needs of offspring. But as I demonstrated in the Introduction, most communities of faith today support contraception, admitting that there are other ends to sex (like pleasure) aside from reproducing, while continuing to insist that marriage is the only “appropriate” context for sex. These traditional reasons for limiting sex to marriage and continually conflating all sexual activity with coitus are no longer compelling.⁶⁸² My argument has been that they also belie ongoing distrust of sexual pleasure as a potential good in its own right.

Embodiment, Justice, and the Role of Pleasure

Pleasure in Same-sex Eroticism

With respect to embodiment and sexual pleasure, queer theological scholarship points out that lesbian and gay sexuality has been maligned precisely because of its embodied focus on sexual pleasure. “Sexual pleasure remains at the heart of charges

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid, 30.

⁶⁸¹ Gudorf cites sexual satisfaction research, including higher rates of orgasm among lesbian women, stronger orgasms from masturbation for women, and the high rates of women who do not experience orgasm through penile-vaginal intercourse. Ibid, 20-21.

⁶⁸² As for procreation, Gudorf sees no reason why it should not remain one of the many goods of sex. In fact, she is very concerned with developing a new reproductive ethic distinct from a new sexual ethic. The heart of her reproductive ethic, guided by her commitments to social justice, calls for a reduction in the world’s population effected by the voluntary commitment of individuals to replace themselves only. For further details and her own critical reflections on this proposal see Gudorf, Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 33-50.

against same-sex sexuality,” argues queer theologian Robert Goss.⁶⁸³ Some strands of Christianity, most notably the Christian Right, promote the perspective that homosexual sexual practices pose a great danger to society. Some within mainline denominations and communities that self-identify as evangelical or fundamentalist align homosexuality with hedonistic pleasure that poses a threat to Christian views on marriage and family, as well as to the emphasis on procreation in marriage. Goss points to lingering discomfort with sexual pleasure that finds its outlet in scapegoating queer sex. He argues

What gay men represent is the unbridled lust of sexual pleasure, but underlying this representation of same-sex sexuality is a great amount of psychological projection and fear of human sexuality, especially when it is uncoupled from procreativity.⁶⁸⁴

In other words, the condemnation of and lingering consternation around the affirmation and celebration of same-sex relationships belies a persistent struggle to shake the shame and guilt, and whole-heartedly embrace sexual pleasure *apart* from its reproductive potential.⁶⁸⁵

Scholars like Goss argue that queer sexual pleasure needs to be recovered because in our current context it contains the potential for revelation on a number of levels. Goss insists that queer sex challenges our heterogendered system, supported by both cultural

⁶⁸³ Robert E. Goss, “Gay Erotic Spirituality and the Recovery of Sexual Pleasure,” in *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love*, eds. Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press: 2003), 203. Goss takes issue at the perspective that gay sexuality narcissistically seeks only pleasure, and argues that gay Christians are claiming their sexuality as a gift from God, which furthers the argument that sexual pleasure is a blessing, and therefore binds sexuality to “justice-love.” Goss, 201.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid, 206.

⁶⁸⁵ I have already explored how faith statements that proclaim the goodness of sex and sexual pleasure, alongside the possibility for procreation, only reinscribe procreationism because sex and sexual pleasure remain confined to heterosexual marriage. Marriage between opposite sex partners is typically grounded in “God ordained” roles and genital complementarity, primarily aimed at producing and rearing children; hence, an implicit procreative ideal undergirds certain examples that claim affirmation of sex and sexual pleasure. As I have argued, this is qualified affirmation. Therefore, although embracing sex and its pleasures outside of the necessity of procreation would seem to welcome the sexual pleasures of gays and lesbians, the emphasis on heterosexual marriage makes the issue of sexual pleasure central to the church’s opposition to same-sex sexual relationships. Goss argues that the restriction of sexual pleasure to heterosexual marriage denies “the right to sexual intimacy and pleasure to queers.” Goss, 203.

and conservative Christian ideas about sex, gender rules and roles, relationships, marriage, and family.⁶⁸⁶ He explains that, more threatening than any one sexual act, queer life “intentionally defines a pleasurable way of life and constructs cultural forms to support that way of life.”⁶⁸⁷ In other words, because queer life (and sex life) does not conform to the aforementioned norms; pleasure – bodily or otherwise – can be a guiding principle for one’s lifestyle. Recall that Gudorf comes to similar conclusions after arguing for the goodness of the body and the importance of valuing the messages from our body about what is pleasurable and what is painful. She, like Goss, supports an ethic that, in a broad sense, seeks to maximize our pleasure and minimize our pain, or oppose suffering and seek joy.

Interpretations of gay sex also strengthen the argument for a necessary relationship between sexual pleasure and spirituality.⁶⁸⁸ Goss explains that some gay men experience a reintegration of sexuality and spirituality as intense sexual pleasure shatters individual subjectivities, resulting in the experience of communion. “The *jouissance* of gay love, the pleasure in the midst of sexual orgasm, becomes an epistemological mode for recovery of the body as spiritual,” he explains.⁶⁸⁹ Put differently, the experience of sexual pleasure for some gay men collapses any rigid distinction or hierarchy between the bodily and the spiritual.

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid, 206.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid, 207.

⁶⁸⁸ Lesbian feminist theologian Mary Hunt points out that while gay men have focused on their sexual lives as the locus of their liberation, lesbian feminists, who resists self-definition based on sexuality, centralize their relational commitments to other women – what Hunt calls female friendship. This way of self identifying is not based on sexuality activity and reflects a lesbian feminist commitment for individuals to be able to love whom they choose, free from heterosexist gender restraints. Mary Hunt, “Lovingly Lesbian: Toward a Feminist Theology of Friendship,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, 2nd ed., eds. Marvin E. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 186.

⁶⁸⁹ Goss, 207.

Because the Christian community can be hostile to gay sexuality, new spiritual paths to integrating sexuality and spirituality have emerged. Goss explains,

From a queer Christian perspective, sexuality becomes the capacity for giving and receiving bodily pleasure...[including] comfort, mutuality, self-discovery, grace and love. For many gay men, it brings a convergence of *jouissance* and spirituality, the ecstasy of human and divine encounter. Simultaneously, it is a convergence of pleasure, certainly with another human being, but also, and significantly, with God.⁶⁹⁰

Here, Goss gives voice to members of the gay community who delight in sexuality – in receiving and giving of physical pleasures – and experience within it God’s presence and pleasure. Instead of viewing gay sexuality as “unbridled lust,” he hopes that churches will someday see it for what it really is: “wide, erotic grace that rejoices in the pleasure of love and God.”⁶⁹¹

Embodiment, Race, and Injustice

Claiming embodiment, taking seriously the unification of body and spirit, as well as sexuality and spirituality, also means recognizing the *injustice* that has been and continues to be perpetrated by maintaining and manipulating the traditionally hierarchical split between mind and the body, which Nelson calls sexual alienation generated by a spiritualist dualism. While Nelson argues that fear/disdain/devaluation of the body comes

⁶⁹⁰ Goss, 207. Scott Haldeman, in his piece “Receptivity and Revelation, A Spirituality of Gay Male Sex,” presents a personal reflection on his sexual experience as the receptive partner in gay male intercourse, firmly owning his preferences, interpretations and conclusions. His piece, reminiscent of Mary Pellauer’s reflections on her experience of orgasm, are illustrative of the possibilities for considering gay sex as a spiritual practice. Haldeman finds sex revelatory in a sacramental sense. Sexual pleasures are “material, embodied, sensory experiences that mediate, but do not delimit in themselves, particular, partial and fragile aspects of divine reality, divine grace and divine love...akin to an icon through which one sees...something of the attributes of God.” It is about “mediated knowledge of God, about encountering God, in partial, momentary glimpses, through the act of encounter with my lover,” he explains. Scott Haldeman, “Receptivity and Revelation: A Spirituality of Gay Male Sex,” in *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love*, eds. Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press: 2003), 221.

⁶⁹¹ Goss, 212.

to find expression in the subordination of women, who are identified with the body, feelings, and sensuality, he neglects to make similar attributions to race. Thus, along with spiritualistic and sexist dualisms, we find the pernicious dualism of race – the split between white and non-white individuals. As with the sexual alienation one suffers at the hands of sexism, for example, racism also encourages alienation within the self, from one's neighbor and, ultimately, from God.

The treatment of non-white individuals, especially blacks, and non-heterosexual individuals in the American context exemplifies these grave injustices. Targeting sexuality, because of its association with the body, has constituted “justification” for various forms of oppression, discrimination, and violence. Identifying the “other” with lewd, lascivious, and rampant sexual desires and behaviors also serves to distance oppressors from their own sexual needs and desires. Similar to Goss’ claims regarding queer sexuality, the lingering discomfort with sexual pleasure finds outlets in scapegoating the sexuality of non-white communities. However, unlike sexual orientation, race has a constructed embodied quality such that it runs skin deep – literally.

The historical association of black embodiment with sensuousness, excessive sexual appetite, and sexual pleasure, alive and well in contemporary stereotypes and modes of exploitation, gives reason for pause and deeper consideration of what the redemption of sexual pleasure, and sexuality more broadly, means for the *whole* of the Christian community.⁶⁹² Womanist theologians in particular demand a critical analysis of

⁶⁹² Although this chapter focuses on the sexualization of African American bodies in a U.S. context, the sexualization of non-white bodies was a common practice of white, European colonizers. Inferiority of the colonized was insisted upon by portraying non-Europeans as nonmonogamous and sexually promiscuous, with an extensive sexual appetite. Grace Jantzen argues that the colonizers' own promiscuous sexuality is projected onto the colonized, giving colonizers reason to justify the slave trade and sexual exploitation as “necessary for the progress of civilization.” Colonization, she suggests, had two major affects with respect

what they argue is a distorted portrait of black sexuality informed by the cooperation of white culture and the Western Christian tradition. This sexist, heterosexist, racist, and classist alliance, they argue, has so profoundly affected and shaped the theology and practice of the Black Church that it has devastated black sexuality.

White racist culture distorts black sexuality and black sexual pleasure, turning the black community in on its self, squelching the liberative forces available in black sexuality, and increasing sexual injustices within the black community. Pointing out that white culture is prone to simultaneous fascination and fear with respect to black bodies and black sexuality, womanist Kelly Brown Douglas argues that this fixation is indicative of white culture's concern for white society and the structures that maintain it. "Indeed, the violation of Black sexuality by White culture is about nothing less than preserving White power in an interlocking system of racist, classist, sexist, and heterosexist oppression," she explains.⁶⁹³ Preservation and control of white culture is maintained by controlling black sexuality.

Sexuality, power, and racism

Douglas concurs with Foucault, agreeing that, "... there is no better way to impugn the character and humanity of a people than by maligning their sexuality."⁶⁹⁴ In

to sexuality: "projecting the colonized people as the sexually perverse Other confirmed European ideals of good sex," and "European ideals for good sex were imposed on the colonized countries and internalized by their people, despite the existing tension with their own traditional values." Grace M. Jantzen, "Good Sex: Beyond Private Pleasure," in *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religions*, eds. Patricia Beattie Jung, Mary E. Hunt and Radhika Balakrishnan (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 8-9.

⁶⁹³ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 12.

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23. Douglas explains that White cultural attacked Black sexuality in an effort to dehumanize Black men and women, which made them easier to enslave and treat as property and labor commodities. White

other words, because the contemporary regime centralizes sexuality and sexual identities and makes them constitutive of personhood, any condemnation of a particular sexuality is totalizing. It qualifies who you are at your deepest level and situates you in society according. Douglas agrees with Foucault that power is produced in this process, just as it disciplines those bodies and identities that it casts off from the norm. She also explains how Christianity contributes to giving sexuality a role in oppressing races of human beings. This project has already pointed out the hierarchical dualism between the body and the soul that lies near the heart of Christianity's historical rejection and disdain of the material body and its pleasures. This dualistic thinking is also implicated in racial injustice, as Black individuals are portrayed as the antithesis of "authentic selfhood," or whiteness, and as such, relegated to the lower half of these dualisms.⁶⁹⁵

As Douglas explains, identifying black individuals with the despised, sexualized body was justification for the need to control black bodies and imply inhumanity. White culture depicted Black sexuality as "carnal, passionate, lustful, lewd, rapacious, bestial and sensual."⁶⁹⁶ Black men and women were imaged as over-sexualized, guided primarily by desires of the flesh. Douglas explains that stereotypes, constructed out of the fear of difference, supported the beating, castration, and lynching of black men, as well as the rape of black women by white men without liability. Black men were portrayed as sexual predators, "violent bucks," whose large penises and sexual prowess were useful to the "slavocracy" in regards to reproduction, but posed a continual sexual threat to white

cultural also honed in on black sexuality because of differences in skin color and physical attributes. Difference again provoked fear and the need for control.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid, 29.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid, 31.

women.⁶⁹⁷ Black women, regarded as promiscuous seductresses or “Jezebels,” suffered the responsibility for their own rapes and sexual harassment by white men, who claimed to be victims of the black woman’s seductive powers.⁶⁹⁸ Subjected to public nudity and inspection at slave auctions, as well as being bought and sold for their reproductive potential, Douglas argues that black women “were helplessly trapped in the mythology of being Jezebels by the very institution that demanded them to be precisely that.”⁶⁹⁹ This “Jezebel” stereotype also provided a foil for White, middle-class women’s sexual purity, allowing white men to exploit black women, while protecting white women’s innocence.

The impact of this kind of ongoing objectification and dehumanization of the black body has been devastating for the black community. Douglas argues that the stereotypes of the Jezebel and the violent buck live on in their contemporary manifestation of the “welfare queen” and “the violent black man.” Promiscuous, unmarried women, who have a lot of children and sit around waiting to collect government checks, characterize the former; the latter reflect the same image of the black male as a violent, sexual predator.⁷⁰⁰ These distortions permeate black lives and relationships and function to replicate the perpetrated injustice intrapersonally and interpersonally.

For example, the manipulation of sexuality affects black self-esteem. Black individuals experience anxiety, disdain and ambivalence about their bodies. Some feel ashamed, as Douglas suggests, left to “negotiate by themselves the burden of years of

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid, 45-46.

⁶⁹⁸ Kelly Brown Douglas, “Black Body/White Soul: The Unsettling Intersection of Race, Sexuality, and Christianity,” in *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love*, eds. Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press: 2003), 102.

⁶⁹⁹ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 39.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid, 52; 56.

humiliation heaped upon them by a White culture that suggests that Black physiognomy is a sign of inferiority and wantonness.”⁷⁰¹ Womanists focus on intensity of this ambivalence for black women, who suffer doubly under the rule of racist patriarchy.

Toinette Eugene explains,

...persons of the rejected racial- or gender specific group begin to internalize the judgments made by others and become convinced of their own personal inferiority. Obviously, the most affected and thus dehumanized victims of this experience are black women.⁷⁰²

In other words, black women as woman are deemed the lesser of the two sexes – responsible for the fall of “mankind” and tied to material existence – while their blackness signifies animality, filth, and promiscuity in the shadow of the white woman’s beauty, purity and chastity. Consequently, their womanhood and sexuality “[harbors] the pain of someone else’s devaluation of their color, hair, hips, noses, and basically the way they move, live, and have their being.”⁷⁰³ The impact that this devaluation has on black women (and men) frustrates self-love and paves the way in the black community, especially in the young, for self-destructive behavior.

More so, manipulating black sexuality inhibits the black community from speaking honestly about sexuality. Sadly, this silence fails to be a remedy in the community for low self-esteem, sexism, heterosexism, and the spread of disease. Silence fails to institute healing, fails to tap the potential of black sexuality for liberative response, and blocks God’s intention for human sexuality to contribute to abundant life.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid, 74.

⁷⁰² Toinette Eugene, “While Love is Unfashionable: Ethical Implications of Black Spirituality and Sexuality,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, eds. James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 109.

