

**AFLAME WITH PASSION:
TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY**

By

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INTRODUCTION

In the year following my graduation from seminary, I served as a youth minister for a mid-sized United Methodist congregation in a Dallas suburb. It was there that I met “Jenny,” a fifteen year old high school sophomore. Jenny was in many ways a stereotypically “typical” suburban teen—involved in high school sports, respected by her peers and a frequent participant in the church youth group’s social opportunities. Jenny had an on-again, off-again relationship with her high school boyfriend, a fact I first gleaned in a car ride home from a weekend retreat. As I drove, Jenny and a girlfriend began discussing the tensions in her relationship. Many of the boyfriend-related conflicts she shared seemed to be rooted in his pressure on her to increase the physically sexual nature of their relationship. She was reluctant, leading to frequent fights.

As I drove, I was surprised by the openness by which Jenny and her friend shared their thoughts, ultimately welcoming my contributions to the conversation. I offered what I at the time thought to be the fairly standard set of caveats grounded in my liberal progressive understanding of sexual ethics; Jenny should know she has a right to her own body and what she does with it. A good partner does not pressure someone for sex. Sexual intercourse should come when a young person is ready and in a caring relationship. Otherwise, abstinence is likely best. If one decides to have sex, the necessary preparations and precautions should be taken. A good partner also welcomes conversation about contraception and STI prevention.

I am not sure there was anything I thought to be especially “Christian” about my words to Jenny. If anything, I suggested that Jenny might in fact violate what had come to be commonly understood by the early aughts as the standard “Christian” line on sex

for teens: abstinence until marriage. In that particular moment, I suspect that Christianity as a practice was manifested more in my act of care through listening, refraining from judgment, and offering insight into what I considered to be best practices for sexual self-care.

The ride came to an end. For several weeks I actually did not see or speak to Jenny. Though we were friendly when she attended church activities, she and I did not have an especially notable or close relationship.

Then one evening, I received a text message from Jenny asking if I could talk. When I offered to call her, she insisted upon texting, as she “did not want her parents to hear.” Jenny proceeded to describe what had transpired between her boyfriend and her that afternoon. Jenny had engaged in sex with her boyfriend after school. She regretted the experience but was unsure how to process her feelings or what it meant for her going forward. As we texted, I realized quickly that a gap existed between what wisdom I knew to offer and what was available to me within the Christian tradition and specifically within the popular American youth ministry training I had received.

After confirming that Jenny had not been physically coerced into sex, I reviewed with her the most pressing clinical concerns. Had she used a condom? If not, did she know where she could obtain emergency contraception and STI testing? Now that she was having sex, was she aware of the necessary steps she needed to begin taking to maintain her sexual health?

Once those questions were exhausted, however, it was apparent that they were far from satisfactory. Jenny had reached out to me, an adult she was not particularly close with but who did occupy a position of spiritual leadership in her church. She expressed

confusion over the mixed emotions her first sexual experience had evoked, and a sense of shame that she had given in to her boyfriend's pressure despite desiring otherwise. At the same time, Jenny was not presently clear on precisely *what* she now desire for her life as a teenage girl and sexual being. Moreover, she expressed a sense that things were now, somehow, irrevocably *different*, and that she was as well.

What Jenny lacked, even after receiving necessary health information and the requisite liberal/progressive refusal to judge on my part, was two-fold. First, she lacked a formalized network of care that she could engage without shame or fear of being "caught" by parental (or paternalistic) authorities as she embarked upon the often confusing and bumpy road of navigating intimate relationships, desires, and a maturing sexual body. Second, Jenny lacked a way of making integrative meaning out of her experience in a way that affirmed the conflicting emotions she carried. She needed a narrative that would contextualize her experience as essentially *human*, an expression of the vulnerabilities we all carry that are so often heightened in sexual matters. Jenny needed a vocabulary and framework for describing her experience, naming her desires for things to be otherwise (whatever that "otherwise" may represent), and situating herself as a person of value within a larger narrative of a community trying to best work out how to be embodied with one another.

A Theology Adequate for Ministry

At first blush, I want to believe that the church represents just such a formalized network of care. In my own United Methodist tradition, which I shared with Jenny, organized religious communities exist for precisely this reason. "Working out" our own

salvation is a difficult business, and we often falter or find that our best intentions might still not be able to prevent us from encountering pain or disappointment in our most vulnerable moments. Often, it is only through direct experience that we even come to know how intentions, desires, and vulnerability actually interact. Churches provide, in theory, an intergenerational community prepared to shepherd those at different points along the way. Is not sexuality a primary example of how deeply we are in need of such care by, for, and with others?

Likewise, through our theology our faith tradition ideally offers the accompanying integrative framework that allows for the contextualization and signification of complex and challenging experiences and desires. Relatively recent developments in the theology of sexuality have only expanded what is available to those seeking to reflect the holiness of bodies, desires, pleasures, and relationality. Questions of the relationship of sex to love and justice have emerged from within Christianity to challenge longstanding dualisms of flesh and spirit. Moreover, even our most ancient traditions affirm the radically incarnational nature of Christian belief and practice. The human capacity for deep communion with God and others powerfully shapes the potential role of erotic desire and sexual love in the lives of Christians. Such founding theological reflections should, presumably, fund the communal practice of care described above while also suggesting habits of ethical sexuality that reflect the nurture of beloved community.

My conversation with Jenny pushed me to deep reflection. What I wanted to tell her was that she was going to be ok, that teenage sexual experimentation would not doom her for life, nor would it permanently hamper her chances for meaningful life in

community with others. I wanted to have a real conversation with Jenny about what she wanted for her life as a sexual person. In our conversation, I told her that what had happened should prompt her to such considerations—did her experience line up with what she desired? Did Jenny even know what kind of sexual life, be it “active” or “abstinent,” that she wanted? Would she be more deeply considering the kind of partners who would be suitable to this goal? And I wanted to talk with her about how her faith could shape a theological reflection to this end. But for such reflections, I realized, much of what Christian teens know about churchly prescriptions for sexuality amount to “don’t do it until marriage.” Christian speech about sex, in this milieu, is restricted to the ethically proscriptive and predominantly inattentive to the practice of theological reflection.

Project Methodology

These observations form the basis for this project. As an ordained United Methodist minister, I have long carried a special concern for how young people are integrated into ecclesial life and formed as practicing disciples. As a theologian, I am especially concerned with how the languages and epistemologies that fund the work of ministry and discipleship to shape our ability to see, encounter, and reflect upon the world and its challenges. Within the discipline of theology, I find anthropological questions about the pressing nature of personhood especially compelling. Correspondingly, as a feminist, I frequently ask how our theology informs and is informed by the interplay of gender, bodies, power, desire, and relationality. I wonder especially about how vulnerability can be appreciated as an intrinsic part of our nature as relational creatures.

Reflecting upon my conversation with Jenny and the experience that provoked it, I found myself turning to the materials most readily available for theologically considering adolescent sexuality—church-based sexuality education curricula. These programs, an almost uniquely American late-modern Protestant phenomenon, emerged almost in tandem with public school sexuality education programs from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s. Usually authored by a combination of health professionals and clergy or lay youthworkers, the curricula present visions of appropriate adolescent sexual life (or lack thereof) as well as constructions of proper future adult sexuality. This vision for teen sexuality is generally signified by (heterosexual) married life or, at the very least, committed long-term monogamous partnership.

Protestant church-based sexuality curricula, upon which this project will focus, are frequently taught by lay church volunteers or youthworkers as the basis for a retreat weekend, church lock-in, or multi-week study series. Naturally, the character of the instructional experience has as much of a shaping and didactic influence on the participants as the words on the page of the leader's guide. As such, any effort to consider church sexuality education should also take this into account. However, these curricula do represent what theologian Mark Jordan has called the attempts of church institutions to articulate "the tasks of sex education for themselves." Hence the rhetoric on the pages of these curricula, I suspected, might contain some insight as to why I felt so limited in my ability to coherently and theologically reflect with Jenny upon her experience using the wealth of wisdom and practice in the Christian tradition.

Several projects have already been published that examine the particular expression of adolescent sexual regulation in evangelical pop culture. Others trace the

emergence of sexuality education, first in public schools and later in the hazy space between the spheres of public and private occupied by Christian publishing houses. Many of these publishers also happen to produce sex education curricula for public schools. Relatively recent scholarly projects have also engaged sexual education efforts as programs of sexual ethics, advocating for more holistic approaches characterized by a call for more sex-positive attitudes and a special sensitivity to the needs of adolescent girls. Additionally, remarkable studies of sexuality education from the perspective of pedagogy and educational psychology have effectively pointed to the myriad deficiencies in both secular and Christian efforts. An assortment of these projects are included in the reference list of this dissertation. Many of these critiques focus especially upon the commonly behavioralistic and rationalist approaches to sex that emphasize the conveyance of knowledge and “positive decision-making” while failing to engage the issue of desire, embodiment, and especially of female sexuality.

However, largely absent from such treatments is an effort to engage the curricula themselves as rhetorical artifacts capable of revealing something about the shaping roles of speech about sexuality and adolescence in relation to theology. Christianity’s historic efforts to convey its approval and condemnation of various interactions of bodies and pleasures, to rhetorically construct sexuality itself and in so doing constantly renew its authority to declare a meaningful theological anthropology, has also had a significant role in shaping the rhetoric of larger social and cultural categories. Contemporary Christian sexuality education for young people offers a significant site for uncovering larger and persistent theological problems that continue to plague efforts at a coherent theology of

sexuality that adequately attends to human diversity, vulnerability, and capacity for self-transcending communion with one another and with God.

Modern Sexuality Education in America

In 1981, Congress passed the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA). The act marked the first time that federal funds had been mandated for abstinence-based sex education and began almost 30 years of federally-funded abstinence-based education in the United States, included several other funding initiatives, and only ended on a federal level a decade ago.¹ The legislation supported sex education designed to educate for “self-discipline” in order to “address the ‘problem’ of adolescent premarital sexual relations” that was being depicted as *the* central contributor to out of wedlock births and, consequentially, a drain on the country’s entitlement system. AFLA inscribed in federal law, via tax code, the assumption that the primary problem with adolescent sexual intercourse was its occurrence out of wedlock. Whether or not adolescent sexual intercourse was developmentally appropriate or rightfully characterized by access to necessary reproductive healthcare was left unaddressed. AFLA and its consequent federal funding for abstinence-based sex education thus became an example of the success of the Right, who were increasingly seeking to utilize the power of the state to promulgate of a certain set of moral and Christian values.