⁷⁰³ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 73.

Thus, simply asking black communities to stand up and claim the goodness of their bodies and their sexuality, let alone their sexual desires and pleasures, minimizes the nefarious bind that this kind of oppression creates. Black communities face a dilemma in discussing sexuality publicly. They risk affirming white culture's stereotype of the black community as obsessed with sexual matters. In this way, not only does white culture malign black sexuality, it grounds its discriminatory thoughts and practices in exactly that which Nelson insists should be affirmed and loved – the body-self and its sensuality. Tearing black sexuality and spirituality asunder

Faced with the risk of reinforcing white culture's stereotypes about black sexuality, Douglas insists that many in the black community adopt a "hyperproper" sexuality modeled on white culture and the body-negative narrative of the Western Christian tradition. Promoting hyperproper sexuality, however, negatively affects the wholeness of black spirituality. For example, Douglas points to black spiritual communities who still treat women as sexual temptations, invoking the "Jezebel" stereotype and upholding the double standard by scrutinizing women's sexual activities and ignoring men's sexual indiscretions.⁷⁰⁴ Rejecting sexuality tears away at the fabric of spirituality because both concern the relationship with the divine. Womanist Toinette Eugene defines spirituality as "the human capacity to be self-transcending, relational, and freely committed, [encompassing] all of life, including our human sexuality."⁷⁰⁵ As the Black Church seeks to distance itself from its sexuality, it succeeds in diminishing its relationship with God.

⁷⁰⁴ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 84.

⁷⁰⁵ Eugene, 106.

Womanist theologians, like Douglas and Eugene, argue that black spirituality, at its core, is not lofty spirituality that is cut off from the body, encouraging the hierarchal dualisms of male/female, white/black, soul/body, pure/sexual, etc. It is not a spirituality that supports racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, etc. It is not a spirituality that supports the fear of the body, sex, and pleasure and clings to procreationism and marriage to contain, restrict, and oppress the needs and desires of the black body.⁷⁰⁶ Eugene warns the Black Church,

The tendency to opt for a spirituality which is unrelated to our black bodily existence or the temptation to become too heavily fixated at the level of the physical, material, or genital expressions of black love keeps us off balance and unintegrated in religiously real ways.⁷⁰⁷

In other words, she presses the black community to seek a balance between and integration of the sexual and spiritual dimensions of their lives. Spiritual life is embodied life, and embodied life is necessarily sexual.

Womanists maintain that the Black Church can and must reclaim black sexuality if its goal is to contribute to the ongoing liberating mission of transforming the oppressive condition of the black community. Aspects central to black theology and spirituality are crucial for embracing black sexuality, and, as a consequence, the black body, its pleasures, and its capacities for liberative energy. Love and appreciation for the beauty of the black body is first evident in God's good creation, which includes the goodness of *all* human bodies. Familiar with Nelson, Douglas explains that the body is also "the instrumentality of divine presence...It is the medium by which god is made 'real' to

⁷⁰⁶ Eugene points to African heritage, which allows black Christians to understand spirituality as both "life-experience and worldview" – one that allows for sharing in a collective mindset which does not make firm distinctions between the secular and the sacred or support negative, polemic distinctions about the merits of ideal/actual, body/spirit or profane/pristine. Eugene, 109.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid, 110.

humanity, through which God interacts in human history.”⁷⁰⁸ The Black Church also affirms Jesus as the incarnate God, who irrevocably joins flesh and spirit, who implicates the body in spirituality.

Beyond Heterosexist and Racist Dualisms

Sexuality, who we are as body-selves in need of physical, spiritual, and emotional connection, is what makes human relationships and relationship with the divine possible; *the body is the physicality of sexuality*. All bodies are good, as they serves as the condition for relating to others and making meaning in the world. All humanity is made in the image of God.

Theologizing from one’s sexual pleasure and recognizing the unified nature of sexuality and spirituality are goals for both the queer community and the black community. According to Goss, queer sexual pleasure needs to be recovered; he and other gay men, for example, do just this in their scholarship, interpreting their own sexual experiences as life-giving and thoroughly spiritual. Though Douglas indicates that the Black Church and community desperately need to embrace their own embodiment, including their sexuality, I had a difficult time finding *theological* scholarship by black male or female authors who write explicitly about their sexual experience and pleasures. Although both black and queer communities continue to suffer at the hands of racists, heterosexist patriarchy, I am curious if race – at least in the theological context – appears to generate greater risk when it comes to talking and writing explicitly and publicly about sexual pleasure. In evaluating the resources used for this project, I could not find anything in the black scholarship that reflected projects like Pellauer’s or Haldeman’s.

⁷⁰⁸ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 113.

Recall that Kelly Brown Douglas testifies to the double bind imposed by white culture that black communities face talking about their sexuality. The black community risks confirming white culture's stereotypes by celebrating their sexual-selves, including their sexual pleasures. Karen Baker-Fletcher, however, who notes the richness of the erotic in contemporary black women's writings, gives an indication that resisting personal reflections like Pellauer's and Haldeman's is actually an assertion of freedom. In consideration of Eve Ensler's "The Vagina Monologues," Baker-Fletcher explains,

It is not surprising that a Black woman did not write, 'The Vagina Monologues,' ...Historically our bodies have been forcefully displayed and spread for curiosity, amusement, observation, and consumption. To be private about sexuality is a freedom for which Black women are still fighting a great cost.⁷⁰⁹

In other words, womanists claim their freedom to do, display, and play with their sexuality as they please, and will not be forced to participate in a sexual regime – say of eliciting their personal sexual pleasures – that has been the source of so much pain for them and their brothers and sisters.

Perhaps what needs to be addressed before moving on is that the intersection of sexuality and race criticizes any simple inclusion of sexual pleasure in Christian sexual ethics. The black community may not have the privilege that white women and white non-heterosexual individuals possess, or they may be powerfully resisting the public production of discourse to these ends – a freedom and power they claim in their own

⁷⁰⁹ Karen Baker-Fletcher, "The Erotic in Contemporary Black Women's Writings," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, eds. Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins, (New York: Pelgrave MacMillan, 2004), 208.

liberation. I would wager that a similar argument could be made for class, which cuts across race, gender, and sexual orientation.⁷¹⁰

My point is that reclaiming pleasure needs to be preceded by reclamation of the whole of black sexuality. There also needs to be accountability for how white culture and the Western Christian tradition have used sexuality in the service of racism. These efforts are an example of how social justice is related to sexual ethics, and why Christian sexual ethics must attend to more than personal sexual relationships. It raises the question of sexuality's relationship to power in yet another way. Not only does sexuality function as a way to suppress power, but via sexuality power shows its productive character as certain forms of knowledge are organized and deployed in public discourse. This demonstrates that the personal is not easily isolable from the political – even when something as personal as sex is the subject.

What's Good for the Goose is Good for the Flock!: Mutuality in Sexual Pleasure

Carter Heyward heavily influenced Christian sexual ethics with claims that mutuality should be eroticized in all relationships, including sexual relationships. Mutuality in sexual relationships became an ethical mandate for “good” sex – sex that resisted using power dynamics to titillate and please. In the context of her *eros* theology, Heyward insisted that desires aroused and satisfied by any ratio of dominance and submission amounted to violence and the pornographic. Thus, mutuality in sexual experience is the second theme that emerges and is bound to sexual pleasure in

⁷¹⁰ An excellent resource is Tracy West, “The Policing of Poor Black Women’s Sexual Reproduction” in *God Forbid: Religion and Sex in American Public Life*, ed. Kathleen Sands, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 135-54.

discussions that seek to affirm sexual pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure that has been ignored, denied, or maligned.

Gudorf devotes an entire chapter to an insistence on mutuality as normative in sexual pleasure. Feminist contributors to this discourse also demand mutuality in sexual experience, and such insights are among the strongest contributions offered by queer theologians with respect to reconstructing Christian sexual ethics. It is clear that not only does pleasure need affirmation, but that mutuality in sexual relationships recognizes that the sexual pleasure of all participating parties needs to be affirmed. In this way, the affirmation of *mutual sexual pleasure* attempts to keep Christian sexual ethics from reinscribing dominant forms and interpretations of sexual pleasure – namely white, male, heterosexual pleasure.

Gudorf's Highest Priority

Mutuality in sexual pleasure is a non-negotiable for Gudorf and becomes foundational for sexual ethics as justice becomes the larger frame for interpreting sexual pleasure. Theologically, she supports mutual relations with the witness of Jesus' ministry, one characterized by the inclusivity of women, children, the poor and sick, prostitutes and tax collectors – all of whom were welcome at his table. Mutuality is also supported by her interpretation of the love commandment explained in the prior section, one that balances the needs of the self with the needs of the neighbor, arguing that these needs inevitably "march together" and can be "mutually satisfied."⁷¹¹ Taken together, to consistently exclude one from or deny one sexual pleasure is problematic. It objectifies one's partner and deprives her of the goods of sexual pleasure mentioned above.

⁷¹¹ Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*, 115.

To further explain, Gudorf states,

In sex, if one partner is consistently acting to please the other person without openness to receiving pleasure, the pleasure of both persons in the relationship decreases. The active partner can over time become the controlling partner, which both partners can come to resent.⁷¹²

It is to this point that Gudorf explicitly engages Heyward and Harrison's work on the intersections of pain and pleasure found in relationships characterized by domination and submission. Gudorf recognizes that the proposed problem, the eroticization of dominance/power, presents a challenge for the solution, the eroticization of mutuality – namely that there can be a distinction between what one might intellectually desire and what one actually finds arousing. Gudorf, however, does not follow through with this critique! She simply moves on, embracing Heyward and Harrison's solution and insisting that mutuality in sexual pleasure should be normative.⁷¹³

Female Orgasm Demands Recognition

While Gudorf is sensitive to the ways that women have suffered alongside sexual ethics that vilify sexual pleasure or neglect a priority on women's sexual pleasure, a number of feminist theologians and ethicists focus pointedly on the lack of attention given to women's sexual pleasure, including the ways that this neglect is culturally

⁷¹² Ibid, 139.

⁷¹³ According to Gudorf, mutuality in sexual activity implies the following: The communication of care and concern, which becomes symbolized in physical touch, serves to maximize pleasure. This can be just as true for those having casual sex as those in a committed relationship. Mutuality in sexual pleasure assumes consent to sex, while the inverse cannot be assumed. Gudorf lists the following as obstacles to mutual sexual pleasure: genital mutilation (usually of women), fear of pregnancy, fear of AIDS and other STDs, rape and sexual abuse, sexual coercion/harassment, sexual dysfunction, ignorance of sexual biology and technique, traditional sex roles, and poor sexual communication. She also argues that responsibly to our communities would require resisting sexual activity which involves contracting STDs, conception outside stable, ecologically responsible child-rearing situations and public policies that support sexual ignorance, sexual dysfunction, sexual abuse and/or sexual coercion/harassment. Finally, she advocates for the criterion of respect and care, which at least rules out any instrumental understandings of partners. Ibid, 143-155.

reinforced and how it deprives women of an increasing sense of well-being and self-concern. Insistence on mutuality when it comes to sexual pleasure calls attention to the importance of women's sexual pleasure in particular, as men's pleasure is typically taken for granted in the priority on penile-vaginal intercourse. Recall that even one of the most progressive church documents, that of the ELCA, referred to the "...the greatest sexual intimacies, such as coitus..."⁷¹⁴ In churches, as in culture, sexual intercourse is still prioritized, despite what women have had to say what stimulates and maximizes their own sexual pleasure.

In her article "The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm: Toward Sexual Ethics that Celebrates Women's Sexuality,"⁷¹⁵ feminist theologian Mary Pellauer identifies difficulties that are particular to reflection on female orgasm. Paramount to phenomenological issues – that female orgasm can be brief and fleeting, difficult to remember or describe in the moment, and lacking in uniformity over subsequent iterations – is the reality that sexually active women cannot take orgasms for granted.⁷¹⁶ Drawing on data from the *1990 Kinsey Institute Report on Sex*, Pellauer highlights the ambiguity related to female orgasm, from the experience of anorgasmia, to the difficulty defining and identifying orgasm, to the experiences of orgasms that are more likely the result of other types of stimulation besides coitus. Unlike men, orgasm for women does not come naturally, she insists. "We have to *learn* it."⁷¹⁷

⁷¹⁴ ELCA, <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx> (accessed January 28, 2011).

⁷¹⁵ This article is omitted from the second edition of this text.

⁷¹⁶ Mary Pellauer, "The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm: Toward Sexual Ethics That Celebrates Women's Sexuality," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, eds. James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 150-151.

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid*, 151, italics in original.

Pellauer also points out that fresh reflection on female orgasm is complicated by female sexual experiences already interpreted in culture. Catholic scholar Patricia Beattie Jung, in her article “Sanctifying Women’s Pleasure,” elaborates on oppressive cultural and theological interpretations of female sexual pleasure. She criticizes Roman Catholic teaching with regards to sex as conflicted and unsatisfactory for affirming the necessity and good of women’s sexual pleasure. For example, although the procreative ends to sex are no longer primary to its unitive function, Roman Catholic theology continues to support conjugal coitus only. Drawing as both Gudorf and Pellauer do on statistics gleaned from women’s sexual experiences, Jung reiterates that coitus is not necessarily the most pleasurable (if at all) sexual activity for women. Unfortunately, the Church continues to view as “polluting” activities that prove to be more arousing, like direct stimulation of the genitals by hand or mouth or other kinds of rubbing.⁷¹⁸

As many feminists here point out, a theological perspective that only supports coitus cannot support female sexual pleasure. Such a perspective also fails to meet its own celebrated ends in many traditions – unity – which Jung argues, similar to Gudorf, cannot exist without shared pleasures and mutual delight.⁷¹⁹ Furthermore, disregard for women’s sexual pleasure promotes ignorance to the pain that can be experienced during sexual intercourse.⁷²⁰ Thus, continuing to promote only the moral goodness of coitus or prioritizing coitus over other sexual acts neglects women’s pleasure. Neglecting women’s pleasure, and as such the experience of mutually pleasurable sexual activity, ironically

⁷¹⁸ Patricia Beattie Jung, “Sanctifying Women’s Pleasure,” in *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World’s Religions*, eds. Patricia Beattie Jung, Mary E. Hunt and Radhika Balakrishnan (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 78.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid, 79.

⁷²⁰ Jung points out, “Under present Catholic catechetical teaching about the main offenses against marriage, nothing is said about the need to share pleasure, or even avoiding causing pain during intercourse.” Ibid.

fails to contribute to the bonding between individuals [read: married] that the Church has come to prioritize above or alongside procreation.⁷²¹ More so, it is worth pointing out that whether the emphasis is reproduction or bonding, the need for pleasure to have an instrumental goodness also resonates with the contemporary sexual regime – Foucault’s suggestion that value or meaning of sexual pleasure is dependent on the ends that it serves.

In addition to critiquing the Christian tradition, Jung identifies social factors, institutional patterns, and cultural messages that contribute to the absence or distortion of sexual pleasure in the lives of women. For example, in the politics of research one finds a dearth of research into the sexual complaints of women alongside the plethora of funds and research devoted to male erectile dysfunction and impotence.⁷²² Jung also argues that a social taboo against sexual pleasure is prevalent in public sex education. As an example, she focuses on the resistance to teaching masturbation – a frustration that I pointed out in my Introduction. This is particularly costly for women, who are less likely to masturbate and masturbate at a later age. Withholding or neglecting sexual self-knowledge is more costly for women because, as Pellauer has already insisted, “women need to learn in particular what please them.”⁷²³

Finally, Jung identifies the chronic forgetting and rediscovery of the clitoris as responsible for the devaluation of women’s sexual pleasure. She briefly traces some historical shifts in perceptions of women’s sexuality and capacity for sexual pleasure,

⁷²¹ Jung acknowledges that many communities of faith have come to appreciate sexual pleasure, to affirm its premoral goodness, in so far as it contributes to procreative and/or unitive ends in marriage. But instrumental value and skepticism abound. On the one hand, more conservative groups qualify this affirmation with caution, fearing that pleasure beyond instrumental value can have corrupt ends. Liberal moral theologians, on the other hand, are less skeptical, but tend to argue that sexual pleasure remains only instrumentally good.