The passage of the AFLA in 1981 was accompanied by another development in the public discourse around sexuality that would go on to indelibly shape public and private attitudes towards sex and sexuality. In 1981-1982, AIDS was first being

¹ Alesha E. Doan and Jean Calterone Williams, *The Politics of Virginity: Abstinence in Sex Education, Reproductive Rights and Policy*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 27-28.

identified among gay male populations in the United States. Just as the moral panics caused by teen pregnancy among white, middle class girls in the late 1970s sparked widespread calls for public sex education, the AIDS crisis and its perceived connection to “unorthodox sexual activity...revealed also the wider anxieties abroad about the current place of sexuality in our society.”² The AIDS crisis gave conservative groups the opportunity to at once craft a narrative about increasing sexual depravity of American culture as illustrated by the ascendancy of the “gay community,” bemoan the rise of “promiscuity” as a “lifestyle choice,” and reinforce its own rhetoric of sex as desperately dangerous, particularly to young people. The third component enumerated in the previous sentence is particularly ironic and illustrative of the Right’s remarkable capacity for doublespeak. The Right managed to at once draw a sharp distinction between “conservative” sexual values—abstinence until marriage through the preservation of virginity, then the maintenance of a lifelong, divorce-free heterosexual partnership—and “liberal” depravity, characterized by promiscuity, premarital sex, and deviant sexual behavior. The language connoted the first kind of sex as safe and pure, the latter as dangerous and corrupt, and yet in the public forum it would seem that sex itself posed a lethal danger to the well-being of young people, families, and society itself.

In 1996, the Adolescent Family Life Act brought “abstinence only” sexual education into the popular vernacular. However, again it did so not through efforts to reform U.S. education policy, but its tax code and welfare system. The New Right had successfully grasped on to welfare dependence as the new threat to the American way of life. At the heart of this growing threat, the argument went, was unwed teenage single

² Jeffrey Weeks, "Sexuality," (New York: Routledge, 2010).

motherhood. And the answer, so claimed the movement, was to prevent teen sex altogether. As a result, a definition of “abstinence-only” education was written again into the federal tax code and remains in U.S. Social Security code to this day. AFLA rescinded federal funding from any comprehensive sex education program that did not explicitly promote abstinence from sexual activity until marriage. Curricula and programming funded through AFLA were required to address contraception and STI prevention efforts solely in terms of failure rates. The bill again marked the successful inculcation of Evangelical values into American policy and trumped mounting scientific and sociological evidence that such education programs invariably failed to produce desired outcomes.³

Addressing teen pregnancy as directly connected to the social and moral fabric of American society by linking it to the rhetoric of “welfare queens” rather than pedagogical interests or educational policy created a narrative for teen sex that continues to persist. Premarital sex in adolescence invariably leads to pregnancy, which invariably leads to poverty, which invariably leads to the moral and civil degradation of American society. Note the philosophical and theological change here. It is not that sexual activity per se outside of marriage is enough to crumble American values. Rather, the signature problem is the violation of middle-class values, the flaunting of the expectation that young people should desire to be chaste, Christian heterosexuals who marry early, produce a nuclear family headed by a male breadwinner and a female homemaker, and exist independently rather than dependent upon the entitlements provided by state programs.

³ Doan and Williams, 27-28.

Mainline development

By 1996, discussions and debates about teen pregnancy made the topic a popular one of concern for parents, churches, policymakers, and civic groups alike.

Denominations had also begun to tune into the larger conversation. (or a little later, given that mainline denominations not only tend to meet quadrennially, but are perennially several years if not several decades behind developments in secular society) passed statements on human sexuality and sex education and began developing sexuality curricula of their own. Notably, just as conservative politicians were solidifying federal funding for exclusively abstinence-based curricula, mainline churches were putting forth comprehensive sexuality programs. However, after a surge in these programs in the late 1990s, curricular innovation quickly tapered off, perhaps not unrelated to the resurgence of the influence of conservative Evangelicals illustrated by the election of George W. Bush and Republican congressional takeover in 2000:

- In 1987 the Disciples of Christ (DoC) had adopted a resolution stating that “the number of teenage pregnancies is increasing, and it is evident that there is a need for sexuality education for teenagers and their parents,” and therefore “Disciples congregations play a central role in the education of their young people and parents by offering clear and responsible information on human sexuality.” By 1997 the General Assembly had formally developed and adopted formal curricula for use with youth and adults in their congregations.
- In 1983, the Episcopal Church urged its governing body to “develop educational ways by which the Church can assist its people in their formative years (children through adults) to develop moral and spiritual perspectives in matters relating to

sexuality and family life.” In 1989, the AIDS crisis had prompted the Episcopal House of Bishops to request “that models of AIDS education programs be made available by the National Episcopal AIDS Coalition in conjunction with the National Church staff; and request that such models promote abstinence or monogamy as well as candid and complete instruction regarding disease prevention measures, such as use of condoms in sexual intercourse and ending sharing of contaminated needles by intravenous drug users.” Since 1995, U.S. Episcopal churches have commonly utilized a comprehensive curriculum for youth and young adults that includes lessons on “Self, Spirituality, Sexuality, and Society,” originally developed in a local parish in the mid-1980s. Of all the programs examined here, only the denomination’s “Journey to Adulthood” is noted as being “continuously updated” year to year.⁴

- In 1983, the 195th General Assembly of the PC(USA) urged “Presbyterians to support sexuality education programs in families, churches, schools, and private and public agencies.” By 1994, the PC(USA) noted in a resolution that sexuality education is a positive factor in preventing unintended pregnancies and the need for abortion,” calling for comprehensive sex education in public schools, accompanied by “additional sexuality education that reflects the values of the Reformed theological tradition” provided by congregations. In 1998, the PC(USA) published a comprehensive youth sexuality curriculum entitled *God’s Gift of Sexuality: A Study for Young People in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*. Though discussions about an update were held during the 2000 General

⁴ Tracey E. Herzer, *The Journey to Adulthood : [Overview and Sample Pages] : A Program of Spiritual Formation for Young People* (Leeds, MA: LeaderResources, 2010).

Assembly, with the adoption of a plan to reprint the curriculum with an added pamphlet entitled “Sexual Abstinence and Abundant Life,” financial concerns have since been cited as a reason that no new curriculum or reprinting efforts have been undertaken.⁵

- In 1977, the United Church of Christ (UCC) encouraged its denomination bodies to “continue to provide leadership in developing resources concerning human sexuality for appropriate use by various age groups in local churches and to provide consultative services and training for Conference, Associations, and congregations who wish to sponsor programs concerned with human sexuality and family life.” The UCC further distinguished itself from many of its mainline counterparts by announcing a call for reflection on “further understanding of sexual identity; the effects of sex role stereotyping and present economic, legal, political, and other societal conditions based upon gender” and “the meaning of ordination, the criteria for effective ministry, and the relevance of marital status, affectional or sexual preference or lifestyle to ordination or performance of ministry.” In 1999, the UCC joined with the Unitarian Universalists of America to develop a lifelong comprehensive sexuality curriculum entitled *Our Whole Lives*.
- In 1991, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) stated in its Social Statement on Abortion that its “congregations and church schools ought to provide sex education in the context of the Christian faith. Such education, beginning in the elementary years, needs to emphasize values such as

⁵ PRESBYNEWS Mailing List, by Emily Enders Odom, 29 June 2000, [Development of Special Resources and Reprint of Sexuality Curriculum](#), PCUSA News. Long Beach, CA.

responsibility, mutuality, and abstinence from sexual intercourse outside of marriage. Parents should also be prepared to teach sexual responsibility to their children in the home. It is especially important that young men and young women be taught to exercise their sexuality responsibly.”⁶ In 2009, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly reiterated their position, stating “education must begin early and emphasize responsibility and mutuality. Such education should focus on sustained conversation about what is good and what is harmful in ways appropriate to growing maturity levels. It should avoid simply requiring compliance with approved or rejected behaviors. Rather it should emphasize the exploration of why certain behaviors are rejected because they are damaging, why and how some pressures should be resisted, and what differentiates mature and rewarding sexual love from exploitative and demeaning forms. Information about birth control, including the encouragement and support of sexual abstinence, is an important component of responsibility. Such education should engage all in conversation about the shared responsibility of couples to ensure the physical, emotional, and spiritual protection of each person.”⁷

- In 1998, United Methodist clergyperson Mike Ratliff (now a denominational authority) authored the curricula *Let's Be Real: Honest Discussions About Faith and Sexuality* for teenagers, actually preceding the denomination's statement in 2004 that all children “have the right to quality education, including full sex education appropriate to their stage of development that utilizes the best

⁶ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "A Social Statement on Abortion," in *Churchwide Assembly* (Orlando, FL: ELCA Department for Studies of the Commission for Church in Society, 1991), 4-5.

⁷ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "A Social Statement on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," in *Churchwide Assembly* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2009).

educational techniques and insights. Christian parents and guardians and the Church have the responsibility to ensure that children receive sex education consistent with Christian morality, including faithfulness in marriage and abstinence in singleness...” Notably, the statement does not refer to adolescents or youth, only children, and it distinguishes itself among mainline denominations by including explicit reference to a “Christian morality” which includes “faithfulness in marriage and abstinence in singleness.” In a recent article on the UMC website, Ratliff himself acknowledged that efforts to continue any sex education programming for youth on a denominational scale have completely crumbled in the face of a predominance of anxiety and debate around human sexuality and sexual orientation. *Let’s Be Real* has not received a renewal or update. However, a curriculum designed for 5th and 6th graders, authored by clergyperson James Ritchie, was published in 2009 and updated shortly thereafter in 2010. The curriculum spends a significant amount of space affirming, “sex is for married adults” and arguing that the most “Godly” persons elect abstinence until marriage according to “God’s plan.”

What these statements and many like them have in common is an implicit link between crisis, teen sexual behavior, and church contributions to prevention. Congregations express concern that a lack of comprehensive sex education imperils the ability of young people (frequently referred to as “children”) to behave “responsibly” and in line with “Christian morality” when it comes to sexuality. Alternatively, young people are in danger of succumbing to teen pregnancy and AIDS, and therefore churches must rise to meet the challenge of keeping young people safe. For the former, sex education is

a matter of positively inculcating “Christian” sexual ethics (which are assumed to be preapprehended and universal, made most clear in the appeal to abstinence before marriage). For the latter, the church assumes a paternal stance, presuming that the transmission of comprehensive sexual information will achieve its goal of protectionist care. In each, though the mainline calls for sex education tend to be more comprehensive than their Evangelical counterparts, they reflect the rising emphasis on “abstinence” summoned forth in the public rhetoric of the Christian Right.

Biopower

I suspect that it is no coincidence that these anxieties manifest themselves so acutely in adolescent sexuality education. Adolescence, in our modern vernacular, has come to be regarded as the paradigmatic definition of liminality, a conflicted transitional space between childhood and adulthood marked by the chaos of bodily transitions and increasing personal independence and self-definition.⁸ The questions of vulnerability and relationship are crucial to the project of being human, just as they are for determining one’s relationship to the bodies, desires, pleasures, and interpersonal encounters that mark their movement through the world. And, for those engaged in the practice of Christianity, there remains the call to also integrate this self-making into the task of forming and nurturing beloved community.