⁷²² Jung, 86.

⁷²³ Ibid, 87.

demonstrating the cultural impetus to minimize over and over again the gains made in identifying the clitoris as a pleasure center, as well as the superiority of clitoral stimulation by hand or mouth over against coitus. A fascinating and in-depth exploration into and critique of the chronic forgetting and rediscovery of the clitoris can be found in feminist philosopher Nancy Tuana's article, "Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance."

Despite the challenges, these feminists argue that female sexual pleasure holds potential and that its affirmation may constitute a moral imperative in sexual ethics. In other words, the insistence of mutual sexual pleasure in sexual acts would actually stipulate that women experience pleasure, namely orgasm. Pellauer, in attempting to determine the moral significance of female orgasm, candidly reflects on her own experience with orgasms. Her piece functions as a corrective to the negative discourse around and conclusions about sexual pleasure (read: orgasm), generated by the dominance of the male sexual experience in the Christian tradition.⁷²⁴

What I most appreciate about Pellauer's reflections is that they are exploratory and less proscriptive. She analyzes her own sexual experience as the starting point for considering the moral significance, and, hence, ethical ramifications for female orgasm. As she identifies themes of import, she interprets her orgasm as a pleasure that is quantitatively and qualitatively different than other sexual pleasures – she calls this ecstasy.⁷²⁵ Aware that her interpretations tend toward the mystical, Pellauer describes

⁷²⁴ Pellauer's method supports Nelson's argument for a sexual theology and Gudorf's insistence that sexual ethics must start with the complexity of human experience as opposed to the tradition's resources. Pellauer is self-reflexive, aware especially of her white, middle-class heterosexuality, and cognizant of the multidimensional complexity of this topic.

⁷²⁵ Pellauer affirms sexual pleasures that do not constitute orgasm, like the physical pleasures that precede orgasm, as well as the warmth, comfort, intimacy and the experience of belonging in an embrace.

orgasm/ecstasy as a quasi-mystical experience, captured by the blurring of boundaries between self and other and self and world.⁷²⁶ Orgasm sets itself apart from other sexual pleasures for Pellauer; it is distinct – more intense, more embodied, while simultaneously more disembodied, more unbounded, uninhibited, less controlled, more unifying with the other. She ponders if this “distinctiveness” warrants a priority.

Jung is incensed that the absence of sexual pleasure for women is rarely recognized as morally troubling. Like Gudorf, she utilizes a Roman Catholic resource: the moral wisdom of the body.⁷²⁷ The clitoris, whose only function as a bundle of nerve endings is to provide a woman pleasure, gives credence, she says, to the *intrinsic goodness* of sexual pleasure. Drawing on Pellauer’s meditations on her experience of orgasm and Audre Lorde’s description of “the erotic,” Jung identifies self-love as part of what is at stake in women’s sexual pleasure. She highlights the connections women make between the experience of sexual pleasure and delight and their subsequent capacity to yearn for and demand joy – even justice – in other areas of their lives. It is the potential for increasing love of self, as well as joy, growth, and wholeness that accompanies the experience of and reflection on female sexual pleasure. This is precisely why Jung argues that denying it or demonizing it is a moral problematic.

Jung concludes that female sexual pleasure has both intrinsic and instrumental value. Like Gudorf, she asserts that sexual pleasure is a premoral good for all men and all women. She emphasizes that silence on the part of Christians with respect to women’s sexual pleasure has sanctified the problem. Thus, women’s sexual pleasure is indeed a

⁷²⁶ Pellauer describes orgasm paradoxically as the meeting of immanence and transcendence; the former indicative of being bound to the stimulation of the body and the latter to the experience of standing outside of the self.

⁷²⁷ “The turn to human physiology as a source of wisdom for the development of an authentically human sexual ethic is a traditionally Catholic move.” Jung, 93.

moral issue. As a result, Jung challenges churches to break their silence regarding the absence of sexual pleasure for many women in their congregations, arguing that the discernment of women's sexual pleasure as morally good necessitates further development and that such a premise must be communally nurtured and sustained.⁷²⁸

Pellauer, who bases her conclusions on her own experience, is more conservative in her summations. Her essay was first published in 1993, seven years before Jung's, and represents the first and one of the only first-person accounts of the experience of orgasm written by a feminist theologian. Pellauer refuses to generalize from the particularity of her experience and heartily affirms "a multiplicity in feminist sexual ethics that can at least match the multiplicity of women's sexual experiences."⁷²⁹ She encourages her colleagues to give attention to the themes she proposes and remains open about reflection on the sacred with regards to orgasm. In so far as she experiences orgasm as a "limit experience," one that takes one to the edge of recognizable, lived experience and borders on transcendence, she finds religious issues inherent in orgasm.⁷³⁰ Still, the relationship between theology, ethics, and female orgasm remains a question for her.

Per Pellauer's analysis, ethical language lingers as a problem for addressing female orgasm. Whereas Jung is convinced that sexual pleasure is a moral issue for women, Pellauer's investigation indicates *greater complexity* tied to the ethics of sexual pleasure, particularly of placing a moral imperative on female orgasm. Although there are a multitude of goods associated with sexual pleasure, and women's sexual pleasure has a history of being ignored or denied, the question: "should women have orgasms during

⁷²⁸ Jung, 77. Like Gudorf, Jung argues that the Roman Catholic teaching about the wisdom of the body provides the ground for affirming the moral significance of nurturing mutual sexual pleasure in every good sexual relationship.

⁷²⁹ Pellauer, 158.

⁷³⁰ Ibid, 159.

sex?” is complicated. The dilemma itself is gendered because we do not ask this question of men. For most men, having sex means having an orgasm. Pellauer exclaims, “...most men could not imagine having sex regularly, let alone for years, without orgasms.”⁷³¹

However, to say, “Yes, women should have orgasms during sexual activity,” does little to affect the healing of those suffering from problems related to their sexual health, like anorgasmia for example. To say, “No, women should not be obligated to have orgasms during sexual activity,” supports the deprivation that many women already experience when it comes to this intensely pleasurable experience. Pellauer’s point is well-taken, especially for those of us with experience in a clinical context, who are acquainted with sexual suffering, shame, and guilt on the part of women and their partners when it comes to the desire for sexual pleasure, especially orgasm.

Bypassing any moral mandate, Pellauer chooses to commit to the use of theological language toward description and personal meaning. In line with Gudorf and Nelson, she prefers the language of “gift” or “grace” – sexual pleasure experienced as an unmerited, gratuitous gift.⁷³² Whether it is a gift from one’s partner or not, she recognizes orgasm as a gift given by her own body, as well as a gift from the “vagaries of culture,” including accurate sex education, feminist literature that makes knowledge available, and agents of healing in the community who make personal and social change possible.⁷³³ Implicitly invoking the need for unity of body and spirit, Pellauer looks forward to further reflection on the gifts the body gives to the spirit.

⁷³¹ Ibid, 160.

⁷³² Ibid.

⁷³³ Ibid. Per Foucault, we should consider to what extent all of these are good gifts of our contemporary sexual regime.

Mutuality and Same-sex Eroticism

Some queer scholars suggest that queer individuals, those whose gender roles and sex lay outside of the constructed norms of heterosexual, married coitus, bring fresh and transformative insight to this discussion. They take their lead from Heyward, who claims that it is the privilege of gays and lesbians to take seriously and actively what it means to love – the share power in their relationships. She makes the case that mutual sexual relationships are available largely in same-sex relationships, and discloses her doubt that “mutuality of common benefit” is possible between men and women in a sexist society.⁷³⁴

Since, Alison Webster has argued that gay and lesbian relationships are possible models for the mutual relating, and that Christianity has much to learn from them as it looks toward reconstructing sexual ethics. “Lesbian and gay relationships at least hold the possibility of equality...the major inequality of gender is missing,” she explains.⁷³⁵ Robert Williams contends that many heterosexual couples can and do achieve truly mutual relationships; however, he also suggests that without the societal role expectations that plague heterosexual couples, gay and lesbian partners organize their own system for decision making and the division of labor.⁷³⁶ In addition to cultivating expertise in mutual relating, Williams imagines that heterosexuals and the Church would have much to learn from those in non-heteronormative relationships.

⁷³⁴ Heyward, “Sexuality, Love and Justice,” 298.

⁷³⁵ Alison Webster, “Revolutionising Christian Sexual Ethics: A Feminist Perspective,” in *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*, eds. Adrian Thatcher and Elizabeth Stuart, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 277. Webster is sensitive to other factors that could work against equality in same-sex relationships, including race, class, age, etc.

⁷³⁶ Robert Williams, “Toward a Theology for Lesbian and Gay Marriage,” in *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*, eds. Adrian Thatcher and Elizabeth Stuart, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 287.

Sexuality, Mutuality, and Race

While queer scholars draw on the unique ability for same-sex relationships, free from the cultural role expectations that plague heterosexual couples, which to function as models for the mutual relating, womanists explicate how the distortion of black sexuality promulgated and exploited by white culture and the Western Christian tradition has thwarted mutual relationships – replicating similar injustices interpersonally. For example, racism grounded in sexuality takes its toll on the relationships between black men and black women, as well as relationships between black “neighbors.”

Womanist thinkers challenge the sexism found in the Black Church and in theological discourse. “Racism and sexism diminish the ability of black women and men to establish relationships of mutuality, integrity and trust,” explains Eugene.⁷³⁷ Black institutions that replicate the gender hierarchy found in white culture align themselves with the oppressive thought and practice that aims for the possession of power rather than the sharing of power. Mutuality in relationship is thwarted. Given the relationship between sexism and sexuality, confronting sexism would require the black community to address the daunting subject of sexuality.

Similar to black sexism, the Black Church and community mirror heterosexist white culture with condemnation of their black neighbors’ homoerotic expressions of sexuality. In her essay, “Black and Blues: God Talk/Body-Talk for the Black Church,” Douglas criticizes the Black Church for refusing to recognize lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) equality as a civil rights issue, pointing to the perception in the Black Church that the LGBT body is sinful and not worthy of the rights and respect given to

⁷³⁷ Eugene, 108.

non-LGBT bodies.⁷³⁸ Victor Anderson argues that the Black Church is far from silent on matters of sex and sexuality, and finds proof in the proliferation of discourse with respect to homosexuality out of the mouths of black clergy. In his opinion, "...there is no body (literally) more contested in Black churches than the curious body of the black homosexual."⁷³⁹ Here the distain in the Black Church and community for same-sex erotic attraction, activities, and relationships make use of the same projective mechanisms that serve to alleviate angst with regards to sexuality in white culture. Again, mutuality among black neighbors is thwarted.

In Douglas' analysis, the prevalence of homophobia and heterosexism in the Black Church and community is inextricably bound to black oppression, particularly the exploitation of black sexuality. Forced to choose between exemplifying the hypersexual stereotypes imposed by white culture or conforming to "hyperproper" sexuality – the heterosexual, male-defined white standard of sexual conduct – the Black Church has opted for the latter.⁷⁴⁰ Consequently, the Church sexualizes those individuals in the community it finds unacceptable and different, just as white culture sexualizes black people.⁷⁴¹ "The Black Church," Douglas insists, "seizes an effective tool of oppressing

⁷³⁸ Douglas supports her claim with statistics showing that 70 percent of black voters in California supported Proposition 8 in 2008, a position also strongly supported by black clergy. She also notes that black clergy publicly named HIV/AIDS a "gay" disease, marginalizing LGBT individuals and blaming them for the spread of the disease. Kelly Brown Douglas, "Black and Blues: God-Talk/Body-Talk for the Black Church," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, 2nd ed., eds. Marvin E. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 49. In *Sexuality and the Black Church*, Douglas reveals that in her 10 years of teaching at the Howard University Divinity School, "no topic [touched] more of a raw nerve than homosexuality." Students expressed open disgust of gay and lesbian sexuality, calling it perverse, abominable, diseased and sinful. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 87

⁷³⁹ Victor Anderson, "The Black Church and the Curious Body of the Black Homosexual," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, eds. Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins, (New York: Pelgrave MacMillan, 2004), 297.

⁷⁴⁰ Douglas explains that this effort is an attempt to desexualize black men and women, in the face of white culture's attempts to sexualize them. Douglas, "Black and Blues," 55.

⁷⁴¹ *Ibid*, 58.

power, the sexuality of those it opposes, and maligns it.”⁷⁴² In other words, the Black Church, in its efforts to resist its own oppression, to gain some power, draws on the power of sexuality to evoke a heterosexual privilege. They argue that gay black men and women pose a threat to the black family (already threatened and demeaned by white culture) and that their nonprocreative coupling colludes in the genocide of the black race.⁷⁴³ Black lesbians, who are sexually independent of men, also “betray black manhood,” threatening his ability to dominate the female body. Thus, black lesbians suffer tri-fold in the black community and in white culture by virtue of their gender, race, and sexual orientation.

In addition to embracing the love of the black body and total self-love, the reclamation of black sexuality is a call to live in mutual relationships where power is shared. In so far as relationships make manifest the love of God, the Black Church recognizes Jesus’ ministry as the paradigm for what it means to share the love of God. She explains,

Essentially, Jesus was decidedly partial to justice and to those who were victims of any form of oppression...to live like Jesus...requires living a life characterized by loving relationships, those that are liberating, healing, empowering, and life-sustaining.⁷⁴⁴

Here, Douglas brings together the affirmation of black sexuality with its relationship to living in just relationships, both thoroughly grounded in the Black Church’s theological

⁷⁴² Douglas, “Black and Blues,” 58. To further distance itself from the link between blackness and sexual deviance, the Black Church often dismisses homosexuality in its own culture, addressing it as “a white thing.” For an in depth discussion on homophobia and heterosexism in the black community, see Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 87-108.

⁷⁴³ Douglas draws out the sexism implicit in this homophobia. For example, gay black men, who are aligned with the effeminate, threaten black manhood, and strong black mothers are implicated in the creation of the gay black male. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 103.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid, 115; 118. Douglas also includes proof of this relational emphasis but pointing to the doctrine of the Trinity, where we find a God who is in God’s self internally and eternally relational as creator, redeemer and sustainer. This relationship is characterized by mutuality and reciprocity. Douglas, “Black Body/White Soul,” 110.

perspective. She adds the need to recognize God's passion, not only as suffering, but as ardent love. "God's passion," she argues, "attests to God's ardent commitment to life and hence God's willingness to suffer so that life might flourish."⁷⁴⁵

For the Black Church, living passionately in this way suggests a more encompassing understanding of human passion, more than the desire for sexual activity. Douglas draws heavily here on Lorde's notion of the "erotic" and Heyward's insistence that loving relationships are just relationships. Living passionately means tapping into the "divine energy within human beings, the love of God, that compels them toward life-giving, life-producing, and life-affirming activity and relationships in regard to all of God's creation."⁷⁴⁶ Recall that human sexuality is the vehicle through which passion is expressed; it is the condition of the possibility of mutual, loving relations.

An Extensive Project of Moral Transformation: Sexual Pleasure and a Passion for Justice

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, Carter Heyward's interpretations of the erotic permeated the field of Christian sexual ethics. Her proposal for combating the "erotic split" – the eroticization of the tensions generated by top vs. bottom, giver vs. receiver, traditional male vs. female roles, being self-possessed vs. belonging to another – was extremely convincing to those seeking to make Christian sexual ethics more relevant in its response to the current cultural context and more justice oriented. Alongside the establishment of sexual pleasure as a good gift and grace from the divine, I have shown that the proposed *eroticization of mutuality* became a call that resonated for many Christian sexual ethicists. Justice was paramount in Heyward's work and a crucial

⁷⁴⁵ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 120.

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 120.

impetus to the eroticization of mutuality. As a result of her influence, the relationship between the affirmation of personal sexual pleasure and political commitments to justice-making in the community, as well as the global context, grew in significance.

Female Sexual Pleasure and Justice

The explicit relationship between sexual pleasure and concrete movements toward social justice is undeveloped in Gudorf's text. She does theorize, however, that mutually pleasurable sexual experiences hold promise for both the individual and the wider community. Given that the value of sex is no longer attached to procreation, new symbolism must convey the meaning and value of sexual activity. Per Foucault we might suggest the need for a new discourse. In addition to participating in the generation of life, Gudorf suggests that sex should be implicated in *sustaining life* for the individual, the partnership and the community.⁷⁴⁷ Sex sustains life through bonding individuals together (usually in pairs) and becomes a symbol of our ability as embodied persons to experience union.⁷⁴⁸ In a nutshell, Gudorf says that this experience of sexual activity, in which we risk, commit, and share in pleasure provides the opportunity for us to reflect on union, to see its worth and to see its possibilities for enhancement and fulfillment. This is how one's personal experience of sexual pleasure benefits the self *and* opens one up to others and the community at large.

⁷⁴⁷ Again, Gudorf draws on her Catholic heritage, pointing to the sacramental system of practices and rituals that channel grace into nurturing individuals and relationships and bind individuals and communities of faith to God.

⁷⁴⁸ Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*, 131-132.

Gudorf concludes that while sexual pleasure and the intimate bond cannot replace human need for justice and community, they contribute to the task of creating human community in two important ways.⁷⁴⁹ She explains,

...sexual intimacy and bonding give us insight into what community is, how it meets human needs and how satisfying it can be; second they can be a great source of energy for the task of social change toward community.⁷⁵⁰

In other words, as we grow into a good sex life, one abundant in the experience of mutual sexual pleasure, insight into what constitutes intimacy grows, as does our care and concern for our partners. Care and concern for our partners encourages degrees of intimacy with friends, family, and neighbors and energizes us to challenge those things – institutions, individuals, social beliefs and practices – that harm or discriminate against our lovers and others.

Commitments to justice with respect to sex were also on the horizon for other feminist theological ethicists. Patricia Beatrice Jung, for example, also understands sexual pleasure to have benefits outside of personal growth and wellbeing. Recall that like Gudorf and Lorde, she argues that the pleasure and joy in mutual sexual experience unleashes a woman's capacity to yearn for and demand joy in other areas of life. As such, sexual pleasure becomes an energizing source, a source of self-respect, which also "embodies and enables revolutionary challenges to many cultural assumptions about the place of women."⁷⁵¹ To this last point, awareness of justice for women on a larger scale, beyond the need for sexual pleasure, emerges as a consequence of the energizing power of pleasure. Also reminiscent of Gudorf's claim, Jung argues that female sexual pleasure

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid, 135.

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁵¹ Jung, 93.

not only grows self-love, but fosters other love as well. Desire draws us toward others and sustains relationships. In pleasing another and being pleased by another, lives are connected. Jung suggests that sexual pleasure inclines us not toward isolation, but “toward the world.”⁷⁵²

Jung also adds that shared or mutual sexual pleasure expresses a way of relating that challenges the construction of self/other relating in our culture. Here, she cites Heyward and Harrison’s work to suggest that the experience of mutual sexual pleasure resists the dominant paradigm of relating characterized by power-over. “Mutual sexual delight discloses the *possibilities* of creaturely interdependence and reciprocal enhancement,” she concludes.⁷⁵³ Theologically, she supports reciprocity between neighbor-love and self-love – evidence of a creation that is made for communion. In sum, her argument suggests that mutual sexual pleasure can participate – perhaps as *example* or *initiator* – in eradicating all kinds of relations characterized by domination and submission. In so far as it discloses the *possibilities*, mutual sexual pleasure is a foretaste of a new way of living in community.

An eye toward justice frames the intent of Pellauer’s project insofar as it seeks to point out the value of women’s sexual experience – particularly orgasm – toward the construction of sexual ethics. She adds her belief that the wonder and joy of ecstasy intrinsically spills over into the world outside. However, she does not develop a justice ethic to these ends. In other words, Pellauer does not elaborate, as Gudorf does, on the virtues of personal sexual pleasure insofar as they encourage partners to extend themselves to the community as conduits of God’s love to others. Pellauer prefers to

⁷⁵² Ibid, 94.

⁷⁵³ Ibid, 94, emphasis mine.

refrain from further comment until the diversity of women's sexual experiences are made known. In her conclusions, she suggests that women's experience of orgasm, as well as women's experience of sex without orgasm, are worthy of exploration in the development of feminist sexual ethics, providing "loci for examining a whole range of intertwined and complex goods in sexuality that have not been explored."⁷⁵⁴ There is reason to believe that justice-making could be one.

The feminist emphasis on mutuality of pleasure in sexual experiences may not be all that is needed to support safety and flourishing in all female sexual experience. Feminist philosopher of religion, Grace Jantzen, argues that an assessment of current cultural interpretations of pleasure offer qualification and caution to the kind of pleasure being affirmed and promoted. Her suggestions also revive my feeling that discourse related to sexual pleasure remains relatively confusing. On the one hand, communities of faith are skeptical, silent or limited in the pleasure they affirm; on the other hand, culture prioritizes sexual pleasures – private sexual pleasures – in such a way that it drives the expectation and demand for experiencing pleasure in all sexually activities.

Jantzen centers justice in matters related to sex and sexuality, arguing, "...whereas Western feminists have rightly learned to celebrate sexual pleasure, we have not always been as quick to discern the wider issues of justice involved."⁷⁵⁵ Here, she is concerned about the celebration of sexual pleasure becoming a private issue, colluding with the ideals of Western individualism and late capitalism and attempts to turn pleasure into a privately owned commodity. Sex as a commodity is dependent on it being pleasurable; in fact, Jantzen points out,

⁷⁵⁴ Pellauer, 163.

⁷⁵⁵ Jantzen, 3.

...we are pressured now to find sex pleasurable, to get it right every time, to suppose that intimacy depends on perfect sex...good sex as pleasurable sex has generated a new variety of compulsion, this time for achieving pleasure...this compulsory pleasure is intensely private, nobody else's business.⁷⁵⁶

Jantzen is concerned that getting caught up in the drive for personal pleasure, and expending time and resources to these ends, distracts feminist from other issues related to sexual justice. Focusing on private pleasure, stresses Jantzen, is bought at the expense of reproductive justice for all and proves unhelpful for women in other parts of the world or those positioned differently in the West.⁷⁵⁷

Jantzen distinguishes herself from Gudorf, Pellauer, and Jung by explicitly insisting on a connection between sexual pleasure and justice. She remains wary that proposals that focus on personal fulfillment and enjoyment risk turning a blind eye to new public policy that reintroduces Western domination.⁷⁵⁸ To be sure, Jantzen fully supports the celebration of sexual pleasure; however, she insists that such celebration should not be privatized to serve the purposes of capitalism. In her conclusions she says,

Sexual pleasure is not neutral, nor is it a biological given or a natural essence. Sexual pleasure as Foucault has taught us, is, like sex itself, socially and discursively constructed. Our attitudes toward sexual pleasure can be constructed to work for justice or against it, to enhance and empower or to demean. Rather than focus exclusively on the private pleasures of sex, we need to combine the energy of our sexual pleasure with the power of our passion for justice.⁷⁵⁹

⁷⁵⁶ Jantzen, 11.

⁷⁵⁷ Jantzen, 3-4. Jantzen cites the following examples of public policy that falls to the wayside when personal, private sexual pleasure takes precedence: 1) pharmaceutical companies and beauty industries that market products aimed at increasing attractiveness and intensifying pleasure, 2) the continued sexual exploitation of poor women and children (at home and abroad), who become victims of prostitution, sex tourist, etc. 3) the exploitation of women and children in poor countries for fetal tissue or for organs for experimentation, and 4) the advances in genetic engineering that have opened the door to developing "ideals of perfection or desirable characteristics," as well as the possibility of avoiding "defects" or "deviance." Jantzen, 11-13.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid, 4.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid, 14.

Here, Jantzen, like many of the aforementioned authors, connects the energies associated with sexual pleasure to the drive for justice. At least that is my interpretation. For her, however, sexual pleasure *must* move beyond the private to affect the public and political. Failing to do so amounts to collusion with the powers and principalities of the present world.

Jantzen's critique is more cautionary than it is critical of Gudorf, Pellauer, and Jung. He suggestions definitely presses them and other proposals to ask: To what extent does valorizing female sexual pleasure support Western decadence at the expense of neglecting other problems women face and public policies that support these issues?⁷⁶⁰ For Gudorf and Jung, mutuality is the solution. Jung, who is aware of Jantzen's critique, feels that her emphasis on *mutual sexual pleasure* – shared delight – is one way that individuals can come to connect with these other concerns. She also concurs that efforts to address the lack of pleasure for women have been private and individual, increasing the burden on women to work and perform. Jung aims to move away from this individualized perspective and toward the “social dimensions” of grace – toward ways that communities of faith can communally nurture, sustain, and enhance sexual pleasure for women.⁷⁶¹

Recall that Gudorf argues that mutual sexual experiences open individuals up for becoming conduits of God's love to others. She too is sensitive to the privatization of sex and the temptations to retreat from the concerns of the public world to the private realm of sex, marriage, family, and friends. Her position, however, is to acknowledge that the unitive function of the pleasures of sex remain only a small part of our search for

⁷⁶⁰ Jung, 80.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid, 83.

community.⁷⁶² Here Gudorf acknowledges that the fight for justice requires much more than what sexual pleasure can offer. Based her affirm of sexual pleasure apart from its unitive function, she also implicitly indicates that sexual pleasure need not always serve these ends.

Pellauer's piece is an initial step in providing some language and an interpretation of female orgasm, and only acknowledges that the experience of orgasm for women enlivens their appreciation for self and life more generally. Jantzen might push Pellauer to think more critically about how sexual energy reaches beyond satisfying the needs of the self; however, this criticism needs to be balanced with Pellauer's bold attempt to reflect critically and constructively on her own experience of sexual pleasure.

Same-sex Eroticism and Justice

Queer theologians construct the crisis with respect to sexuality in the Church and in culture to be first and foremost a justice issue. Their scholarship takes the next radical step in binding mutual sexual pleasure in particular to social justice issues more generally. More so, the theory and practice of Christian sexual ethics shifts its focus to a priority on justice and, according to Marvin Ellison, its renewal constitutes "an extensive project of moral transformation."⁷⁶³

As with mutuality, Heyward's work here was foundational. She claims that love-making (in all its forms, including sex) should always be justice-making.⁷⁶⁴ Sexual

⁷⁶² Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*, 133.

⁷⁶³ Marvin Ellison, "Reimagining Good Sex: The Eroticizing of Mutual Respect and Pleasure," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, 2nd ed., eds. Marvin E. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 246.

⁷⁶⁴ Heyward claims that it is the privilege of gays and lesbians to take seriously and actively what it means to love. Deprived of categories steeped in traditional romantic love (husband, wife, fiancée, marriage, bride, bridegroom), as well as symbols of romantic love (rings, weddings, public displays of affection) and

activity, if it is truly erotic, moves toward the mutual sharing of power in relation. Recall her argument that same-sex erotic activity and pleasure should serve as an enlightening resource for considering the relationship between sexual pleasure and mutuality, or sexual pleasure and justice, because queer participants are not restricted by heteronormative gender roles or scripts. In fact, some queer Christians use their sexual experiences to argue that sexuality is just as political an issue as it is a private issue. They see their intimate relationships – which in and of themselves stand outside of the oppressive structures of compulsory heterosexuality – as justice-making and part of a larger call to participate in realizing justice in the lives of all those limited by sexism, heterosexism, racism, classism, etc., as well as the political and economic structures that support all forms of oppression.

Heyward is the champion of this proposal. Recall her sentiments that where there is no justice between individuals or in communities, there is no love; and where there is no love, sexuality is perverted into violence and violation.⁷⁶⁵ She explains that for her being a lesbian is the best way of being a lover; for her, lesbian sexuality is *loving* sexuality. Doubting the possibility of true mutuality in heterosexual relationships, Heyward chooses to invest her energy and passion elsewhere. Because lesbian relationships may be mutual, she suggests that they offer a glimpse of a more just way of relating for all partners. Lesbian feminism opposes structures of male-dominance, including heterosexism, procreationism, and a social order (economic, religious, sexual, etc.) characterized by domination – always someone on top and always someone else on

religious legitimation of romantic love (blessing relationships, celebrating or even acknowledging relationships), she argues that only “lover” remains as the descriptor for gay and lesbian individuals and those they love. As such, gay and lesbian voices speak from a place of being compelled to articulate the depths of what it means to love and to make love. Heyward, “Sexuality, Love and Justice,” 294.

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid, 296.

the bottom. Heyward's message is that justice for same-sex relationships is ultimately more than a concern for rights in private life.⁷⁶⁶ It is about overhauling the aforementioned oppressive structures. Mutual sexual relationships live out and exemplify this justice, as well as fueling the passion to liberate the self and others.

Recall that some gay Christian men write explicitly about their sexual pleasure and its revelatory and liberative capacities. In addition to insisting upon explicit celebration and affirmation of gay sexual pleasure in Christian contexts and culture, both Robert Goss and Scott Haldeman see a necessary relationship between their sexual activity and justice. Haldeman, in an approach that invokes Pellauer's exploration of her own orgasms, describes the spiritual, ethical, and theological value of his experience as a receptive partner in gay intercourse. He describes four movements of anal intercourse: his vulnerable posture, his permeability, the experience of emptying and being filled, and, finally, communion. In his description of each movement, he explains how his relationship to his partner, to others, and sometimes to God is shaped by the sexual experience.

For example, with respect to his permeability, Haldeman must risk being offensive or even experiencing pain, but the risk can also lead to pleasure, intimacy, and healing. Permeability must be practiced in a relational context of deep trust, including open communication and respect for the boundaries between pleasure and pain. Haldeman also explains that the experience of permeability in his sexual relationship encourages him to take risks and listen across lines of difference, and to be more open and flexible attempting to live justly in communities of difference.⁷⁶⁷ Regarding the

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁷ Haldeman, 226-227.

theological value, his discussion of emptying and being filled serves his relationship with God. He delights in the image of an intimate approach of God and allows himself “the pleasure of being overwhelmed by God who delights in me and wishes my good.”⁷⁶⁸

Haldeman sums up his sexual experience as a receptive partner as, “feeling complete, whole, and yet yearning for more – more justice, more mutual respect, and more well-being for myself, my partner, communities near and far, and the whole world.”⁷⁶⁹ In this personal account, Haldeman’s sexuality and his spirituality are characterized by receptivity, which he practices in sex and his life. “It is shaping me,” he explains, “as other things I do shape me...”⁷⁷⁰ Like Pellauer, Haldeman is clear that he is not making a universal claim for the spiritual, theological, or ethical meanings inherent in gay sex. He does, however, challenge his readers to consider their own sexual practices and how these practices relate to their notions of self, community, and God (and visa versa). His is a practical plea to see the subtle relationships between our doings in our private, public and spiritual lives, reminding us, “...our doing shapes who we are becoming.”⁷⁷¹

The experience and the reflections of individuals like Haldeman support a sexual ethic, particularly a vision for sexual pleasure, which is inseparable from justice. Robert Goss, like Haldeman, refuses to recover gay sexual pleasure at the expense of social justice. “Sexual pleasure,” he insists, “is not morally neutral, for it can be pursued for narcissistic gratification alone or in order to extend justice-love.”⁷⁷² With respect to the latter, he argues that sexual pleasure can become the foundation for moral discourse and

⁷⁶⁸ Ibid, 228.