This dissertation therefore seeks to develop approaches to Christian theological anthropology that attend to contemporary constructions of “youth” or “adolescence” in

⁸ G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence; Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (New York,: D. Appleton and Company, 1904); David F. White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach*, Youth Ministry Alternatives (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005).

relation to desire and sexuality. In the background of this project is the constant influence of Mark Jordan's observations upon the form of biopower, first identified by Michel Foucault, that has come to replace authentic theology in Western Christianity's pronouncements about the role of sex and sexuality in the life of the believer (and, perhaps, the human person in general).

In *The Ethics of Sex*, Jordan argues that the Christian church has largely ceded the authority and content of its speech about sex to national and secular bureaucracies. These bureaucracies "have become ever more efficiently involved in the regulation of citizen-sexuality—in population control, healthy reproduction, or eugenics."⁹ Meanwhile, the church has attempted to advance a theology of sexuality and a corresponding sexual ethic through rhetorical engagement with the impact of the last century's "Sexual Revolution." Such rhetoric can run the gamut from liberal affirmations of authenticity and happier sexual living to conservative condemnations of the "increase in human disorder and degradation."¹⁰ Still, Jordan argues that both perspectives blatantly ignore the rise of "biopower" and the presence of its corresponding national regulation and surveillance of sexuality in church speech about sex. As control has shifted to this new regime of bodily discipline and population control, church speech about sexuality has been voided of its authority. Further, ecclesial preoccupation with sexual "decadence" in fact belies complicity with this shift in power by refusing to examine the role of churches in "trying to accommodate themselves tacitly to the new power over sex." Church members,

⁹ Mark D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex*, New Dimensions to Religious Ethics ; (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 133.

¹⁰ Ibid.

leaders, and their theologians have largely become “docile subjects of the secular bureaucracies for sexual regulation.”¹¹

Jordan’s work highlights the way in which biopower regards adolescence as the developmental period in which proper sexuality is “accomplished” and the transition to (heterosexual) adulthood may be properly undertaken. Desire is appropriately fixed during this stage, leading to the proper performance of our gendered vocations in adulthood. Biopower accomplishes its aims by disciplining this process, foreclosing on the possibility that “desire could be otherwise.” Since the gendered norms of heterosexuality sediment themselves in the category of identity, both the terms and content of that category are likewise foreclosed upon. So, too, are the terms of engagements for desires, bodies, pleasures, and relationships. As both Jordan and Foucault demonstrate, all of this has been reduced to the notions of genital sexuality.

The “slow rhetoric” of adolescence

When he addresses adolescence in *Recruiting Young Love*, Jordan writes of “slow rhetoric.” Slow rhetoric is that which eventually forms character through a multitude of rhetorical inclusions and exclusions. Christian slow rhetoric “allots or withholds love,” creating a community within which certain characters will be welcomed while others will be shunned. Jordan makes the key assertion that slow rhetoric is “not about opinions.” Slow rhetoric cannot be enumerated by simply attending to the strict pronouncements of ecclesial bodies. Instead, slow rhetoric is to be traced through processes of “embrace and

¹¹ Ibid., 134.

abandonment.” Rhetorical speech can “instill a way of conceiving and performing lived possibilities,” but rhetorical silence can be equally effective.⁴

The work of “slow rhetoric” is particularly acute during adolescence. “Youth is subject and object of slow rhetoric, its special study and grand occasion.”⁵ As the object of slow rhetoric, youth is continually refashioned according to broader shifts in cultural preoccupations and panics. “Adolescence,” Jordan and others have shown, is itself a partial product of adult anxieties, a constructed resting place for profligate but unspecified concerns about threats to social order, racial purity, national identity, or economic regime. Take your pick. Adolescence is also a construction of sexual desire itself, the manifestation of proliferating sexual possibility that transcends normative boundaries.⁶ Parents and caregivers casually refer to a young person’s arrival in adolescence by interpreting erratic or charged behavior as a product of “raging hormones.” Sexual experimentation, or at least the desire for experimentation, is presumed to be an intrinsic component of these years. In popular culture, teen sex carries with both risks and alluring reward. Frequently, the dangers of adolescent sexuality are juxtaposed with rhetorical frameworks that reveal undercurrents of normalization; premarital heterosexual sex is “premature,” while non-heterosexual adolescent sex is described as “experimentation.” In its perceived vulnerability, adolescence also exists as a site for naming and foreclosing upon sexual possibilities, both individual and social, even as teen sex is fetishized and exploited for profit.⁷ The very presence of adolescence likewise reinscribe the authority of regimes that demand the discipline of adolescent sexuality towards particular ends. Jordan proposes a corresponding rhetorical analysis that can uncover a means of accounting for this process of construction and regulation.

The stability of the biopower regime is dependent upon such foreclosures. In a heteronormative regime, this means that desire, sex, and sexuality must be constantly policed if their contingent categories are to remain stable. However, the insights of critical theory, particularly from Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu, argue that the process of being a sexual subject is ongoing—a contingent, infinitely-layered set of psychic negotiations and performances.¹² The human subject is deeply vulnerable, and we are misled to believe that sexuality represents any sort of inherent “truth” about a person independent of this process. The very presence of desire suggests the possibility of instability. If church speech about sex as contained within its curricula for adolescents buys into the work of biopower to obscure fundamental human vulnerability, then it might be argued that it has fallen victim to a form of idolatry. It is in the interest of biopower, therefore, to grant desire its particular range of outlets, be they heterosexual or some contingent “deviance,” and collapse them into an understanding of genital sexuality.

Still, for over thirty years, psychologists, sociologists, and educational theorists have argued that much of the adolescent sexual education provided by churches and secular institutions alike has proven markedly insufficient, inattentive to the lived experiences of adolescents, and deeply susceptible to cooptation by competing discourses about the moral acceptability of various sexual acts, preferences, and “lifestyles.”¹³ My

¹² See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans., John B. Thompson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2001); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹³ See Louisa Allen, *Sexual Subjects: Young People, Sexuality and Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Doan and Williams; Michelle Fine, "Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire," *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 1 (1988); Janice M. Irvine, *Talk About Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002);

own experience as a youthworker in a variety of church and parachurch settings and my conversations with ministry colleagues and the young people we serve have only confirmed this claim. Further, engaging this concern in the context of feminist and queer theologies and corresponding theologies of sex and sexuality has led to a further observation—that the deficiencies in adolescent sexual education so aptly identified by secular theorists can also be accompanied by a failure of church-based curriculums to provide theologically robust reflection on bodies, desires, pleasures, and relationships as they relate to the Christian formation of young people.

This project thus makes an effort to determine through genealogy how Christian rhetoric has come to align itself with the control of adolescent populations and the endorsement of particularly modern and heteronormative forms of sexual practice that are often far removed from the ethos of religious habits of celibacy, continence, and chastity that permeate the tradition. By unpacking what Jordan has called the “slow rhetoric” of church speech about sexuality and adolescent sexuality in particular, I seek to recover more authentically Christian insights into human personhood and the shaping roles of desire, bodies, and pleasures in Christian life and practice.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter 1, I will trace the rhetorical strategies of *Good Sex 2.0*, *Our Whole Lives*, and *Created By God*. Though “Christian” in form, the content of the curricula’s theological vocabulary (*imago*, “God’s plan,” “holy”) is largely drawn from the wells of American idealism and moral panic that regard adolescent sexuality as inherently

James T. Sears, *Sexuality and the Curriculum : The Politics and Practices of Sexuality Education*, Critical Issues in Curriculum (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992).

dangerous and, if indulged, potentially deviant. The language of church-based curricula often mirrors the politically charged rhetoric of teen pregnancy epidemics and welfare dependence that successfully entrenched the discursive link between adolescent abstinence and the preservation of the white middle class in the latter half of the twentieth century. A historical survey of contemporary Christian sexual rhetoric demonstrates that tropes of sexual control have frequently accompanied descriptions of ecclesial and state stability under threat. Protestant theological rhetoric especially reflects a Reformed confidence in the role of social institutions to carry out the providential will of God. This influence can be observed in the rise of modern human development and sexological theories that assured the preservation of American ascendancy through the proper heteronormative management of young social and sexual lives.

I show that deploying theological language as a sexual control limits the ability of Christian communities to think reflectively and imaginatively with young people about the role of bodies, desires, pleasure, and erotic relationship in community in a way that preserves vulnerability as a fundamental human good. Further, theology used as sexual control forecloses on our ability to join young people in anticipating forms of loving and just Christian sexuality which fall outside the heteronormative, white vision of the nuclear family that has come to stand in for the fulfillment of the *imago dei* in God's plan for human sexuality.

Early Christian theologies tended to link sexual discipline to the cultivation of piety and carried, at best, an ambivalent relationship to the practice of marriage. The theology of the sexuality education curricula examined demonstrates just how far we have come from these early beginnings. Chapter 2 therefore resembles a genealogical

account of the evolution of Christian sexual rhetoric over time, from its early and complicated relationship with the body to its present role as a handmaiden for particular political, market, and ideological aims. I find that the rhetoric of sexual control has, from its inception, frequently accompanied descriptions of ecclesial and (eventually) state stability in the face of perceived threat. Protestant Christian theologies in particular carry rhetorical tropes especially capable of appropriation by ideological, market, and political aims. Chapter 3 focuses on the influence of this theological heritage and observes its effects in the rise of modern human development and sexological theory. The modern notions of adolescence and “healthy sexuality” emerged concurrently and with a consistent eye towards the role of both in a healthy heteronormative society. I demonstrate the necessity of integrating this genealogy into any effort to mount an effective theological challenge to the message of sexual control that currently characterizes Christian sexual rhetoric.

In response, I suggest that the Christian tradition itself also carries resources for an effective theological challenge to this appropriation of Christian speech to ideological ends at the expense of the needs and experiences of young people. Chapter 4 contends that applying feminist critiques of the classic *imago dei* and expanding upon the desire-love-justice relationship offered in theologies of eros provides a promising starting point for an alternative program of Christian adolescent sexuality education. However, I also argue that this approach could be further strengthened by highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit in reshaping forms of loving human relationship that transcend efforts to simply discipline sexuality in the interest of social stability. This begins with a retrieval of historic understandings of sexual practice and continence as means for deeper

communion with God. Applying feminist revisions of the *imago dei* and expanding upon the desire-love-justice relationship offered in theologies of eros provides a promising theological starting point for an alternative program of Christian adolescent sexuality education. Highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit in reshaping forms of loving human relationship can further transcend efforts to simply discipline sexuality in the interest of social stability.

In Chapter 5, I make an argument for an erotic Trinitarian view of human sexuality, arguing that the community of Trinitarian persons offers an alternative vision for human community. Continuing to highlight the role of the Spirit in relation to eros thus resituates human sexuality within the project of “working out” salvation in Christian community. I conclude by arguing for the role of Christian practices as theological resources for adolescents and adults alike in the development of sexual practices and ethics which foster a loving and just community. Christian practices can therefore serve as effective theological resources for adolescents and adults alike in the development of sexual relationships and ethics that foster a loving and just community as well as care for the specific vulnerabilities of the young.

CHAPTER I

THE EDUCATION OF DESIRE: TEACHING AND TALKING ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY

I began this project by turning to the place where speaking with and to adolescents about sexuality occurs most explicitly in my own context — American Protestant sexuality education curricula. These curricula are designed to target church youth ministries and typically address youth grades 6-12. I wanted to know how and why the theological resources I grasped for in my own practice of pastoral care often eluded coherence and spiritual depth. Instead, the religious literature I had at hand frequently contained an assemblage of ideological pronouncement, public health discourse, behavioralist rationalism, and puritanical moralism.

Still, the presence of these resources at all marks the increasing willingness of the church to at least acknowledge the need to address the role of sexuality in the lives of adolescents and into adulthood. Coming into theological dialogue with these curricula would allow me to consider how the American Protestant church had come to understand itself and the message about sexuality it was to convey. Doing this would also give me a starting point for considering an alternate set of theological foundations.

The Curricula

For my project, I selected three of the most anecdotally popular curricula used in Protestant youth ministries across the country: *Created By God: Tweens, Faith, and Human Sexuality* (Abingdon Press, 2009), *Good Sex 2.0: A Whole-Person Approach to*

Teenage Sexuality and God (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2009), and *Our Whole Lives: Sexuality Education for Grades 10-12* (Unitarian Universalist Association/United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, 2000).¹ The curricula span the theological and ideological spectrum, from conservative Evangelical to liberal Protestant. *Created By God (CBG)* is authored by United Methodist clergyman James H. Ritchie and nurse Nan Zoller and represents what might best be described as a “moderate” view on adolescent sexuality. The curriculum spends a significant amount of time addressing physical maturation and puberty, emphasizing the goodness of burgeoning sexuality while discouraging premarital sex and celebrating the relational intimacy to be anticipated in marriage. Information on contraception and STI prevention is provided in brief, though the medical information that accompanies the section contains several errors, particularly around the cure rates for common sexually transmitted infections.² Homosexuality is briefly addressed, with a quick note that the morality of non-heterosexual practice is ultimately unknown.

Good Sex 2.0 (GS2.0) follows a relatively familiar modern Evangelical script for adolescent sexuality, which will be described in further detail later in this chapter. The authors, Jim Hancock and Kara Powell, are described as youth ministry experts. The curricula itself emphasizes the powerful nature of sexual desire and its potential for negative consequence if indulged outside adult marriage. Relatively little information is given about the body or sexual health, and the curricular excludes instruction on

¹ Eva S. Goldfarb and others, *Our Whole Lives : Sexuality Education for Grades 10-12* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association : United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, 2000); Jim Hancock and Kara Eckmann Powell, *Good Sex 2.0 : A Whole-Person Approach to Teenage Sexuality and God: Leader's Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI/EI Cajon, CA: Zondervan; Youth Specialties, 2009); James H. Ritchie, Jr. and Nan Zoller, *Created by God: Tweens, Faith, and Human Sexuality* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009).

² Ritchie and Zoller, 134.

contraception or STI prevention. Homosexuality is addressed only in the context of a section on various forms of sexual confusions and insecurities and a brief open discussion on whether homosexuals are “made” or “born.”³

Our Whole Lives (OWL) stands apart from the two curricula above for several reasons of both form and content. The curricula was commissioned by the Unitarian Universalist and United Church of Christ publishing houses and is authored by a combination of healthcare professionals and representatives from each tradition. The curriculum is actually comprised of two volumes per age group (spanning childhood to late adolescence and divided by grade level). In the first, actually titled *Our Whole Lives*, a comprehensive sexuality curriculum reflecting public health guidelines is offered, with a professed secular ethos grounded in principles of “self-worth,” “sexual health,” and “responsibility.” Each tradition then has a “faith supplement,” *Sexuality and Our Faith*, which contains ideas for bible study, faith-based discussion, and worship rituals to accompany each curricular session.⁴ The curricula itself is exhaustive in content, describing in detail everything from proper condom use to exercising sexual fantasy. Sexual diversity is presumed and celebrated, as is the likelihood that young people are already choosing to engage in sexual intercourse.

Examining these curricula allowed me to identify several common rhetorical patterns across the varying approaches taken by each text. Described in detail below, the curricular approaches to the anthropology of the adolescent and the nature of sexual desire help fund my turn to historical genealogy, critical theory, and finally to feminist

³ Hancock and Powell, 65.

⁴ Makaanah Elizabeth Morriss and others, *Sexuality and Our Faith : A Companion to Our Whole Lives Grades 10-12* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association : United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, 2000).

theologies of eros, Spirit, and Christian practice in the remainder of the dissertation. The turns I make seek to augment or replace curricular “theologies” that lack sufficient theological depth or insight into the experience of the adolescent and the relationship between sexuality, human personhood, and God shaped by the practice of Christian discipleship.

Bodies Out of Control

In her book *Sexual Subjects: Young People, Sexuality, and Education*, educational theorist Louisa Allen critiques the prevailing ethos present in sexuality curricula designed for young people. Such curricula, she argues, rely upon the construction of adolescent sexuality as dangerous or risky. Addressing this danger is presumed to be particularly urgent due to contingent notions about the adolescent body and its desires. The adolescent sexual drive is portrayed as one “requiring restraint.” The adolescent is “overwhelmed by hormonal urges” and “incapable of ‘rational’ sexual decision-making,” a body “out of control.”⁵

Allen suggests that these curricular discourses render it nearly impossible for adolescents to identify themselves as sexual beings without being caught up in discourses of promiscuity or deviancy. Within the discursive model Allen identifies, to “be sexual” as an adolescent is to give in to the destabilizing, dangerous desire already fomenting under the surface of the adolescent body. Here, fear operates not only as a tactic for adolescent self-regulation, but also as a paranoid adult response to the irrational, uncontrollable adolescent body. If an adolescent names themselves as sexual, s/he gives

⁵ Allen, 64.

linguistic space to a body dangerously out of control. If the only acceptable option afforded by adult-constructed curricula is the denial of sexuality in the interest of preventing an indiscriminate chaos of desire, then the invitation to self-directed critical reflection is severely prohibited. Naming oneself as a sexual adolescent is a 'giving in' to dangerous bodily urges. Hence, controlling what can be said about adolescent sex connotes the containment of sexual chaos.

All three curricula, despite their variations, draw theology into a mix that shares much in common with Allen's portrait of contemporary adolescent sexuality curricula. These shared characteristics can be traced through three movements, all adding up to an establishment of the primacy of regulation as the primary goal of sexual education. As I will show below, significant evidence for an ethos of crisis and containment appears throughout the rationale and content of this project's curricular materials. Though the familiar ghosts of "repressive" Christian morality can be found in each, rattling about in the attic (or being invoked only to be slain), these curricula do not identify in their task the need to develop new ideas about the relationship between theology, sexuality, and Christian practice. Instead, theology is frequently used to authorize the regulatory authority of parents, state, market, scientific and medical discourses over and against the capacity of young people for meaningful theological or critical reflection. These three movements will be examined in the following sections and appear as follows:

1. The establishment of the *imago dei* as the primary lens for understanding human sexuality as well as enumerating a human responsibility to "sexual health."

2. An appeal to "sexual responsibility" contingent upon the acknowledgement of parental authority and the authority of the medical and scientific communities.
3. The centrality of "sexual health" and "wholeness."

Imago Dei

The most striking parallel across all three curricula is a common foundation in a connection between gender, sexuality, and the *imago dei* drawn from Genesis 1. For each curriculum, being “created in the image of God” correlates to being created as sexually desiring, gendered, and intended for binary romantic partnership.

Created By God

CBG opens with a paraphrase of Genesis 1, verses 27 and 31:

Working from a mental image or picture, God created humankind; Out of the Creator's imagination they were created; Male and female God created them...God surveyed all God had made, And declared all of it to be outstanding. Evening and morning marked the sixth day of creation.⁶

The "image of God" is framed as a construction of God's mind, a manifestation of the imagination. "Male and female" are "outstanding" categories that provide the basis for both the *imago dei* and human sexuality. They are "imagined," perhaps a subtle nod to the relatively common postmodern strains of constructivism in cultural discourse. Still, it is God doing the imagining, and so they are also fixed, at least by human standards. This has significant implications for the marital relationship, in which the marital intimacy between a man and a woman is described as comparable to the intimacy between a

⁶ Ritchie and Zoller, 8.

person and God. Here, the *imago dei* invariably has consequence for the (presumed) heterosexual relationship between genders.

CBG again invokes Genesis 1:27 to inform readers that their own "creation" was not "random," but in the "image...of God's character and being, not, of course, of God's physical image, since God is spirit."⁷ The following paragraph states that "the amazing gift of creating life, and the gift of being male or being female, are now your gifts, and are mysteries you can spend a lifetime exploring and enjoying."⁸ God's image is creative, and the existence of distinct genders whose collective efforts can initiate reproduction thus reflects this creative capacity.

The objectification of sexual knowledge as a contingency of the *imago dei* is a sentiment echoed in *CBG*, which reminds readers,

You were created by God! And God is still at work in you, moving you along the path designed for you from your creation, through childhood, and now towards adulthood. Yes, you've been moving along that path since you were born, but now it's time for you to pick up speed! In these next few years you'll be making major changes towards becoming an adult: how you look, how you feel, how you think, and how you relate with other persons. / So how does 'sex' come in? God made us male or female, to live and love, to form relationships and families, and gave us the privilege of creating new human life. God gave us the gift of our sexuality--our maleness or femaleness--and like all of God's creation, said 'It is good.'⁹

God "moves people along," and sex education is necessary to illuminate certain knowledges that shape this unfolding.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 83.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰ For *CBG*, knowledge of God plays out most vividly through the apprehension of God's plan, expressed in *CBG* in everything from menarche, to menopause, to male/female attraction.

Readers are told that they have "always been sexual" because they were "destined for maleness or femaleness" from conception.¹¹ They are then told that "males and females complete God's design for wholeness. We need each other to create new life, physically."¹² The divinely-imagined fixity of male/female gender is also reinforced by an appeal to totality, as *CBG* informs readers,

When it comes to gender, you're either male or female; you're either a boy or a girl. Gender is not something you have by degrees. You can't be more girl or less girl, more boy or less boy, than someone else...What you need to know...is that you are either all one or all the other--all male or all female.¹³

Students are reassured that this gendered sexuality is a gift from God, and that "the information you will find in this book is intended to help you be proud and confident about being female or male."¹⁴ Sexuality is about *being* female or *being* male, as an expression of God's creative imagination that in turn characterizes the *imago dei* in human beings. The chapter's introductory overview clearly states its intention to present necessary information on the human reproductive process. However, the chapter begins by first invoking Genesis 1:27 and the *imago dei* in order to communicate to readers that adolescence will mark a period of increased attraction to "the other sex." In the transition to adulthood, this attraction likely will result in the selection of a marriage partner, the initiation of sexual intercourse, and if desired, the creation of children. It is within this context that the nature of gender and embodied gender relations are discussed.

¹¹ Ritchie and Zoller, 83.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 79.