⁷⁶⁹ Ibid, 222.

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid, 229.

⁷⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷⁷² Goss, 212.

justice work. Similar to Haldeman, he encourages gay Christians to consider how their embodied pleasures might be intertwined with their spirituality and erotic justice.

Both Haldeman's and Goss's articles are published in Marvin Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith's edited text, *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love*. A professor of Christian Ethics and an ordained Presbyterian minister, Marvin Ellison draws on Nelson's and Heyward's work, in addition to his own experience as a gay man, to produce a book length proposal entitled *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* (1996).⁷⁷³ Ellison's understanding of sexuality parallels Nelson and his notion of erotic desire reflects Heyward's influence. He defines justice as "the ongoing, never-ending journey to remake community by strengthening relationship."⁷⁷⁴ Justice-making is attention to how the wellbeing of individuals is affected by social power. To work for justice, therefore, is to correct "whatever harms people, other earth creatures, and the earth itself."⁷⁷⁵

Ellison's goal is to outline an erotic ethic of "justice-love," a phrase that he adopts from the Presbyterian study document, *Keeping Body and Soul Together: Sexuality, Spirituality, and Social Justice* (1991). "Justice-love" means seeking to be in right-relationship with others and to working to set right all relationships, especially those characterized by domination and submission.⁷⁷⁶ The emphasis on pleasure and passion in

⁷⁷³ Ellison has made a large contribution to the discourse surrounding the future of Christian sexual ethics. Selections of *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* appear in *Sexuality* [a reader] and the second edition of *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, published in the fall of 2010. Ellison is co-editor of the latter text with Kelly Brown Douglas. As a self-proclaimed "theological educator for justice," Ellison is also co-editor of *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love*, which emerged after the Presbyterian Church rejected "Keeping Body and Soul Together," a report connecting sexuality, spiritual and social justice presented to the Presbyterian General Assembly in 1991.

⁷⁷⁴ Marvin Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 2.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid, 128 fn.

this text is expanded beyond the sexual experience of intimate partners, and, like Jantzen, Ellison resists reducing pleasure to private pleasure. He most definitively presents a comprehensive sexual ethic that binds pleasure and justice.

The failure of the Christian tradition to provide reliable moral guidance that critically opposes essentialism and grasps the social construction of sexuality motivates Ellison. Noting that part of the problem rests in the dualism between the soul/spiritual and the bodily/sexual, he also criticizes the Christian perspective for uncritically passing on the received tradition as if it were “unassailable and permanently valuable moral truth.”⁷⁷⁷ Furthermore, as the tradition has resisted and reacted – uncomfortable with sex and fearful of conflict – against changing cultural patterns, its influence has diminished. Subsequently, communities of faith have strengthened their grip on the family and sexuality, while their emphasis on control and disconnection from the current cultural context weakens their moral authority on this front. Ellison agrees with Nelson that religious communities have not responded with creativity or compassion in the face of the sexuality crisis in our culture.⁷⁷⁸

In “Common Decency: A New Christian Sexual Ethics,” Ellison suggests that *responsibility* take the place of marriage and/or heterosexuality as morally normative for contemporary Christian sexual ethics.⁷⁷⁹ In this essay, he begins to develop the

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid, 5. Also see Jordan, 4-19.

⁷⁷⁸ Ellison, *Erotic Justice*, 5-6. Ellison is critical of traditional, libertarian and liberal messages about good and bad sex. Traditionalists mourn the loss of and demand a return to traditional white, middle-class, heterosexual values – familial hierarchy, sex only in a marital, reproductive context, etc. Libertarians prefer a minimalist ethic that mandates consent, but is uncritical about the influence of context, power dynamics or social consequences. Liberals, although discontent with the traditional view, still have reservations about sex, women’s power and same-sex erotic relations and relationships. They retain relationship between sexual pleasure and danger that worries that inborn sinfulness can lead one down the slippery slope of illicit sexual desires. Ellison, *Erotic Justice*, 20-23.

⁷⁷⁹ Ellison explains the confusion between normative and normal/natural that plagues a sexual essentialism position. This view point argues that sex is a natural force, fixed and unchanging, and biologically

framework for his larger contribution, *Erotic Justice*. Ellison explains how inequalities are eroticized and how sexism, for example, begins to feel natural in our very bodies. In other words, “Patriarchal sex makes gender injustice appear pleasurable.”⁷⁸⁰

Heterosexism then demands conformity to sexism, and denies, shames, and punishes those who resist conforming to this “norm.” Ellison argues that the Church needs to recognize that neither homosexuality nor sex outside of marriage constitutes sexual injustice, but rather insistence on conformity to the unjust norm of compulsory heterosexuality and gender inequality.⁷⁸¹

Ellison’s proposal, an ethic of common decency, claims justice in sexual relationships as morally normative for Christians. Justice includes the recognition that sex is part of Christian spirituality, affirming our created purpose as lovers, “invited to relish in giving and receiving pleasure.”⁷⁸² A justice perspective (1) celebrates all sexual relations when they deepen human intimacy and love, (2) requires relational fidelity as determined by the participants, (3) celebrates the plurality of intimacy needs and (4) respects differences. It learns from failures and rules out relations that abuse, exploit, or violate. Far from a simple sexual ethic of “no harm be done,” this ethic argues that good sex, including respect and pleasure, enhances one’s well-being and self-respect, and grows a desire to connect more justly with others. In “Common Decency,” Ellison is

determined. Biology gives rise to natural expressions of sexuality. The heterosexual, reproductive partnership is seen as natural and normal given anatomical complementarity. What appears as natural, becomes normal and gathers moral weight in the “normative.” Drawing from Michael Kimmel’s work, Ellison explains that in sexual essentialism what is “normative,” or constructed and enforced through socialization, is taken to be “normal.” The normative, however, is “a product of moral discernment and deliberation, reflects a communal valuing of what is good, right and fitting. Normative judgments, including those made about sexuality, are subject to challenge and revision.” Ellison, *Erotic Justice*, 317.

⁷⁸⁰ Marvin Ellison, “Common Decency: A New Christian Sexual Ethic,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, eds. James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 237.

⁷⁸¹ Ibid, 238.

⁷⁸² Ibid.

already (re)introducing the need for Christians to embrace erotic power as intrinsic to humanness, as a power that often “enriches our connectedness to self, others, and God, and that in and of itself is the source neither of our salvation nor of our damnation.”⁷⁸³ He is shaped by interpretations of the erotic found in Lorde’s work and steeped in its theological renderings by Heyward.

Ellison goes on to draw together the concerns and insights of his contemporaries to articulate what he calls “a message of hope,” not only for addressing the crisis of sexuality in the Church, but also for facing the structural injustices that manipulate sexuality to eroticize injustice. In the introduction to *Erotic Justice* he takes up Heyward and Harrison’s insights to argue that the crisis with respect to sexuality in communities of faith and culture is located in the “eroticizing of dominant/subordinate social relations and in the distortion of love by racism, sexism and other injustices.”⁷⁸⁴ With an emphasis on the necessarily influential nature of the larger social order and its power relations on all aspects of human life, including eroticism, Ellison begins with the impact of structural injustice on self-understanding and our desire for intimate connection.

Rethinking sexual ethics, therefore, requires a sexual ethic embedded in a framework of social justice. Ellison explains,

...justice...is foundational to good loving...Our loving well requires that we pursue justice in all social relations, including those closest to our skin. Justice and love are tightly intertwined soul mates.⁷⁸⁵

The goal is to actualize justice in all relationships by eroticizing equality and mutual respect. As the normative expression for *all* social interaction, relationships of equality

⁷⁸³ Ibid, 237.

⁷⁸⁴ Ellison, *Erotic Justice*, 1.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid, 2. Ellison defines justice as: the ongoing, never-ending journey to remake community by strengthening relationship; justice-making is sensitive to how well-being is enhanced or diminished by patterns of social power and powerlessness.

and mutuality challenge every social oppression.⁷⁸⁶ We embody – literally – justice in the context of right relationships, including those that are explicitly sexual.

For Ellison, the path to eroticizing mutuality, which brings to mind Heyward’s proposal of *phantasie*, is to “imagine living by an ethical eroticism that enjoys life’s pleasures and at the same time prods us to pursue a more ethical world. The erotic can fuel our passion for justice.”⁷⁸⁷ Our imagination serves to move us past the reality that dominant/subordinate social relations are currently eroticized. When it comes to sexual arousal and sexual pleasure, my critique of Ellison parallels my critique of Heyward. I am unconvinced that we can phantasies or imagine our way out of those fantasies, cues, and sexual practices that feel so good now. I am also not convinced that doing so is necessary to oppose injustice in the world and advocate for the disenfranchised.

Taken together, eroticizing justice – Ellison’s proposal for renewing Christian sexual ethics – amounts to nothing less than breaking the eroticized link between pleasure and injustice on the largest of scales. He extends the invitation to individuals to begin the process of unlearning “the culturally inculcated eroticized desire for power as control,” as well “teaching the value of mutual vulnerability and interdependency in all our connections.”⁷⁸⁸ Hence, Ellison’s statement that renewing Christian sexual ethics amounts to an extensive project of moral transformation captures the priority on and sheer breath of working toward sexual justice for all in Christian sexual ethics – a move I whole-heartedly affirm. My resistance, however, clings to the necessary role attributed to personal sexual pleasures in advocating for this ethical framework.

⁷⁸⁶ Ibid, 76.

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid, 81.

⁷⁸⁸ Ellison, “Reimagining Good Sex,” 246.

Race, Sexuality, and Justice

In the last two sections on embodiment and mutuality, I drew on womanist theology to show how black bodies and their desires have been maligned in such a way that black sexuality has been both distorted and used as justification for abuse, discrimination, and oppression. I pointed out that any simple inclusion of sexual pleasure into sexual ethics is complicated by the intersection of race and sexuality. White culture and the Western Christian tradition have subjected the black community to a double-bind. On the one hand, to speak about and celebrate their embodiment, especially sexual pleasure, is to confer constructed, racist stereotypes. On the other hand, to adopt a hyper-proper approach to sexuality, one modeled on white sexist and heterosexist culture, enlists black sexuality in the service of proliferating sexism, heterosexism and even racism within the black community itself.

From the start the theme of justice, in the form of reclaiming a black sexuality that loves beautiful black bodies (and their pleasures) holds spirituality and sexuality together. Recall the argument that the beauty of black sexuality has become so debilitated that, “The power of black sexuality to contribute to our liberating mission to change our oppressive condition has been weakened.”⁷⁸⁹ In other words, defacing black sexuality amounts to not only an injustice in itself, but also insofar as the potential of the power of black sexuality to embody justice and contribute to liberative causes is muted. Thus, a justice focus, demanding the reconciliation of black spirituality and sexuality to make energy available to address all forms of oppression, is central to black theological sexual ethics.

⁷⁸⁹ Toinette, 105.

Womanist scholars like Douglas and Eugene look to the Black Church to affirm and encourage these hopes for the black community, resisting and refusing to allow white culture pleasure at the expense of black bodies. A number of black scholars and theologians are in agreement that sexuality is a contentious issue for black institutions, including the Black Church.⁷⁹⁰ These authors concur with Cornel West's sentiments that black institutions like schools, families and churches have refused "to engage one fundamental issue: black sexuality. Instead, they [run] from it like the plague. And they obsessively [condemn] those places where black sexuality [is] flaunted: the streets, the clubs, and the dance-halls."⁷⁹¹ The history, roles, and goals of the Black Church, those things that make it so significant to black life, are what make injustices within this institution particularly problematic. Black sexism, the separation of sexuality and spirituality, anxiety around and disdain for the black body, procreationism, heterosexism, etc., all generate alienation internal to the black community.

In sum, not only do black individuals fail in a racist context to love and respect their body-selves, but discomfort with sexuality blocks the desire and potential for passion that would make the Black Church a community of mutuality and love, standing strong in opposition to racism and other forms of discrimination that target sexuality to oppress. Drawing on Foucault and his theory of discourse, Douglas calls for a *sexual discourse of resistance*.

⁷⁹⁰ The focus through this paper concerns the black community in general, but addresses the Black Church in particular. Douglas explains that the latter reflects the rich complexity of the former. There is no single entity that represents the Black Church. The Black Church is defined historically and socio-culturally. Historically it grew out of black individuals' resistance to white racial oppression, particularly slavery. Socially and culturally it influences values, shapes morals and is a critical source for black physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. Douglas, "Black and Blues," 48.

⁷⁹¹ Cornel West, *Race Matters*, (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 86, quoted in Douglas, "Black Body/White Soul," 106.

According to Douglas, a sexual discourse of resistance in the black community draws on African cosmology that makes no distinction between the secular and the sacred, and, hence, rejects the antithesis between the flesh and the soul. It calls for “unadulterated self-love” that “empowers black men and women to celebrate and love their black embodied selves.”⁷⁹² It condemns unequal power relations between black men and black women and rejects white family norms. A sexual discourse of resistance declares that homophobia is antithetical to black life and freedom.⁷⁹³ Lastly, it refuses to replicate in the Black Church and community white culture’s hierarchies of power that devalue women, racialized others, and those in same-sex erotic relationships. In fact, it holds white culture and the contribution of the Western Christian tradition accountable for the grievous sin of defiling the sexuality of non-white individuals. In Douglas’ words, “A discourse of resistance will stress that Black well-being is *not* fostered by adopting the oppressive, destructive, life-negating tools of White culture.”⁷⁹⁴

⁷⁹² Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 75.

⁷⁹³ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, emphasis in text. Practical ways of encouraging the aforementioned transformation in the Black Church include “the creative use of sexually inclusive *language* for God as well as sexually inclusive *images* which serve to symbolize God.” Eugene, 111, emphasis in text. Douglas demands that the Black Church embrace “blues bodies,” those individuals whose stories pervade blues music. Blue music is an example of a form of resistance that subverts the stereotype of black bodies as hypersexual. Blues bodies are nonbourgeois (the black underclass), sensuous (express the body’s desires and feelings, including sexual feelings) and rejected (demonic on account of their sensuality). Douglas argues that as long as the Black Church rejects blues music it will reject blues bodies. Douglas suggests a new narrative to affirm black bodies and contest white norms – the signifying lament of the blues. The lament signifies protest against erotic sexuality as impediment to life, heteroerotic norms, the division of soul and spirit and the separation of the sacred and the secular in human experience. She powerfully concludes that “if the Black Church is to be a liberating, sustaining and life-affirming agent for all black bodies, then the church must be black and blue.” See Douglas, “Black and Blue”, 48-66.

Critical Analysis Toward Conclusions

In this chapter I explored three themes that I identified as being crucial to the affirmation of sexual pleasure in contemporary Christian sexual ethics: embodiment, mutuality, and justices. Nelson's *Embodiment* paves the way for scholars intent on wrenching Christian sexual ethics free from a legacy that continues to distort and hold the body, sex, and sexuality in contempt. As a function of our embodiment and its capacity for sensuality, there is a move in this scholarship to recognize sexual pleasure as a pre-moral good, to demand it in all sexual relationships, and to firmly rid it of the angst generated by the Western Christian tradition. Some proposals gesture toward the potential for personal pleasures to have positive ramifications for loving one's self, for growing in care and concern for one's sexual partner, and for living into more just and mutual relationships with one's neighbor, broadly defined. Mutual sexual pleasure becomes an ethical mandate for "good" sex. The voices of marginalized groups – those whose sexuality has been the grounds for their subjugation – centralize their own sexual experiences to more radically connect sexual practice to social justice. Grounded in the feminist theological recoveries of *eros*, these proposals reclaim sexuality, and, in some cases, view sexual pleasure as the site for potential liberation - literally.