¹⁴ Ibid.

In *CBG*, heterosexual marital love is the "ultimate," literally the highest point of intimacy, evocative of touching heaven in its juxtaposition with the love between humans and God. The text describes a set of progressive "degrees of intimacy," culminating in the "really focused intimacy" illustrated "with God and with one's spouse." Readers are directed to a diagram of a triangular "cone", which illustrates ascending (and narrowing) levels of intimate relationship. At the base is "Casual acquaintances," followed by "Friends," then "Intimate friends," and at the pinnacle, "God and the person to whom you commit your life." By spending time together and getting to know one another, "intimacy can happen with God or between any two people who are willing to work at it."¹⁵ Prior to descriptions of physical reproductive processes, *CBG* encourages readers to understand the concept of intimacy. Intimacy, defined as "a close relationship, a growing and deepening friendship", is "the basis for close friendships and, ultimately, for love--among friends and between a husband and a wife."¹⁶

The binaries relied upon by *CBG* use the *imago dei*, gender, and God's plan for human intimacy to enact a set of subtle regulations. Intergender relationality is presumed to provide an eventual glimpse into what is commonly portrayed as the highest form of interhuman communion, marriage and its expression in heterosexual marital sexuality. God designs human beings with an intentional plan for their growth and development, and it is crucial that students come to realize the accompanying sexual knowledges necessary for a proper engagement with their gender, corresponding sexual selves, and respective social institutions designed to mediate each. Students are assured over and

¹⁵ Ibid., 72.

¹⁶ Ibid., 73.

over that their created nature is a sign of God's plan.¹⁷ Their reproductive biology reflects broader theological meanings and reinforces the compatibility of those meanings with medical and scientific advice. All changes experienced in puberty are to be encountered as "normal," a step on the way to the ultimate purposes of a "sexually healthy" adulthood epitomized by heterosexual marital commitment and a thorough understanding of their bodily processes and "natural" sexual desires, the fully-realized *imago dei*.

Good Sex 2.0

As in *CBG*, *GS2.0* also opens with a reflection on the *imago dei*. The unit offers a bible study addressing Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24 in the context of a discussion of Mark 10. The study asserts that the creation of men and women in God's image has direct implications for the marital relationship. The "one flesh" of heterosexual marriage reflects the biblical description of the image of God. This divinely ordained and divinely reflected institution is under direct attack both in the encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees and in the contemporary culture of shifting sexual values.¹⁸

GS2.0 argues that Jesus was "countercultural," valuing intact families while indicting Jewish authorities "with unlimited power" who "wanted even more power to do exactly what they pleased."¹⁹ Sewn into this argument, if a bit clumsily, is an effort to make gender "equality" an original component of the *imago* reflected, interestingly, not in a description of Jesus' relation to women (which *GS2.0* never actually brings up in the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁸ Hancock and Powell, 36-37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

course of the curriculum), but in Jesus' strengthened pronouncement against divorce. The lesson transitions from the discussion of divorce to the question of whether men are "better" than women or women are "better" than men, suggesting that a certain egalitarianism is necessary for successful marriages.

For *GS2.0* the *imago dei* defines marriage, marriage defines gender relations, and both are threatened with destabilization by those who want to "do exactly what they pleased." The intact family, held together by heterosexual marriage, thus signifies the most basic of anthropological truths: formation in the image of God via binary gendered relationship.

Our Whole Lives

OWL makes special appeals to relationality and knowledge in its consideration of the link between God's image and gender difference. The curriculum affirms sexuality as a "vital dimension" of our "God-given" capacity to "respond to, and be in relationship with, others and the world around us."²⁰ The *imago dei* lends to sexuality the definition of a sensate expression of pleasure in human relationality, coupled with the capacity to respond to and investigate the stimuli it offers. The providential nature of sexuality and its placement within the goods of creation transforms sex into a rhetorical object, a knowledge to be explored and investigated. We can know this because "we are physical as well as spiritual and intellectual beings, and we have senses through which we can delight in the beauty of creation."²¹

²⁰ Morriss and others, 117.

²¹ Ibid.

As an object of creation, sexuality contains an implied element of futurity. Sexuality "unfolds." It "blossoms." Sexuality is also something to be "explored," especially when it comes to the exploration of one's gender and sexual identities.²² As part of the "created world," sexuality has been declared good.²³ By exploring one's sexuality, knowledge increases and sexuality unfolds. In its version of the *imago dei*, *OWL* contains an undercurrent of divine legitimation for the construction of sexuality as a certain set of knowledges. Sexual knowledge has a role in the creative unfolding of human self-actualization in time. Sexual knowledge is not itself created by human beings, but somehow bestowed in a preexistent, preapprehended form, by God. Human beings reflect that bestowal in their capacity to respond to and explore their unfolding sexualities.

OWL also makes an appeal to the connection between personal ethical discernment, the acquisition of sexual knowledge, responsibility, and the *imago dei*. In so doing, the curriculum highlights a particularly liberal preference for the connection between personal rationality and God:

Throughout these workshops, [the leader should] reintroduce the concepts that we are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27) and that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Therefore, we have the responsibility to treat ourselves and others with care and respect and not to push others or ourselves or let ourselves or let ourselves be pushed into behavior that feels wrong or uncomfortable. / In our responsibility, we are accountable to God, to ourselves, and to others. Knowing that we are accountable for what we say and do brings us to recognize the tremendous importance of our decisions and actions related to sexuality. In making choices about what we feel comfortable doing or how we choose to be influenced by outside culture, God gave us each free will.

²² Ibid., 148.

²³ Ibid., 117.

We have the power and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the wisdom to make healthy choices and to discern what is appropriate and what is not.²⁴

For *OWL*, there is an implicit human accountability in the *imago dei*. Young people who embrace the *imago dei* within them must attend to the matter of "making choices about what we feel comfortable doing" and not "pushing" oneself or others into behavior that "feels wrong or uncomfortable." Decisions and actions have "tremendous importance," and we are accountable to "God, to ourselves, and to others" to make "healthy decisions."²⁵

In the *OWL* course unit "Reproductive and Sexual Health Care," leaders are instructed to "Remind students of the story in Genesis 1:27. They are created in the image of God, so their sexuality is a reflection of God's own creativity and delight in creation."²⁶ One of the few direct references to the discipline of theology in any of the curricula, *OWL* goes on to offer, "From a theological perspective, then, sexuality and the maintenance of sexual health are part of honoring the reflection of God's image that is in each person...Maintaining one's sexual health is part of honoring the reflection of God's image within us."²⁷ Students are reminded again and again that they are made in the image of God, and that God desires them to be "healthy." Within this paradigm, human sexual behavior takes on significance as an informed response to the creativity of God and the human connection to the *imago dei*.

²⁴ Ibid., 185.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 117.

²⁷ Ibid., 135.

Sexual health in the Image of God

All three curricula label this as the pursuit of "sexual health," characterizing "sexually healthy" behavior as a form of worship. The links established here between the *imago dei* and male-female relationships ideally expressed in marriage in *OWL* is given a further qualification as correspondent to the criteria of "health." Choices for abstinence or committed, covenantal sexuality with a corresponding set of hygienic, prophylactic and contraceptive practices are "healthy," while premarital sex or other forms of "risky" sexual experimentation are "unhealthy."²⁸ In both CBG and *GS2.0*, "healthy" sexuality also connotes "healthy" Christian discipleship. The reproduction of these "healthy" sexual values in behavioral choices indicates adolescent commitment to Christian practices of witness and proclamation as well as their acceptance of the curriculum's dominant definition of marriage. Students' sexual lives (or *abstinent* lives) are tied to their evangelical presence among their peers and provide evidence of their personal commitments to the gospel.

The greatest expression of the *imago dei* appears to be a modern, married, "sexually healthy" adult with an appropriate sense of the value of familial and parental authority. Is "sexual responsibility" properly understood as faithfulness to parental and ecclesial pronouncements on what God desires for teenage sexual behavior (or lack thereof)? What is the character of the God invoked in these curricula, and what is the relation of that character to the adolescent human being? It would seem, above all, that God's character is most notable as a guarantor of rightly-ordered being and behavior, which is in turn dictated by the priests of medicine and market. The God these curricula

²⁸ Hancock and Powell, 202-203.

want their students to know is one who regulates bodies and their sexualities, directing a proper path to sexual health and recharacterizing obedience as "responsibility." We will return to this trope in the final section.

Sexual Responsibility

Situated about halfway through the *Good Sex 2.0* curriculum is a section devoted to the question "How far is too far?" The section suggests that students wish to know the degree of physical sexual activity they may undertake before God will be "mad" at them. In response, the session guide and accompanying DVD inform students that they may "go as far as you wish, but before you lust." While avoiding the outright injunction to abstain from premarital sex, the curriculum manages to set up a paradigm in which lust and sexual desire are essentially the problematic urges for unmarried sexual activity made paradigmatic in sexual fetishization and compulsion. Both the will and body seem to collude in tempting teenagers away from divinely-ordained conjugal sex and towards the disordered passions of unmarried sexuality—a relinquishing of moral agency in favor of sin. Lust, as noted above, is the "desire for a forbidden sexual relationship." However, practices of mutual accountability in the practice of premarital abstinence are proposed as a way out. Later in the curriculum, students are told to identify individuals that would help them remain "accountable" to their commitments to avoid sexual temptation "until you hear 'Here Comes the Bride' on your wedding day."²⁹

The term "responsibility" appears frequently in *GS2.0*, and similar sentiments run through all three texts. Along with direct injunctions to "responsible" behavior, there are

²⁹ Ibid., 165.

also relational appeals to accountability and ongoing reminders of expectations placed upon students by guiding authorities, including God, parents, peers, and the church.

Readers are told that it is quite clear that something has "gone wrong with the appetite" for sex:³⁰

In the first century, moral standards were generally pretty loose, and chastity was regarded as an unreasonable and unattainable standard. Paul, however, would not compromise. His definition of sanctification here [1 Thessalonians 4:3-7] is avoiding sexual immorality and learning to control our bodies in a way that's holy and honorable. But Paul also includes another component in his definition, one that smacks of responsibility: doing no harm to our sisters and brothers. You may not have to look any further than your own youth group to see out-of-control people taking advantage of their brothers or sisters in Christ. Pity.³¹

The curricula often portray responsibility as a matter of controlling the body and its appetites in the interest of restoring a lapsed modern culture. In *GS2.0*, the ethos for the entire sex education endeavor is couched in the question, "So how do we help our students understand and enjoy and take responsibility for their sexuality? How do we equip them for life in the world where they live instead of some Neverland where children don't wrestle with sexuality?"³² "Taking responsibility" when it comes to sexuality is presumed to be a struggle, and a dangerous one at that, for the modern world is no "Neverland."

That practice of control is commanded as one of worshipful obedience to God's will. *CBG* makes a similar appeal. *CBG* readers are told that as an adolescent, Jesus was "learning to live responsibly." The *CBG* curricula opens with the story of a young Jesus, found by his parents in the temple after a frantic search. After describing Jesus' own

³⁰ Ibid., 202-203.