Heyward, another formative figure in the construction of contemporary sexual ethics, champions the necessity of both mutuality and justice in the context of sexual ethics and beyond. Mutuality, thus, creates the condition for justice. In the proposals in this chapter, mutuality is the standard for right relating and key to eliminating all relations characterized by domination and submission, subsequently tearing down the very foundations of sexism, racism, heterosexism, ageism, etc. According to many of

these scholars, mutuality in relationship, including mutuality in the context of sex, consists of sharing power – another contribution of feminist *eros* theology. Sharing power eliminates the tensions generated by “sado-masochistic” relating. The majority of these proposals insist on Heyward’s solution: the need to *eroticize mutuality* – to make “power-sharing” sexy and pleasurable. This should also be true for sexual activity. Recall that this solution is based on the argument that most, if not all, heterosexual sex derives its pleasure from the tensions generated by unequal power relations; in other words, power [read: power over] in our culture is eroticized.

Because these scholars claim that the nature of the power exchange in sexual activity can/does translate into how one handles power in other relationships, and more so, that the joy of power-sharing in sex ignites a passion for mutual relating with all of humanity and creation, justice is ultimately the larger framework for interpreting sexual pleasure. Simply put, sexual pleasure that is the consequence of mutual sexual relating opens one up to the pleasures of and motivates one toward justice-making. For many of these scholars the relationship between mutual sexual pleasure and justice-making is an ethical expectation. It is also the heart of my critique.

First, the discourse with respect to mutuality that stretches over these last two chapters is confusing at times. I argue that there is a conflation between egalitarian relationships in which mutual sexual decision-making takes place and mutuality in sexual activity itself. In the context of the latter, these authors argue that power differentials should cease to exist and titillate participants. As a result, the proposed solution to the problem of heteronormative sex – the eroticization of mutuality – forgoes the possibility

of mutual relationships where partners agree on using power differentials to maximize their pleasure.

My second critique calls the possibility of mutuality as defined by these proposals, what I would call an idealized mutuality, into question. Drawing on Benjamin's work in Chapter Three and Miller-McLemore's work in Chapter Four, I want to reassert my argument that mutuality in the context of erotic desire and pleasure does not involve the elimination of tensions from proper mutual relating, sexual or otherwise. Tension, especially for Heyward and Beverly Harrison, is the problem, as it is always part and parcel of the arousing effect of eroticized power. But I would counter that tension is always the consequence of the continual negotiation of power and, perhaps, constitutive of the mutuality for which these proposals long – of my desire to be recognized by you, your power to recognize me and visa versa. The uncritical adoption of feminist *eros* theology by Christian sexual ethics leaves much of this work open to this critique.

Pellauer's honest recollections of her experience of power are provocative and generate the need for more complex analysis when generating discourse on pleasure, mutuality, and power. With respect to power, an implicit and explicit aspect of this discourse as a whole, Pellauer describes love-making toward orgasm as "a dialectic...of his power meeting mine, that is, he has this power because I respond to him and this response is mine."⁷⁹⁵ She confesses, however, that this reality is more reasoned than experiential. This is the observation Gudorf makes, but fails to critique. The experience Pellauer describes consists of the power of his hand and his body arousing a response in

⁷⁹⁵ Pellauer, 157.

her, and the nearer she comes to orgasm the more she feels his power.⁷⁹⁶ She does not experience it as the power of her own response. Pellauer surmises that this is due to the “power of connectedness between us...The tingle is neither in his hands nor in my skin, but only at the interface between them.”⁷⁹⁷ Still, phenomenologically, her experience of arousal and climax is “his power over her.”⁷⁹⁸ Pellauer steps back from her reflection and admits that this frightens her. She finds openness to his power difficult. However, she insists that her ability to “receive” this ecstasy is based on other factors in their relationship, including trust, growing mutuality, safety, and the ability to forgive one another.

In my reading, the power Pellauer describes is personal – his power and her power, not necessarily shared power. Intellectually she says that it is his power that provokes arousal and her power that responds. Her experience, however, is that of his power over her and not the power of her own response. Pellauer is aware that to speak about power this way, as a feminist, is frightening, but that confidence and trust that her partner would never hurt her intentionally allows her to receive his power over her. She resists heterosexists assumptions that her pleasure is at the disposal of men, and points to the mutuality in the partnership, learning and hard work on the part of both partners. For orgasms, both partners are grateful.⁷⁹⁹

These admissions on Pellauer’s part touch directly on the problem with “sloppy” definitions of mutuality. Miller-McLemore, who is familiar with Pellauer’s article, finds Pellauer exemplary in pointing to the difficulty (even possibility) of sustaining a mutual

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid, 158.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁹ Pellauer introduces the language of luck, chance and accident here, and wonders what has happened to the use of such language in ethics. Pellauer, 160.

relationship the way that Heyward insists. Gudorf reflects Heyward's slippery assumptions about mutuality when she argues that in mutual sexual pleasure the needs of the self and the needs of the other inevitably "march together" and can be "mutually satisfied." But Miller-McLemore insists that desires, interests, or needs do not always – if rarely – align with perfection. This is certainly true of sex, even when it is characterized by mutual intensions. Mutuality as a process of negotiating power that is continually vulnerable to human frailties is an example of mutuality defined differently than shared power. It is a definition that better suits the goal for our sexual relations in the *here and now*, especially in a context where power in relation and the tension it breeds gives rise to our sexual desires and pleasures.

Pellauer's experience is more honest, more human, and more realistic. In addition, it is pleasurable! It is a quasi-mystical experience that opens her to the world. Most importantly, it is her experience, and she refuses to generalize from the particularity of her experience until "a multiplicity in feminist sexual ethics that can at least match the multiplicity of women's sexual experiences."⁸⁰⁰ She resists making ethical claims about her orgasm and encourages her colleagues to participate in the conversation – to reflect on their own experiences, as well as the relationship between power and mutuality. She also asks us to contemplate the difference between belonging and patriarchal ownership, suggesting that attention to trust, vulnerability, and openness may be helpful to this discussion.⁸⁰¹ Pellauer's approach has an openness about it that invites us to make meaning out of the particularities of our own sexual experiences. Interpreting sexual

⁸⁰⁰ Pellauer, 158.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid.

pleasure is akin to generating one's own practical sexual wisdom, an approach that I am more comfortable with given the diversity of sexual experiences.

Related to the process of mutuality, and perhaps most pertinent for pastoral theology and care, is the *reality of risk* even in the most mutual of sexual relationships. This point assumes that mutuality can be thwarted by more than patriarchal domination. Tragedy and the incommensurability of element goods and powers are facts of life. In many of the aforementioned proposals the elimination of tensions in the eroticization of mutuality rightly aims to thwart violence and abuse. I argue that this move also attempts to eliminate risk, when at the most I suggest that it can only serve to mitigate it. Suggesting that risk in mutual relationships can be eliminated misunderstands the complexity of our theological anthropology. In sex, this hope ironically denies the potential for pleasure inherent in risk when trust, safety, and mutuality are part of the larger frame of negotiating sexual activity. This point touches on Benjamin's explorations of the pleasures available to some in s/m fantasy and relationships. In regard to those who are in need of care, I am convinced that an ethic that denies the reality of risk will fail to meet all individuals where they are at and could function to misguide those in search of their own path to sexual flourishing.

Finally, without resisting the claim of the goodness of pleasure, I question the burden placed on sexual activity and its pleasures to motivate and inflame one's passion for justice. I have kept in mind Foucault's reminder that discourse on sexuality – emerging from discourse on sexual pleasure – has productive power. Thus, how do these proposals contribute to the current sexual regime, and is their contribution in accord with their over arching hopes to see sexual justice supported by and manifest in the Church

and the larger community? In what sense might these proposals limit the sexual freedom for which contemporary sexual ethics so desperately advocates? Finally, what kind of guidance does this analysis give us for the place of sexual pleasure in Christian sexual ethics? What kind of guidance does it provide for pastoral theologians and caregivers faced with sexual suffering and the potential for sexual healing? These are the overarching questions I bring to my final analysis in the concluding chapter.

CONCLUSION

PLEASURE, PARADOX, AND PASTORAL THEOLOGY

As this dissertation comes to a conclusion, a reiteration of the task at hand is warranted. It is *not* my intention as a result of my critical analysis of the discourses on sexual pleasure to offer a new framework for Christian sexual ethics or even to conclusively determine whether or not sexual pleasure should remain among the expected norms for “good sex” – though I think that my analysis raises some provocative questions regarding both concerns. Instead, my primary aim was to explore the discourse on sexual pleasure across disciplines to critique the grounds upon which contemporary Christian sexual ethics sought it fit to include sexual pleasure in its framework for sexual ethics for faith communities.

I argued that the inclusion of sexual pleasure in Christian sexual ethics lacks consideration of the complexities and paradoxes that are deeply rooted in human life, relationships, and community. Using sociology, theology, psychology, philosophy, pastoral theology, and women’s studies, I demonstrated that whether socially constructed or inherent in our physiology, psychology, or spirit, *the human condition* – including our capacity for sexual pleasure – is fraught with tension. Christianity has long wrestled with paradoxical proclamations to capture the Christian adherent’s plight: “justified, yet sinner,” living in the “already, but not yet,” “innocent, yet at fault,” and fulfilled in Christ, yet desperately in need. Paradox is the hallmark of the Christian life that awaits the Parousia! Why would our hopes for sexual life fail to reflect paradox? Thus, one of

my biggest critiques in this project is the failure of some Christian sexual ethicists to acknowledge the implications of this reality for sexual activity in the here and now. For many individuals unrealistic ideals in sexual ethics will not effect sexual healing.

The failure on the part of pastoral theology – which begins its reflection with the messy ruptures in our hopes for the good life – to consider the complexities of everyday sexual life is equally as aggravating. As I mentioned earlier, this void in pastoral theology, coupled with the idealism in Christian sexual ethics, concerns me because the scholarship in Christian sexual ethics often serves to fill the gap in pastoral theology and care for resources attending to sex and sexuality. Whether appropriating them as stand-ins for pastoral theological texts or drawing from them as resources for the construction of a pastoral theology of sexuality, pastoral theology is remiss in critically analyzing and evaluating Christian sexual ethics vis-à-vis pastoral theology's central concerns and goals.

This is problematic on two fronts. First, pastoral theology, and consequently pastoral care and counseling, often begins with suffering and is sensitive to the tensions – imposed and fated – that afflict both the mundane and significant dimensions of human life. The field should be critical of proposals that bypass the impact of human fragility on sexual life. Second, pastoral theology attempts to balance attention to *context* and the *particularities* of individual suffering and flourishing with attention to larger justice concerns for faith communities and the greater public. Consequently, in addition to critiquing idealistic expectations for sexual life, the field should be concerned as to whether or not appropriated resources in Christian sexual ethics are sensitive to the tensions generated by *context and diverse needs* when sexual flourishing is a priority.

Complexifying Embodiment, Mutuality, and Justice

To reiterate, I have great respect for contemporary Christian sexual ethicists who have attempted to cut sexual pleasure free from its historical association with sin and immorality. With some *important qualifications* I agree with the groundwork laid by theological ethicists to support a positive discourse on sexual pleasure, as well as sexual justice, in Christian sexual ethics. Embodiment, mutuality, and justice are crucial themes related to sexuality that have relevance in the clinical context and to the work of the Church in the community at large. For individuals like Heyward, Harrison, Ellison, Goss, and Haldeman, I support a vision for sexual pleasure that binds it to power sharing in sexual activity and concrete acts of social justice in the public realm. However, when it comes to supporting a discourse on sexual pleasure for *all* of God's creation, especially as it relates to constructing a larger framework for sexual ethics, my qualifications are significant.

To the first theme, I support the move in Christian sexual ethics to embrace and value our *embodiment*, including the vision of a unified body, self, and spirit. The body is good insofar as it constitutes the conditions for our connection and relationship to others and the medium through which we make meaning in and understand the world. Still, the body is not without its limits and despite its crucial role in our relational and spiritual lives, one must keep in mind that under certain circumstances it can also be a source of suffering. For example, as part of the Nashville Alliance for Sexual Health (NASH) I was privy to case presentations by physical therapists who worked with women suffering from injuries to the muscles in their pelvic floor.⁸⁰² These women presented a variety of

⁸⁰² The pelvic floor is the region that spans the area underneath the pelvis. The muscles in this area support the pelvic organs in the lower abdominal cavity, such as the bladder and uterus, and comprise the

symptoms, including lower back pain, incontinence, painful sexual intercourse, and difficulty having bowel movements, urinating, and walking. In addition to seeing urologists, gynecologists, and physical therapists, many were referred to counselors because the pain, embarrassment, and relationship issues resulting from their injuries made it difficult to embrace their embodied existence. At times their bodies inhibited them from completing the simplest of tasks and responsibilities, including participating in sexual activities. Thus, while we should value and revere our body-self as a gift from God, we must simultaneously recognize that for some, at various points in life, the body can be a source of profound suffering.

With regards to the second theme, I support *mutual relationships* between individuals and, more specifically, between individuals in sexual relationships. However, there are many caveats to a mutuality ethic in sexual relations that resist idealism. I have used Jessica Benjamin's, Kathleen Sands', and Bonnie Miller-McLemore's works to support a *complexified understanding of mutuality*, which I have applied to sex. First, the fragility of the body – even the deep connection between the body and the mind – on occasion frustrate sexual life. For example, the stress and fatigue of a long day or a vigorous workout can be a physiological and/or psychological barrier to sexual pleasure, even when sexual activity is desired and mutually agreed upon. Second, if mutuality is defined as sharing power, then sexual activity that stimulates and brings pleasure using power dynamics is deemed unethical. This definition is problematic for those who in the context of a mutual relationship agree to play with power to enhance the intimacy and

foundation of the core of the body. These muscles help control urination and defecation and are active during sexual activity, especially orgasm. These muscles can be injured as a result of certain athletic activities, bruising or breaking the coccyx or tailbone, or pregnancy, labor, or birth. Simon LeVay and Sharon M. Valente, *Human Sexuality*, (Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, Inc., 1999), 555.

pleasure in their sexual experience. I suggest that mutuality in sexual activity as an ethical norm should have more to do with *sharing decision-making power* than with eliminating power play in actual sexual acts.

Third, drawing on Benjamin's and Miller-McLemore's analyses most endemic to human being, mutual relation connotes a process and not a static state. A praxis of mutual recognition respects individuality and the conflict of needs and goods that often call for forgiveness, grace, and the intentional renewal of the tension between self-assertion and recognition. Failure to sustain the tension is inevitable. It is renewing the tension that allows for healing and perhaps moments of flourishing – sexual or otherwise. In other words, sexual partners may experience instances where they lose themselves in each other without loss of self or lose self-consciousness without the loss of awareness. This kind of sexual connection may (or may not!) be extremely delightful, but there is still much pleasure to be had in negotiating tensions in the in-between times and, for some, in playing with extremes. There is also, per the realities of “tragedy” and human frailty, sexual suffering in the midst of mutual relationships.

In sum, my resistance to the insistence on mutuality bound to sexual pleasure in Christian sexual ethics is *not* a resistance to the importance and priority on mutuality in relationships. It is first, a resistance to simple, static understandings of mutuality, and second, a resistance to the proposed one to one correspondences between good sex and mutual power in relation and between sexual suffering and the absence of mutuality.