³¹ Ibid., 187.

³² Note that, while the curriculum is explicitly directed at students in late adolescence, they are referred to here as "children." *ibid.*, 31.

coming of age, *CBG* immediately draws readers into a discussion of their need to "put an end to childish ways" and assume a role of increasing responsibility in their families. This is marked by the increasing moderation of their behavior, and youth are reminded that this means no more temper tantrums or leaving their rooms in disarray. An emphasis is placed on the increasing amount of change being experienced, and readers are assured again that this change is part of "God's plan":

Welcome to adolescence! You are growing and changing, becoming the adult God plans for you to be.³³

CBG tells its young readers they are emerging into a new set of responsibilities. Navigating the challenges of adolescence successfully requires wisdom, and the family unit is the primary site for this transition. The sexual health of teenagers, and their practice of "responsible" decision-making, is located in direct relation to their current and future families, with "God at the center of your life."³⁴ This curricular structure communicates a definition of "responsibility" that reinforces the need for youth to understand that sexual health emerges from the honoring of their accountability to parents and to God. As the curriculum proceeds, readers are frequently reminded that their sexual education has been designed to help them make decisions appropriate to their anticipation of an eventual lifelong committed marital relationship and family of their own.

CBG admonishes its young audience, telling them that they must learn to realize that their actions affect others, "as Jesus did." This includes decisions about the use of their bodies, sexually and otherwise. Tellingly, the connection between responsible

³³ Ritchie and Zoller, 20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

living, the anticipation of external consequences, and the growing moral agency of adolescents are all reminiscent of the essentially American, middle class values of "goal-setting" and having a "plan for your life."

You're learning to live responsibly too, becoming more aware that what you do affects many persons, not just yourself. To do that, you need information and understanding in order to grow in wisdom as Jesus did. You must set goals for yourself and plan for your life. And you must carefully choose your mentors and life-teachers. You're recognizing that life is complicated, asking questions is crucial, and putting God at the center of your life is essential. / In all this, you will want to be more independent, to make your own decisions, and to take greater control of your life. And for that you need wisdom in all areas, especially about your self and your bodies.³⁵

While only hinted at in the opening sections, *CBG* later becomes more directive, exhorting students to premarital abstinence as the appropriate expression of their adolescent sexual responsibility:

Abstinence is not having intercourse between now and when you are married. Your family and your church strongly urges you to make that decision, even while they recognize that you are becoming physically capable of sexual intercourse, and that you now experience sexual arousal or excitement. Sexual intercourse is for married adults.³⁶

The curriculum then equates the failure to be abstinent as "setting yourself up to feel guilty," which is "foolish."³⁷ Premarital sex is considered a betrayal of God's plan for long-lasting intimate relationships and is presumed to have vague but negative consequences for "many other people who stand to be affected if you make the decision to have sexual relations when you are young."³⁸ Choosing to abstain instead is an "act of kindness--toward yourself, toward that person for whom you have special feelings" and

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 102.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

other peripheral parties, presumably those represented in the previous conversations on family.

Likewise, in *GS2.0*, "Learning to control our bodies in a way that's holy and honorable" is a component of the "responsibility" to honor God with one's body by refraining from sexual intercourse. Any detrimental consequences from sexual intercourse are described as stemming from the rejection of this primary command. As support, students are introduced to the story of David's affair with Bathsheba. The curriculum uses the biblical account as an example of "failed sexual responsibility," indicated by the "severe punishment" David faced for "neglecting his responsibility to God." The underlying theme takes premarital or extramarital sex as inherently problematic and presumes the students share this understanding. It requires no comment in the curricular lesson. Instead, the question of responsibility is framed as an illustration of the natural consequences of deciding to engage in extramarital sex. David's moral failure was the willful disregard of God's command and his unwillingness to admit that extramarital sex would invariably yield disaster for others.³⁹

Ethics and the discernment of sexual knowledge

In a section entitled "Adolescence+Freedom=Responsibility," *CBG* tells readers,

We want you to have the correct information so you can make wise decisions about your behavior and your treatment of others. Your response then is your Christian witness and can affect your health and well-being and the health and well-being of others.⁴⁰

³⁹ Hancock and Powell, 192.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

The theme of sexual discernment as Christian witness is also crucial for the *OWL* approach to human sexuality. The relationship between "sexual health" and sexual knowledge deeply grounds the curriculum and its corresponding vision of Christian praxis. God is properly worshipped when sexual knowledge finds expression and engagement through ethical decision-making, and such worship practices are made known in sexually healthy bodies. Sexuality itself is held in the body, something that "unfolds" and is to be known.

Sexual knowledge, correspondingly, results in a potential increase in "sexual health." The curricula generally expect "sexual responsibility" to be best understood when knowledge and health are in proper relationship. The project of sexual education is a process of students learning about bodies and sexual "expression." Students light candles representing their "desire for sexual health," as a reminder that "God is with us in that desire" and that "God knows our bodies intimately and wants us to know ourselves as well."⁴¹

Like *GS2.0*, the *OWL* curriculum also deploys the David and Bathsheba story (2 Samuel 11:1-12:23) in a conversation on responsibility as a demonstration of failed sexual knowledge and its effects on ethical behavior. Here, the "ability to create life, like God" is "a responsibility not to be taken lightly." The curriculum presents the David and Bathsheba vignette as a "poignant and tragic" story of "a couple not remembering" the gravity of sexual reproduction and its consequences. The narrative of compounding sexual consequences is juxtaposed with an illustration of proper regard for a divinely-ordained system of decision-making. A presentation of feminine wisdom figures follows

⁴¹ Morriss and others, 192.

the David and Bathsheba story to introduce a unit on STI prevention. Students are reminded,

We have the responsibility to make decisions to express our sexuality in healthy ways because...our spiritual physical beings are sacred temples of God...If we decide to express our sexuality in unhealthy ways, we have to live with the natural consequences of that decision--a broken heart, someone else hurt, a physical illness, perhaps even death...

Note the contrasting transition that follows

Yet, God still loves us. If we ask, God will give us both the strength to face those consequences and the opportunity to make more healthy choices in the future...We all have the love of God no matter what our decisions have been.⁴²

God and the medical establishment have lined out effective strategies for contraception and STI prevention. Elsewhere in *OWL*, students are to be informed that discerning what choices they will make about what they are "comfortable" with sexually should be understood as an expression of free will that is assisted by the Holy Spirit. That Spirit grants "the wisdom to make healthy choices and to discern what is appropriate and what is not." "Healthy" as an appellation is extended to include "sexual behaviors" that are "comfortable and right for us."⁴³

OWL carefully avoids naming God's disapproval of specific acts. However, the curriculum does describe the failure to pursue "healthy" sexuality as a rejection of the image of God. The existence of God as judge (even if loving) thus serves as the liminal pivot point between healthy and unhealthy sexuality. The curriculum simultaneously affirms God's abiding love while nonetheless binding God's judgment to that of medical and scientific authorities.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

Likewise, in *GS2.0* and *CBG*, all such guilty disaster can be avoided if young people first recall the need for wisdom to make decisions (or rather, the decision for abstinence) in the pursuit of sexual health. This wisdom is best sought from authority figures, especially their parents, who provide a conduit for the plans already set out by God:

Communication is key to positive change and growth. The healthiest adolescents are those who are able to communicate with adults who care about them, especially their parents. And, those same adolescents are least likely to engage in potentially destructive behaviors (like drug and alcohol use, sexual experimentation, and taking unnecessary physical risks), and most likely to demonstrate respect for themselves and others.⁴⁴

GS2.0 makes frequent distinctions between “Christians” and “people who aren’t Christians” by asking student participants to consider how the sexual behavior of Christian teens affects the external perceptions of “regular” teens. Participants are told that “there’s no such thing as a sexually inactive teenager because all teens deal with the opposite gender, their own bubbling hormones, and more or less intense sexual desires.”⁴⁵ One session describes three teens engaged in fantasy. The first teen is titillated by a soap opera sex scene, the second looks at a swimsuit edition of a popular sports magazine, and the third daydreams about the arrival of her crush in her bedroom. The presentation of these stories is followed by the reading of Matthew 5:27 and the suggestion that Jesus has defined lust as “imagining a forbidden sexual relationship” (implied to be extramarital sex).

The participants are then asked whether they believe that the teens portrayed in the vignettes were lusting. After some discussion, the handbook then instructs the leader

⁴⁴ Ritchie and Zoller, 18-19.

⁴⁵ Hancock and Powell, 125.

to tell participants that “Paul offers no middle ground between offering ourselves to God and offering ourselves to sin.” In particular, “it’s a daily and ongoing decision to offer the parts of our bodies to God, instead of to sin.” This is in turn followed by two questions: “Why does God care about how [the teens depicted] respond to their sexual desires?” and “If [the teens described] wanted to learn from someone else what it means to control your own body, what examples might they turn to?”⁴⁶

Again, the implication of this session appears to be that sexual fantasy, encountered alone, is ultimately a matter of the body. The body is where desire originates, fomenting a lust that opposes the divine will requires control. The response to sexual desire is the discipline of the body. In the closing paragraphs of the lesson, students are asked to contemplate the notion of having died with Christ and charged to “set their heart on things above” as laid forth in Colossians 3:1-4. “How do you think setting your heart on things above,” they are asked, “might affect your sexual imagination?”⁴⁷ The body itself has been set at odds with God’s will and the salvation found in Christ. As in primitive Christianity, it must be mastered if spiritual ascent is to occur.

Relationality, sin, and the body

CBG also suggests that adolescent bodies are temporarily inscribed with the reality of broken human relationality. However, in a modern turn, the consequences are not found in universal and unrelenting original sin, but rather the premature appropriation of sexual desire outside the human vocation of marriage. “Sexual intercourse,” Ritchie

⁴⁶ Ibid., 131.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 129-131.

admonishes, “is for married adults.”⁴⁸ Adolescents are not called to marriage. Instead, according to *CBG*, they are called instead to engage in abstinence, “not having intercourse between now and when you are married.”⁴⁹ The reason offered is based in this idea of intimate relationship. “Abstinence allows for relational intimacy to develop and maturity to occur... Young persons who have sexual intercourse end up missing out on all of the talking that leads to intimacy. Guilt and embarrassment prevent them from talking with each other about sex or anything else. Sexual intercourse is a good gift, but when this could gift is used unwisely, it can destroy intimacy.”⁵⁰

CBG offers “some reasons for abstinence”:

“Contracting one or more sexually transmitted diseases...

Uncommitted sex means one is taking advantage of the other.

You will miss the intimate relationship God intends for us with our life partner.

Pregnancy can happen. Are you prepared--emotionally and financially--to be a parent now?

The younger the mother, the greater possibility of pregnancy and delivery complications.

Your life dreams and plans will be drastically changed.”⁵¹

CBG's reasons are not far off from its recollection of the Genesis narrative in his description of intimacy. Essentially, unmarried adolescents who become sexually active reenact the Fall. In so doing, they inevitably thwart the ethical and relational aspects of

⁴⁸ Ritchie and Zoller, 102.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 103.

“God’s plan.” Married sexuality (or perhaps better, adult married bodies), it can be implied, enacts redemption and reconciliation.

In its proposed alternative, *CBG* encourages readers to separate bodily sexual desire from the concept of emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy is defined as " a close relationship, a growing and deepening friendship." *CBG* then directs the reader to a triangular "cone", which illustrates ascending (and narrowing) levels of intimate relationship. At the base is "Casual acquaintances," followed by "Friends," then "Intimate friends," and at the pinnacle, "God and the person to whom you commit your life." *CBG* refers readers to the "degrees of intimacy" and the "really focused intimacy" illustrated "with God and with one's spouse." Readers find that "intimacy can happen with God or between any two people who are willing to work at it" through spending time together and getting to know one another.⁵² Intimacy is "the basis for close friendships and, ultimately, for love--among friends and between a husband and a wife."⁵³

Perhaps most notably, in *CBG* God’s plan *evidences* itself in the emergence of specifically heterosexual desire:

And now, entering puberty, your distinct maleness or femaleness really begins to show and your interest in 'the other sex' grows. That's God's plan!...As an adolescent moving into puberty, you *will* begin to have increased interest in the other sex. You *will* find that you like being with others--quite a change from just a few years before *when boys and girls often want nothing to do with each other!* Probably starting with group events, teens then begin to date, and later to enjoy the closeness of holding hands, dancing, hugging, and kissing.⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid., 72.

⁵³ Ibid., 73.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 83-84.

For these curricula, both Christian identity and sexual health are contingent upon the possession of appropriate sexual knowledge and its expression through "responsible" behavior—depicted as the delay of sexual activity until heterosexual marriage and the primacy of a higher, spiritual form of intimacy over the unpredictable and perilous whims of the body. Marriage forms the ideal basis for an antidote to the brokenness of fallen human sexuality. It is in increasing levels of dyadic relationship, culminating in marriage, that one can witness the repair of fragmented human sociality. Notable, therefore, is the emphasis upon the link between the relational and the ethical found within marriage. Disobedience and “poor decisions” can lead to multiple forms of health and unhealth, both bodily and social.

Health and Wholeness

In *CBG*, the body itself reveals the work of God: "This whole journey through puberty started with the work of that special timing mechanism, the pituitary gland, and the hormone signals it is sending through your body right this very minute. Pretty amazing, God's plan! It's all normal--and so, by the way, are you!"⁵⁵ The refrains of “normal” and “It’s God’s plan!” are common throughout, applied at various moments to menopause, nocturnal emissions, love, and procreation.⁵⁶

Sexuality, therefore, is to be understood as the embodied manner in which God calls human beings to relationality, and sexual health is best affected when bodily desire is directed to the desire for emotional intimacy with another.⁵⁷ The curriculum makes

⁵⁵ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 54, 62.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 7, 73.

frequent allusions to the how differences between boys and girls draw them to interest in one another. Sexual difference also forms the basis for emotional and intellectual connection, for it inspires boys and girls to learn about each other. The problem, as Ritchie describes it, arrived in the abuse of difference.

In an appeal to Genesis 2:15-25, *CBG* teaches that the first Adam had a need for a partner, "someone with whom he could carry on a conversation." And so, God creates Eve as the first woman. *CBG* does not mention Adam's rib, but it does stress the importance of Eve's difference, characterized by her female gender. Gender differences "gave [Adam and Eve] something to talk about!"⁵⁸ *CBG* also notes the level of comfort with which Adam and Eve experienced their own nakedness before God and one another.

However,

Adam and Eve didn't stay comfortable [with their nakedness and difference before God and each other]. They made poor decisions, disobeyed God, and their relationship with God and with one another began to fall apart. Nakedness and their bodies were suddenly an issue, and they quickly covered their naked bodies. When Adam and Eve gave into temptation, their relationship with God broke down; their differences became an embarrassment to them. They lost the intimacy, both with God and each other.⁵⁹

In an interesting spin on the Augustinian approach to the sexual body as the mirror of humanity's Fall, *CBG* writes that "somewhat like Adam and Eve allowed their actions and their differences to break their intimacy, so the growth process" can cause boys and girls to drift apart from one another.⁶⁰ The curriculum attributes the drift apart to competition between genders, which "calls for winners and losers" and is illustrated in how young people compare themselves to one another in order to "decide who is better."

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

From this, we might infer that the changes in young persons' bodies that occur in puberty do not reflect the disordered state of human sin, but of broken (hetero)sexual relationship and intimacy.

Healthy relationships, healthy bodies

Theorist Linda Singer has written that, in modernity, “rhetorical metaphors of sickness and health dominate the representation of the social.”⁶¹ Christian history contains not only a long tradition of ambivalence towards the body and its desires, but also a well-developed language for the instability of social and ecclesial power linked to sexual chastity or transgression. In these curricula, we can witness a tying together the theological language of the *imago dei* with the contemporary rhetorical imagery of “health,” “unhealth,” and “wholeness” to describe proper ethical and Christian practice that extends far beyond the ecclesial community and into the body itself.

In a series of sessions in *GS2.0*, participants are asked to catalogue the “sexual secrets” that are making them “sick.”⁶² These “secrets” include, in the same list, “Compulsive Masturbation, Pornography, Sexual Fetish, Pregnancy, Peeping Tom Voyeurism, Nonstop Fantasizing, Sexual Harassment, Rape, Sexual Abuse, Irresponsible Flirting.” The lesson that includes this catalogue asks students to consider their sexual “struggles” in relation to their “responsibilities” to God and others. The catalogue activity concludes that session, so that the act of confession (named as such in the

⁶¹ Linda Singer, Judith Butler, and Maureen MacGrogan, *Erotic Welfare : Sexual Theory and Politics in the Age of Epidemic*, Thinking Gender. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 27.

⁶² Jim Hancock and Kara Eckmann Powell, *Good Sex 2.0 : What (Almost) Nobody Will Tell You About Sex : Student Journal* (Grand Rapids, MI, El Cajon, CA: Zondervan ; Youth Specialties, 2009), 122.

activity) confirms not only sexuality's interference with the will, rhetoricized in a language of health and sickness.

Sexual abstinence, understood as the restraint from sexual intercourse with other bodies, comes to serve as a primary signifier for teenage fidelity to proper divine (God) and earthly (parental, medical) authorities. Unhealthiness is signified by a poor regard for one's loved ones, and thus the choice to have premarital sex is fashioned as a moral and spiritual failing as well. Recalling the "cone" of intimacy found in *CBG*, God's *imago dei* is effectively inconceivable outside of a proper regard for both authority figures and the divine plan for one's future spouse, with grave implications for the health of society itself.

This is not exclusive to especially "conservative" or "body negative" approaches to sexuality. In its effort to distinguish itself from curricula more deeply saturated with explicitly moralistic overtones, the *OWL* comprehensive approach leads with a commitment to "sexual health" directly tied to its interpretation of the *imago dei* and linked to the communication and application of sexual knowledge in ethically responsible ways. This, *OWL* asserts, is worship.

An early unit invites participants to speak the following litany:

We have free will to make decisions to express our sexuality in healthy ways. We can choose to express our sexuality in ways that lead to a healthy life, or we can choose to express our sexuality in ways that lead to physical and emotional sickness and even to death...If we decide to express our sexuality in unhealthy ways, we have to live with the natural consequences of that decision--a broken heart, someone else hurt, an unwanted pregnancy, a physical illness, perhaps even death. Yet, God still loves us. If we ask, God will give us both the strength to face those consequences and the opportunity to make more healthy choices in the future...⁶³

⁶³ Morriss and others, 146.

God's image is found "inside" each person. Sexuality expresses the *imago* and requires care and nurture if a person is to be rightfully faithful to God. Part of this worshipful attention is physical, so that "maintenance of sexual health" implies the prevention of unplanned pregnancy and the transmission of STIs. The engagement with scientific and medical prescriptions for "health" is described as a form of Christian practice, and effective discernment of sexual health needs is understood within the larger effort to know God. "Free will" is invoked, affirming that the ethical significance of human sexuality is centered on the relationship between "decisions" and the "expression" of sexuality. Such expression is undertaken as a matter of behavioralism--it is "expressed" by choice, and that expression is likewise a reflection of human free will. Sexuality is therefore portrayed as something innate, existing within the person, latent without expression. Behavior—ethical choice—manifests this hidden, divinely given knowledge.

The "thread of sexual wholeness"

In *GS2.0* and *OWL*, the emphasis on health is paired with the use of language of "wholeness."⁶⁴ For *GS2.0*, wholeness is tied directly to the idealization of family structures. *OWL*'s more ethically rationalistic approach, with its commitment to comprehensive health information, insists that one needs both a just ethical framework and appropriate set of scientific and hygienic knowledges to be sexually whole. Neither curriculum explicitly defines "wholeness," but the casting of the term in line with questions of health and unhealth suggests several shared meanings. The persistent

⁶⁴ The more moderate curriculum of *CBG* avoids the term altogether, whereas it is particularly loaded with meaning for the two sitting on either sides of the "liberal/conservative" spectrum.

linking of "wholeness" to health evokes the question of bodily integrity, both personal and social.

OWL tells readers that "Sexuality is a gift that calls us to wholeness as individuals." The statement follows with the assertion that "we know the costs to ourselves as persons when we neglect or abuse our bodies. We also know the pleasure and joy available to us when we care for our bodies and our health." The failure to be sexually whole is a failure to rightly direct one's free will to the proper worship of God, expressed in turn by a commitment to "sexual health" that includes intentional avoidance of physically "negative" sexual consequences. Though not offered a positive definition of "wholeness," program participants are offered a set of guiding principles for the curriculum at large. The failure to pursue sexual wholeness through the care of body and health yields consequences placed in contrast to "pleasure and joy." *OWL* goes on to assert that "the purposes of sexuality are to enhance human wholeness and fulfillment, to express love, commitment, delight, and pleasure, to bring new life into the world, and to give glory to God."⁶⁵

The influence of the understanding of sexuality as fundamentally disordered—representing a fragmented body and self—can be frequently observed in the *GS2.0* approach. Questions about masturbation are answered with warnings that the activity will likely quickly become compulsive. Curiosities about “turn-ons” or, in one session, descriptions of a boy fascinated by his best friend’s sister’s underwear drawer, are accompanied by admonitions to heed the risk of sexual fetishization. Fantasy, participants are told, leads to “acting out” and finally to “isolation” in an endlessly

⁶⁵ Morriss and others, 117-119.

reinforcing loop.⁶⁶ Students are asked to reflect on “how God would want you to act” given such “temptations.”