On the last theme, *justice* related to sexuality is another crucial dimension of Christian sexual ethics with which I am in agreement. This argument is central in Douglas', Heyward's, and Ellison's works. The Church must be cognizant of how

sexuality – black sexuality, queer sexuality, sexuality of the poor – is used to malign, oppress, and leverage power over these communities. Attacking sexuality makes it difficult for these populations to consider the spiritual dimensions of their sexuality and to envision their sexual pleasure as a gift and a grace. Being committed to sexual justice for all, however, does not necessarily obligate personal sexual pleasures to contribute toward these ends. While I would not discourage this goal for some, requiring sexual pleasure to effect social justice seems burdensome, especially from a clinical perspective, where I have seen many individuals – especially women – who are struggling to simply enjoy sexual pleasure for themselves and with their partners.

In addition, insinuating that certain sexual pleasures do not participate in efforts toward social justice conflate our sexual activity with who we are – our identity - and what we stand for and are committed to in the world. According to contemporary proposals that support eroticizing mutuality and oppose the eroticization of power, if I prefer a little bondage in my personal sexual life, I am likely to develop a taste for oppressing my neighbor. But this is not true for everyone. In fact, many individuals who participate in more creative, less “vanilla” sexual experiences tend to focus more on freedom of choice than the restriction of rights. Some, like the subversive sex radical feminists I covered in Chapter Three, actually resignify practices like sadomasochism and leather practices by using them in unintended ways for the purposes of liberation.

There is so much to be unpacked here. Contemporary Christian sexual ethics needs to engage and respond to these varying perspectives. Secular theorists, like feminists participating in the feminist sex wars, have done a much better job through debate of demonstrating the complexity of the relationships between sexual pleasure and

liberation and oppression. They also show us how individual experiences shape different opinions in regards to sexual activity. For example, Pat Califia, who insists that the meaning of sexual language and practice is context dependent, finds that s/m practices in her context maximize her agency and her pleasure as opposed to hurting her or rendering her powerless.

In sum, the conflation of sexual activity with identity makes me worry that these proposals place an undue burden on our sexual activity to affect social justice. After all, if most of the time sex falls short of being ideal, it seems unfair to demand that it fit into a larger call for commitments to social justice. And, if no matter how we cut it, sex is constructed in our very bodies as a power exchange – to some degree – how can we expect it to be a source – *even the source* – of meeting the demands of an entire feminist ethic? This is precisely Sands’ critique of feminist *eros* – “Not only was *eros* to heal patriarchalism, it was also to ameliorate the whole panoply of other oppressions – racism, ecological depredation, class inequities and so forth,” she explains.⁸⁰³ Sands goes on to remind readers of feminist Gale Rubin’s caution against conferring an excess of significance on sex. Sands argues that claiming a necessary connection between *eros* and justice has given feminist theologians (and I would add theological ethicists) reason to exclude practices like s/m, fetishism, and pornography from sexual theologies.⁸⁰⁴

⁸⁰³ Sands, “A Response to Marcella Althaus-Reid’s Indecent Theology,” 176.

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid.

Coming Full Circle

Recall that at the onset of this project I asserted that Christian sexual ethics has uncritically accepted and promoted a vision for sexual pleasure that lacks the complexity, tensions, and paradox demonstrated by the contributions of other disciplines. I have already explained how the emphasis on connecting personal sexual pleasures to social justice places an undue burden on sexual pleasure insofar as it must *necessarily* transcend the personal to the political. Before returning in this critical conversation to pastoral theology and bringing the commitments of pastoral theology to bear on what has been covered thus far, I want to briefly attend to the other two assertions in my thesis.

First, I suggested that efforts to speak in positive ways about sexual pleasure from a theological perspective have erred in ways reminiscent of the Christian tradition. Just as Augustine constructed sexual pleasure as essentially irredeemable, untrustworthy, corrupted, and capable of corruption, Christian sexual ethics has grounded itself in a redemption of an *eros* that is essentially infallible, always trustworthy, salvific, and incorruptible. This ideal or essential *eros*, defined by an ideal understanding of mutuality that eliminates all tensions, failures, and the possibility of the conflict of needs and goods, draws sharp distinctions between what qualifies as truly erotic and what is relegated to the “pornographic.” For many, the insistence on eroticizing mutuality in sexual activity runs counter to the current eroticization of the tensions generated by power dynamics. Thus, the sexual activities of the majority are called into question by a Christian sexual ethic that affirms sexual arousal and pleasure in power-sharing only.

Similarly, because the erotic is necessary theological – the Divine presence in and substance of mutual sexual relating – those sexual activities that are not properly erotic

alienate individuals from God. In an ironic twist, insisting on the ethical import of eroticizing mutuality in sexual experience mirrors the priority on and claims to the spiritual made by Augustine with respect to virginity and the chaste life. Intimacy with the Divine is maximized in eroticized mutuality as it was in practicing abstinence for historical Christians. For each respectively, all other sex or sex period separates us from God. In this way, implicit in any tolerance of “somasochistic” sexual relating for contemporary Christian sexual ethics is reminiscent of Augustine’s hopes for married intercourse. The former expects partners to move toward sharing power in sex, just as the latter expects married individuals to embrace chastity when the “ardor of youth cools.”⁸⁰⁵

Efforts to speak in positive ways about sex from a theological perspective have also been congruent with the current sexual regime. Sexuality, as articulated by Christian sexual ethics, is central the human condition and to our identities as Christians who have been gifted with embodiment and sensuality, the physicality of God’s grace. While this a reversal of the centrality of sexuality to the human condition in Augustine’s interpretation of original sin and its punishment – positive as opposed to negative – continuing to position sexuality as foundational to personhood and identity complies with Foucault’s interpretation of the “history” of sexuality, the will to knowledge, the deployment of sexuality, and the production of power. In other words, by continuing to interpret sexuality as central to the self, Christians perpetuate the view of sexuality as a source for truths about the self, as well as the divine. Theological discourse about sexuality orders knowledge and makes claims on sexual behaviors that create and enforce norms and the proliferation of identities, which in turn create and exact disciplinary power. For good or for ill, Christian sexual ethics does just this – the centrality and spiritual import of our

⁸⁰⁵ Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 12.

sexuality necessitates a framework that ultimately constructs norms for sexual conduct with theological authority.

Contemporary Christian sexual ethics would not deny its desire to implement a framework for making ethical and moral decisions about sex. Ethicists like Heyward and Ellison and institutions like the Religious Institute, however, claim to turn away from judging specific sexual acts. Instead, the *substance* of sexual relationships is the primary ethical concern. For example, “right relationship,” a phrase repeated numerous times by Heyward, means living in mutual relationships and sharing power. Insofar as a sexual relationship exhibits “right relating,” Heyward claims to be satisfied. Ellison is more direct. In *Erotic Justice* he explains, “A mature sexual ethic focuses not on what must be prohibited...but rather on the quality of relationship, that pattern of respect and care, and how power is distributed and expressed.”⁸⁰⁶ In “Common Decency: A New Christian Sexual Ethics,” he clearly advocates for a focus on the *substance* of sexual relations – the quality of honesty, care, and respect that is present – as opposed to the *form* of sexual relations – who does what, with whom, under what circumstances.⁸⁰⁷ The Religious Institute pointedly states in its *Religious Declaration*, “Our culture needs a sexual ethic focused on personal relationships and social justice rather than particular sexual acts.”⁸⁰⁸ Taken together, the focus on the substance of relationships eliminates judgments made against sexual activities on the basis of 1) the gender of one’s partners, 2) the body

⁸⁰⁶ Ellison, *Erotic Justice*, 83.

⁸⁰⁷ Ellison, “Common Decency,” 236.

⁸⁰⁸ See <http://www.religioustheology.org/religious-declaration-on-sexual-morality-justice-and-healing>, or the appendix.

parts involved, and 3) the marital status of participants. In other words, it resists the unjust norm of compulsory heterosexuality and gender inequality.⁸⁰⁹

There are many positive things to say about this approach to sexual ethics, which I find appealing and advantageous for pastoral theology. However, the demands made upon sexual pleasure by these theorists – even the inclusion of pleasure period into a framework for sexual ethics – confounds the central aim of focusing on the relationship as opposed to the act and its circumstances. By including sexual pleasure in the form of *the need to eroticize mutuality*, these scholars reject as morally acceptable any sexual activities that use eroticized power to increase intimacy and sexual pleasure. Recall that Heyward insists that any kind of sexual activity that does not realize or aim toward mutual power-sharing retains a sadomasochistic character and can only be understood as anti-erotic or pornographic. This is further complicated and confused by her paradoxical claim that the sadomasochistic context of our culture implicates *all sexual activities* in producing pleasures that are experienced through domination and submission. Thus, new proposals that include sexual pleasure insofar as mutuality is eroticized end up focusing on and judging sexual acts, practices, and pleasures that play with, negotiate, or exemplify power imbalances.

In my opinion this system is too dualistic – as if in sexual relationships we either share power or participate in the dominant/submissive paradigm that Heyward argues always constitutes violence and leads to injustice. My critique on this point does not try to avoid the problem of violence with respect to what goes on inside the bedroom. I am not talking about embracing sexual abuse and forms of domination that ignore or manipulate consent and repeatedly fail to negotiate the tension crucial to a praxis of

⁸⁰⁹ Ellison, “Common Decency,” 238.

mutual recognition. What I am suggesting is a modification to simple dualistic notions of power, i.e. the eroticization of shared power is good, while the eroticization of power is bad. Where is the proof that power in and of itself is problematic?⁸¹⁰ For example, if in sexual play we can mutually agree to use the tensions in power exchange to maximize sexual pleasure, is it not the *eroticization of abusive power* that most concerns us, where as the *eroticization of power* does not appear in and of itself to signal injustice? In many cases the *eroticization of power* signals the recognition of how deeply patriarchy has shaped our sexual desires and pleasures and seeks to capitalize on this reality by submitting it to control, safety, and mutual decision-making and implementation.

Perhaps distinctions need to be made between abusive power and power imbalances that have benefits given other parameters like informed consent, trust, fidelity, etc. Secular feminists argue that it is not beyond the realm of possibility for partners in egalitarian relationships, committed to social justice work in their public life, to use eroticized power to make the most of their sexual experience, especially if eroticized power – given the enduring reign of heterosexist patriarchy – is what most often titillates. Thus, power can be eroticized in the context of a mutual relationship without calling this violence or insisting that subversive practices, like sadomasochistic sexual activity, are ideal, the only way out of sex that is either constructed from its foundations up or taken prisoner by patriarchy. In other words, the suggestion of eroticized mutuality, or being “turned on” by power-sharing, may exist now for some, but

⁸¹⁰ Foucault argues that power is everywhere and that it is always relational. “The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.” Foucault, 93.

for others it is more reflective of a fantasy. I maintain that both eroticizing mutuality and eroticizing power deserve support, especially in a caregiving context.

My point – the last in my three point thesis – is that proposals in Christian sexual ethics struggle to affirm sexual relationships and acts that eroticize pleasure and play with tensions to generate and/or maximize sexual pleasures. As such, Christian sexual ethics ironically reinscribe – albeit with a wider circle – sexual practices and pleasures that are acceptable, while delineating those that are not. Taken together, contemporary interpretations of sexual pleasure in contemporary Christian sexual ethics risk participating in the ongoing production of a sexual regime that regulates and controls specific sexual acts and pleasures, even as they claim to prioritize the nature of the relationships in which sexual activities occur.

I conclude that the call to eroticize of mutuality is a theoretical attempt to eliminate tensions in the critical analysis of the flow of power through sexual pleasures themselves. I am not convinced that “imagination” or “phantasie” can reconcile the “essential goodness of sexual pleasure” with the thorough distortion of (some would argue the creation of) these pleasures in a patriarchal context. Trying to do so has put contemporary Christian sexual ethics in a position to monitor sexual pleasures, a role not uncommon to the Christian tradition. Thus, sexual pleasures continue to generate a degree of obsession and angst, even in progressive Christian contexts.

This leads me back to the problem with essentializing *eros*, and subsequently sexual pleasure. Whether essentially good/redemptive or essentially bad/sinful, a black and white approach to erotic pleasure ignores the paradoxes and multiple shades of gray that capture the majority of sexual experience, causing Christians to either ignore,

marginalize, or demonize the sexual sufferings and joys that inhabit the spaces and experiences in-between. A close read of Heyward in *Touching Our Strength* and “Pain and Pleasure” – works that infuse constructive suggestions in contemporary Christian sexual ethics – reveals recognition of the paradox the plagues discourse on sexual pleasure. But she cannot hold the tension and pushes toward a resolution that in the face of diverse contexts and experiences remains highly theoretical at best.

Pastoral Theological Reflections

Returning to the Individual

My pastoral theological sensibilities, arising from my knowledge of the field, as well as my personal and clinical experiences, embrace the paradoxes that grip daily life. The challenge of being in relationship is most fundamental and often the content of counseling sessions. The challenge of sustaining mutual relationships and the suffering in the breakdown of balancing self-assertion and recognizing others bring individuals, couples, and families to counseling. Sexual life, because of its resonances with primal desires and embodied satisfactions, is a playground (some times an abandon or abused one) for negotiating the needs of the self and the other. I agree with Benjamin that in sex it is the dynamic tension between assertion and recognition that makes mutuality possible. She argues that erotic satisfaction is attained through a praxis of mutual recognition of and with others. The erotic excitement of mutual recognition between selves is based on differentiation – others who are both separate from and in communion with us. But this erotic satisfaction is not achieved without tensions. Similarly,

community is not achieved without tensions. It makes sense to me that even in the most mutual relationships we retain our subjectivity. There are still boundaries that even if crossed can be re-negotiated.

Because we are individuals, we do not always desire the same thing, at the same time, in the same way that others might prefer. If we did, mutuality would not suffer the challenge of our individuality – the ways that despite being like all others and like some others, we are also like no other.⁸¹¹ The Christian community, in its affirmation of sexual pleasure, envisioning it as a gift and a grace from the Creator, cannot ignore the individual and her particularities. Pastoral theology, while it would fully support sexual justice in the community at large, does not lose sight of the individual. Pastoral theology, argues Miller-McLemore, in its study of experiences of suffering and its analysis of “what is at stake for particular individuals in particular situations...seeks a...corrective to theoretical or doctrinal abstraction.”⁸¹² I would add that it also seeks a corrective to generalizations across experience, always beginning its reflection with a commitment to empathy and understanding in particularity. Thus, one individual’s interpretation of her personal sexual experience may not be generalizable to others.

In the proposals reviewed in Chapter Five the most pastoral theological approaches to a discourse on sexual pleasure are Pellauer’s and Haldeman’s personal reflections. I say “approaches” as opposed to “arguments” because neither makes an argument for the meanings – spiritual or otherwise – inherent in sexual pleasure. Instead, they interpret their own experiences of orgasm and share the wisdom gleaned. Pellauer refrains from making any moral claims with respect to female orgasm until the

⁸¹¹ Lartey, 171-172.

⁸¹² Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Also a Pastoral Theologian,” 822.

particularities of other experiences are shared. Like Pellauer, Haldeman also resists making universal claims for the spiritual, theological, and ethical meanings inherent in gay sex. He challenges his readers to consider their own sexual practices and how these practices relate to their notions of self, community, and God. Recall that he encourages us to see the subtle relationships between our doings in our private, public, and spiritual lives, reminding us, "...our doing shapes who we are becoming."⁸¹³ Both theologians are provocative and call us to a similar exploration of our own sexual pleasure. They do not, however, make ethical demands based on their experiences with orgasm.

While Pellauer (a straight, white female) and Haldeman (a gay, white male) value reflecting on their person sexual pleasure and contemplating its ethical significance, others reject an open exploration of this private, sometimes exploited, dimension of sexuality. For example, lesbian feminist Mary Hunt points out that while gay men have focused on their sexual lives as the locus of their liberation, lesbian feminists, who resists self-definition based on sexuality, choose to centralize their relational commitments to other women – what Hunt calls female friendship.⁸¹⁴ She explains the reclamation of the word lesbian as “women loving women without fixating on the presence or absence of genital activity to define it.”⁸¹⁵ Consequently, the choice to love women is a personal with political ramifications. However, according to Hunt, whether or not friends are

⁸¹³ Haldeman, 229.

⁸¹⁴ Hunt, 186.

⁸¹⁵ Ibid. Lesbian feminism, Mary Hunt explains, can only be understood in a context that is both patriarchal and heterosexist, maintained by the exclusion of women and homosexuality, where women are defined by their gender and by their sexual relationships to men. Lesbians, she argues, are not defined according to their sexuality, by those with whom she does and does not sleep. Rather, a lesbian is “an outlaw in patriarchy.” In other words, despite the patriarchal messages telling them not to love women, lesbians love women, and they love themselves as women. “To be a lesbian,” Hunt elaborates, “is to take relationships with women radically seriously, opening oneself to befriend and be befriended, so that by loving, something new may be born. When all women are freed to have this experience, then, and only then, can we say that any women are free.” Ibid, 184.

sexual partners remains a private matter. She is adamant about the distinction, insisting that lesbian feminists are entitled to private lives like everyone else.⁸¹⁶

Recall that womanist Karen Baker-Fletcher makes a similar case for the rights of black women to do, display, and play with their sexuality as they please, arguing that possessing this agency is an assertion of freedom in the face of a racist culture that has historically “forcefully displayed and spread for curiosity, amusement, observation, and consumption” the sex of black bodies.⁸¹⁷ Baker-Fletcher interprets some of the silence on the part of the black community as intentional and selective, a way of resisting participation in a sexual regime that has been the source of so much pain, discrimination, and exploitation.

For these scholars, whose contexts differ from Pellauer’s and Haldeman’s, an explicit discourse on sexual pleasure as it relates to sexual ethics is intentionally absent. Hunt focuses more broadly on the meaning, transformation, and pleasure that are available in friendship. From her lesbian feminist perspective it is not sexual pleasure that motivates the desire for working toward the alleviation of oppression constructed and maintained by patriarchy. She argues that focusing on sexual activity misses the point that the relational dynamics of domination and submission are the unmovable foundation of heterosexual relationships and institutions. Thus, for Hunt, rethinking sexual ethics requires a priority on the “sexual” nature of all relationships, particularly friendship.⁸¹⁸

⁸¹⁶ Ibid, 186.

⁸¹⁷ Baker-Fletcher, 208.

⁸¹⁸ According to Hunt, lesbian feminism, women who take their friendships with other women seriously, is a model of relating that exhibits mutuality, concern for the whole community, honesty, and other qualities that make it advantageous for theological reflection. Friendship becomes the standard for just relating in all relationships, including (but never exclusively) intimate relationships. A priority on justice in relationships guides the sexual ethics that emerge from this perspective.

For Baker-Fletcher, the wisdom of *eros* found in the writings of black women – perhaps including but not limited to sexual pleasure – holds the key to liberating and loving black sexuality. She insists, “[My] essay rejects white feminist, post-modern arguments that ‘this is essentialist’ as a nonagenda item for Black women who find healing in acknowledging a common history in relation to the transatlantic slave trade.”⁸¹⁹ In other words, Baker-Fletcher claims that *eros* as a resource is healing and transformative for the black community. She rejects the critique that I have leveraged against feminist *eros*. Her sentiments are invaluable for pastoral theology going forward on two fronts. First, Baker-Fletcher (and Hunt) demonstrate that sexual pleasure need not be a resource for Christian sexual ethics given her experiences in the black (and lesbian) community. Second, Baker-Fletcher challenges pastoral theology to continue to consider *eros*, as articulated by womanists, as a resource for sexual ethics.

The reason for explicating the differences in Pellauer’s, Haldeman’s, Hunt’s, and Baker-Fletcher’s works is to argue that *context matters* when it comes to considering how and if discourse on sexual pleasure should factor into Christian sexual ethics. The role of sexual pleasure in flourishing, in suffering, in spiritual life, in motivating social justice, and in constructing sexual ethics cannot escape the personal. These particularities, I argue, include *and* stretch beyond gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class to family dynamics, temperament, biological constitution, culture, and all the facets of life that make each individual unique. I am inclined to consider discourse on sexual pleasure in pastoral theology and care as emergent, constructed by the careseeker at his or her discretion in the context of a caregiving relationship, as opposed to determined by an external, apriori ethical framework. This approach is not a stretch for pastoral theology,

⁸¹⁹ Baker-Fletcher, 199.

whose strength lies in making meaning in the midst of the human story by reflection on concrete experiences of suffering, flourishing, and life in the interim.

Good-Enough Sex

I argued earlier in this project that the goal of power-sharing in sex, or eroticizing mutuality in sexual activity, was an attempt to eliminate risk in sexual encounter. In Heyward and Harrison's efforts to abolish abuse and violence in sexual life, they champion mutual vulnerability. But they write as if mutual vulnerability eradicates the possibility of wounding. Insofar as risk has the potential to put us at the mercy of suffering, this is a valiant effort. Ideally we want to avoid suffering at all costs! However, if we understand mutual exchange as a constant negotiation of power, a giving and receiving, then we have no choice but to allow for a degree of risk – the chance, the possibility, and the probability that precisely because we have entered into a relationship grounded in trust and enhanced by vulnerability, any faltering of reciprocal recognition may be an occasion for wounding. Recall, once again, that according to Benjamin and Miller-McLemore the breakdown of mutual exchange or failure to reciprocate will occur. Finding out why and renewing the tension is part and parcel of the task of relating.

Theoretically then, with respect to “good sex,” I suggest that the reality of risk means that any ideal notion of truly “good” sex is intermittent, if not at times totally unpredictable. This is exactly what Heyward fiercely opposes. She contends that if self-other dynamics are “fated to bear the mark of the tension between self-possession and other-possession, then good sex can be at best an occasional, even accidental, striking of

a delicate balance.”⁸²⁰ I think that Heyward is right on! Risk means that our “sex” – whatever our context - is only ever “good-enough.”

The idea of “good-enough” sex, however, is not entirely novel. For example, David Scharff, who uses ORT to interpret adult sexual life, considers Winnicott’s concept of the “good-enough mother” paradigmatic for “good-enough sex.” “The good-enough mother,” Winnicott says, “is one who makes active adaptation to the infant’s needs, an active adaptation that gradually lessens, according to the infant’s growing ability to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration.”⁸²¹ Put differently, a good-enough mother regularly provides for and is in tune with her baby’s physical and emotional needs; however, though she does the best she can, she is prone to occasional failures. While these failures frustrate the baby, they also provide the infant with the opportunity to cope with frustration, to self-soothe, and eventually to make objects real through the integration of their good and bad aspects. Mom (or any primary caregiver) is *good enough* because she gives the infant exactly what is needed and wanted most of the time. In Winnicott’s theory occasional failures are highly valued because they provide the opportunity for growth, integration of one’s world, and individuation.

Scharff says that similar to the goals of the good-enough mother in childrearing, “reasonable goals for sexuality are that it be a useful and on the whole enjoyable part of a . . . relationship that is capable of containing and facilitating the average amount of conflict and frustration, giving at *some times* exactly what is needed and wished for.”⁸²² Here, Scharff considers that good-enough sex has similar qualities to good-enough mothering. On the whole, good-enough sex will be enjoyable, at times providing exactly what is

⁸²⁰ Heyward and Harrison, 143.

⁸²¹ Winnicott, 13-14.

⁸²² Scharff, 11, emphasis mine.

desired and needed. Sex is *good enough* in that it can withstand and contain the occasional failure, which provides the opportunity for couples to hold together the realities of the good and bad aspects of their partners and themselves.

Though Benjamin does not use the term “good-enough sex,” the praxis of mutual recognition that she proposes captures the tensions that permeate all erotic union. Because we are constantly negotiating moments of self-assertion and other-recognition, most sex to some degree is good-enough. For some, sexual pleasure is heightened by sadomasochistic fantasy and role playing, where increasing the risk of recognizing the other and failing to be recognized generates deep satisfaction when the other survives destruction, ultimately reinforcing the subjectivity of both partners.

Pastoral theology recognizes that the fragility of the human condition and the challenge of mutuality extends into the sexual arena. I previously suggested that trying to eliminate risk in mutual relationships misunderstands the complexity of our theological anthropology. In sex, this hope ironically denies the potential for pleasure inherent in risk when trust, safety, and mutuality are part of the larger frame of negotiating sexual activity. Recall that Pellauer’s attributes her ability to experience and enjoy her spouse’s “power-over” her to other factors in their relationship, including trust, growing mutuality, safety, and the ability to forgive one another. Haldeman, aware of the contentious nature of claiming the “receptive” position in sex, argues that all human thought and behavior is ambiguous – some potentially life-giving, while others are potentially destructive. For this reason, all behavior is in need constant reflection and reform, and sex, he says, like other practices, involves risk.⁸²³

⁸²³ Haldeman, 222.

Pastoral theology might consider that in a larger framework of trust, growing mutuality, safety, and the ability to forgive one another, perhaps it is our brokenness (whether manifest in a propensity to dominate or submit) that allows for pleasure in sexual activities with those we trust and with whom we feel safe. Because I take seriously Miller-McLemore's critique of "sloppy" mutuality and her argument for mutuality as a life-long process, pastoral theology can interpret failures in sexual relating as opportunities for growth as individuals and in our intimate relationships as a whole. Failures also give us perspective with respect to the limits of the goods that sex can offer us. In this sense, pastoral theology can argue that good-enough sex is *the best sex*.

Lingering Concerns and Future Research

As pastoral theology turns its attention toward reflecting further on sexual experience and the potential discourses emerging on sexual pleasure, the following issues tempt a pastoral theological response. Recall that Gudorf argues we must admit that the reason we pursue sex is for the pleasure, whether the pleasure of passion or the pleasure of emotional intimacy.⁸²⁴ In some instances this is true. In other cases, connection, attachment, or security trumps a quest for pleasure. "Make-up sex" is notorious for reestablishing connection and security – for communicating without words that "everything is ok," "I forgive you," or "I love you." Pleasure may reinforce these feelings, but not necessarily. Sands' points out that sex seeks out many goods, "from deepening a relationship, to satisfying lust, to offering comfort, from making babies to making money."⁸²⁵ More so, she argues, "Lust can go with love, but they are not

⁸²⁴ Gudorf, 115.

⁸²⁵ Sands, "A Response to marcel Althaus-Reid," 177.

intrinsically connected, nor even intrinsically compatible.”⁸²⁶ Furthermore, some in sexual-minority communities, like queer leather communities for example, use sexual practices as way to solidify identity. Thus, practices like s/m have little to do with sexual pleasure at all.⁸²⁷ *How can pastoral theology articulate and interpret that the reasons we pursue sex are multiple and contingent? Can pastoral theology support the multitude?*

Recall that I demonstrated in the Introduction that most communities of faith today admit that there are other ends to sex (like pleasure) aside from procreation, while continuing to insist that marriage is the only “appropriate” context for sex. I argued that confining sex to marriage belies ongoing distrust of sexual pleasure as a potential good in its own right. *Can pastoral theology still make a case for marriage as a good context for sex, one that is no longer grounded in a procreative ethic or fear of sexual pleasure? Can marriage be salvaged as one among a number of arrangements that can establish parameters that create a context for good-enough sex as articulated above? To what extent does marriage insofar as it covenants for commitment, trust, steadfastness across time, and space for failure encourage good-enough sex?*⁸²⁸

If pastoral theology is convinced that truly focusing on the substance of a relationship should be the grounds for sexual ethical norms, it must cease evaluation of sexual acts. Thus, it would embrace s/m and alternative sexual expressions. Doing so could also dissolve an emphasis on monogamy, redefine traditional definitions of fidelity, and raise provocative questions about prostitution and the creation and consumption of pornography – both issues that even the most progressive proposals in Christian sexual

⁸²⁶ Ibid.

⁸²⁷ See Jacob Hale, “Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies: How to Have Sex without Women or Men,” in *Social Text*, 52/53, Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender, (Autumn-Winter, 1997): 223-236.

⁸²⁸ These questions were raised by Bonnie Miller-McLemore in personal correspondence on June 30, 2011.

ethics tend to avoid. *How will pastoral theology respond to the sexual pleasures that are tangled up in pornography, prostitution and [role] play? Is it pastoral theology's obligation to do so? In other words, what is the role of pastoral theology in reflecting on and implementing sexual ethics?*

Finally, not all proposals in contemporary Christian sexual ethics prioritize pleasure or necessarily include it in new frameworks for sexual ethics. In *Just Love*, for example, Margaret Farley includes the following in her framework for a sexual ethics based on norms of justice: do no unjust harm, free consent, mutuality (of desire, action, and response), equality of power, commitment, fruitfulness, and social justice.⁸²⁹ While there is a lot to discuss here, note that pleasure is not among the seven points of Farley's framework. Rather, she says, "...we may in terms of this framework say things like: ...freedom, wholeness, intimacy, and pleasure are values to be affirmed in relationships marked by mutuality, equality, and some form of commitment."⁸³⁰ In other words, pleasure can be affirmed when a sexual relationship is mutual, equal, and committed in some way, but this is not a necessity. Sands asks, "...why cannot sex...without pleasure...be good enough sex?"⁸³¹ Because there are many motivations for sex, Farley and Sands indicate that pleasure is not necessarily prioritized (as it is for Gudorf) or even necessary (as it is in the Religious Institute's Declaration). *What kind of guidance should pastoral theology offer with regards to the place of sexual pleasure in Christian sexual ethics? And should sexual pleasure remain among the expected norms for "good sex"? Does answering these questions even fall into the purview of pastoral theology?*

⁸²⁹ Farley, 216-232.

⁸³⁰ Ibid, 231.

⁸³¹ Sands, "A Response to Marcella Althaus-Reid's Indecent Theology," 177.

APPENDIX

Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing

Sexuality is God's life-giving and life-fulfilling gift. We come from diverse religious communities to recognize sexuality as central to our humanity and as integral to our spirituality. We are speaking out against the pain, brokenness, oppression and loss of meaning that many experience about their sexuality.

Our faith traditions celebrate the goodness of creation, including our bodies and our sexuality. We sin when this sacred gift is abused or exploited. However, the great promise of our traditions is love, healing and restored relationships.

Our culture needs a sexual ethic focused on personal relationships and social justice rather than particular sexual acts. All persons have the right and responsibility to lead sexual lives that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent and pleasure. Grounded in respect for the body and for the vulnerability that intimacy brings, this ethic fosters physical, emotional and spiritual health. It accepts no double standards and applies to all persons, without regard to sex, gender, color, age, bodily condition, marital status or sexual orientation.

God hears the cries of those who suffer from the failure of religious communities to address sexuality. We are called today to see, hear and respond to the suffering caused by sexual abuse and violence against women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons, the HIV pandemic, unsustainable population growth and over-consumption, and the commercial exploitation of sexuality.

Faith communities must therefore be truth-seeking, courageous and just. We call for:

- Theological reflection that integrates the wisdom of excluded, often silenced peoples, and insights about sexuality from medicine, social science, the arts and humanities.
- Full inclusion of women and LGBT persons in congregational life, including their ordination and marriage equality.
- Sexuality counseling and education throughout the lifespan from trained religious leaders.
- Support for those who challenge sexual oppression and who work for justice within their congregations and denominations.

Faith communities must also advocate for sexual and spiritual wholeness in society. We call for:

- Lifelong, age-appropriate sexuality education in schools, seminaries and community settings.
- A faith-based commitment to sexual and reproductive rights, including access to voluntary contraception, abortion, and HIV/STI prevention and treatment.
- Religious leadership in movements to end sexual and social injustice.

God rejoices when we celebrate our sexuality with holiness and integrity. We, the undersigned, invite our colleagues and faith communities to join us in promoting sexual morality, justice, and healing.

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