CBG and *GS2.0* extend the question of responsibility to a critique of the pursuit of sexual pleasure for pleasure's sake. The practice is generally portrayed as failure of the responsibility towards others; premarital sex for pleasure is “selfish,” abusive and unable to match the responsible practice or intimate experience of marital sexuality.⁶⁷

Nostalgia in health and wholeness

GS2.0 introduces its entire curricular approach by framing sexual wholeness within an idealization of the early Christian community. So that students can “begin engaging the biblical text as a source of information and guidance about who they are as whole people--including their sexuality,” they are introduced to a particular vision of early Christianity.⁶⁸ *GS2.0* describes the existence of early Christian communities amidst a culture of licentiousness and exploitation, “where sexual norms were flat-out abusive.” In contrast, “people who loved Jesus...reinvented the family by living in committed marriage, instilling respect for women, and protecting and nurturing children instead of exploiting them.”⁶⁹

According to *GS2.0*, the bible reveals that the Early Church's “thread of sexual wholeness” was also linked to the primacy of stable and loving family units, forming the

⁶⁶ Hancock and Powell, *Good Sex 2.0 : A Whole-Person Approach to Teenage Sexuality and God: Leader's Guide*, 146.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 94; Ritchie and Zoller, 102.

⁶⁸ Hancock and Powell, *Good Sex 2.0 : A Whole-Person Approach to Teenage Sexuality and God: Leader's Guide*, 94.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

basis for the way *GS2.0* approaches the question of theological underpinnings for human sexuality. Now, the curriculum laments, "Somehow, what we call 'the Church' has lost its thread of sexual wholeness along with everybody else." It is therefore "time to stop obsessing about the sexual norms that surround us and steadily but quietly help kids grow into their sexuality healthy and whole."⁷⁰ The contrasts between visions of then and now are intimately tied to a normative vision of the "family" and described in the modern terms of health and wellness. The renewed pursuit of sexual wholeness by turning back to the insights of the early Christian community, the curriculum suggests, is also a pursuit of sexual health. In turn, sexual health can only be comprehended through the lens of a "biblical" account of human families, which in the vision of *GS2.0* look much like late-modern, Western heterosexual nuclear family units. As we will see in Chapter 2, this paradigm is largely at odds with historical Christian theological descriptions of marriage, sex, and procreation.

The pursuit of healthy sexuality in adolescence is also linked to the maintenance of present and future family structures. *CBG* uses the language of "communication" to describe a properly healthy approach to sexuality:

Communication is key to positive change and growth. The healthiest adolescents are those who are able to communicate with adults who care about them, especially their parents. And, those same adolescents are least likely to engage in potentially destructive behaviors (like drug and alcohol use, sexual experimentation, and taking unnecessary physical risks), and most likely to demonstrate respect for themselves and others.⁷¹

The directions on sexual responsibility issued in the opening pages of the *CBG* curriculum are followed by a discussion of the adolescent's changing role within their

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ritchie and Zoller, 19.

family unit. This discussion is key for diagnosing a healthy or unhealthy adolescence. Teens are told that they will be increasingly responsible for moderating their behavior, that temper tantrums and messy rooms are no longer appropriate for their new life stage. Shirking these responsibilities in favor of childish behavior can thus be regarded as tantamount to failing to pursue the surest strategy to a healthy adolescence. Most importantly, healthy adolescence is marked by the prevention of "potentially destructive behaviors" and the "demonstration of respect for themselves and others."

As in *GS2.0*, *CBG* uses the family to locate sexual health in relation to premarital abstinence, imagined as the only speakable practice of sexual responsibility. Communication with authority figures in their lives, namely those in their families, will be necessary for a healthy approach to sexual decision-making. Healthy adolescents understand their own sexuality first in relation to their families, and their willingness to speak of it will be the "key to positive change and growth."

For these curricula, human ethical and sexual "expression," at least when it comes to sex, occurs in two forms: the "healthy" and the "unhealthy." The definitions of each are framed consequentially. In *OWL*, one can be afforded a "healthy life," or she may experience "physical and emotional sickness and even to death."⁷² Unhealth connotes emotional damage, relational fallout, "unwanted pregnancy," and physical disease or death. Further, such damage is portrayed as having potentially disastrous consequence for the success of nuclear family life as a whole.

Because it is not made explicit, one is left to assume that "sexual expressions" that do not produce such damaging consequence are thus "healthy," reflecting the nature and

⁷² Morriss and others, 146.

will of the *imago dei*. Unhealthiness is cast as a failure of free will to choose the good, which, *CBG* argues, includes maintaining a proper sense of responsibility to one's family and an open channel of communication with one's parents. The pursuit of this form of "health" can then also be deemed the pursuit of appropriate worship of God, at least when it comes to sexuality. Unhealthiness is a rejection of this pursuit. God is then also cast in the role of moral assistant, providing "the opportunity to make more healthy choices in the future" while presiding over the production of healthy relationships between teens and their earthly authorities.⁷³

Conclusion

While I am not arguing that churches should not be taking an active role in seeking the sexual well-being of its young people, I am raising a concern that the reactionary nature of these efforts mean that the curricula and programming that results is often geared towards the goals of prevention to the exclusion of theological reflection, both on the content and construction of the curricula and in the encouragement of formative practices among young people. As a result, the developments in feminist queer, and sexual theologies and theologies of sexuality taking place in the academy appear to have made little if any dents in whether or how churches considered their roles in the sexual formation and instruction of young people. Instead, popular rhetoric and legislative posturing seemed to have taken the lead. The language of the welfare queen and the promulgation of middle-class values have insinuated themselves into the well-intentioned rhetoric of church sexuality curricula. Why the term "wholeness?"

⁷³ Ibid.

"Wholeness" implies a contrasting fragmentation. Is "wholeness" what maintains intact ("whole") relationships between humans, others, and God? Is it the proper attention paid to the body along with (and prior to) ethical obligations to others? Is it salvation itself? Atonement that enables a guilt-free pursuit of sexual pleasure within the larger ethical bounds set by the curriculum? Is it the preservation of the body from the incursion of the contagions of negative sexual consequence? Or perhaps is it all of these? What function does this language of nostalgia and optimistic sexual imaginings play in the larger aims of the curricula? Even the popular rhetoric of "God's gift of sexuality" seemed inextricably linked to "God's gift of the upper middle class lifestyle," and the "theology" of sex education appeared to be inadvertently lifted from the "theology" of the New Right's efforts at entitlement reform through the sexual regulation of adolescents.

The fact that 2000 years of Christian rhetoric about sexuality can find itself either collapsed into a collection of curricular injunctions for exclusively adolescent sexual behavior or abandoned completely in favor of "justice" marks a peculiar moment in the life of Christian sexual speech. We have always had encyclical, missal, and homiletical injunction. Here in contemporary Christian sex education we have a speech that is targeted to a specific age group, presumes an authority based on its source, and fancies itself as serving to conduct the "values" of Christianity to young people as they make decisions about sexuality. In so doing, the values communicated appear rooted in the principle of dissuading youth from premarital sex. It appears that "premarital sex" has come to represent sin itself in the lives of young people; premarital sex is described as the primary way sin can corrupt bodies and relationships. By extension, as this project will explore elsewhere, premarital sex further represents the corruption of young people's

“futures,” a popular watchword connoting higher education, stable heterosexual marriage, and middle-upper class economic and vocational aspirations.

Christian speech about sexuality in relation to the soul’s pursuit of communion with God (whether as obstacle or disciplined instrument) appears to have been replaced with speech about sexuality’s potential to disrupt the adolescent’s pursuit of the good life. The associated rhetoric, therefore, cannot be said to advise celibacy and continence as spiritual disciplines so much as “abstinence” as a tool in the crafting of the American dream. Christian theology does not so much set the terms for this rhetoric so much as provide a convenient vocabulary and mode of communication.

This is not to say that the previous forms of Christian sexual discourse acknowledged above are to be romanticized or even necessarily retrieved. Those discourses have a history of bodily denial and gendered regulation that has led to oppression, exploitation, and bodily denigration. However, as a church we must be honest with ourselves about the context and aims of our speech. We are worried our youth are vulnerable, and our response has been to collapse 2000 years of Christian sexual discipline into one central message: “Teens, don’t do it.” Along the way, however, we seem to have lost the ability to speak of sexuality as something larger than a series of developmental choices and potential peccadillos. To save our youth from the consequences of premature sexual intercourse, we have colluded with imposed aims and values whose interrogation rapidly reveals deep conflicts with redemptive theological understandings of the person, of desire, and of God’s creative Spirit embodied in creation.

Theological deficits

These curricula barely acknowledge, if at all, the utility of theology as a practice or resource for examining the relationship between bodies, desire, pleasure and even power. Instead, the curricula present as "sexuality education" a set of methods intended to regulate adolescent sexual behavior. They effectively concentrate larger social anxieties about unregulated sexual proliferation on the adolescent while at the same time reaffirming the dual authority of church and parent to determine the appropriate boundaries for the sexual behavior of the young. By extension, the reaffirmation of church and parental authority serves to echo the tropes of New Right speech as it clamored for renewed power. At the same time, the curricula deploy a paternalistic understanding of God, to whom one's "sexual responsibility" is practiced through the pursuit of "sexual health."

This dominant paradigm likewise canonizes medical and scientific discourses as resources for divine insight, with a primary concern for the framing of "sexual ethics" in terms of right behavior. Despite the expected differentiations in emphasis and level of permissiveness that reflect the differences in theological tradition of their respective authors and publishing houses, all three curricula are essentially reacting to the perceived "crises" in adolescent sexuality raised in the preceding 25 years of political and popular American rhetoric, while taking for granted as "natural" the category of adolescence itself, despite its relatively recent enumeration by twentieth-century medical, scientific, and psychological communities. The commonly accepted version of adolescence is a discrete and natural part of human development, characterized by a heightened and often less than rational experience of sexual impulse. Theology then enters through a relatively

correlative process, with snippets of biblical interpretation and theological vocabularies elected based upon their usefulness for conveying the regulation (and containment) of adolescent sexual behavior. In particular, when God appears, it is as a regulatory authority, a guarantor of these preapprehended values and conceptual arrangements provided by medical, scientific, and political discourses designed to address shifting sexual values.

How and why has this shift taken place? The following chapter explores the evolution of Christian rhetoric that I suspect has come to shape how the church speaks about adolescent sexuality. The discourse's origins in public health campaigns, the emergence of the "Culture Wars," and the rising concerns for teen pregnancy and the AIDS crisis in the latter half of the century all have far deeper theological foundations in the perception of sexual crisis and instability.

CHAPTER II

CHRISTIAN SEXUAL RHETORIC IN HISTORY: THE BODY MUST BE DEFENDED(?)

Introduction

The relationship of political to theological speech about adolescent sexuality is apparent in the denominational statements and history explored in this project's introduction and subsequent Chapter 1. Federal funding for abstinence-based public sexuality education curricula gained political support through the exploitation of anxieties produced by reported increases in teen pregnancy, out-of-wedlock births, the visibility of the gay community, and the AIDS crisis. The documented language surrounding these issues was further characterized by the racialized stereotype of the "welfare queen." A common denominator for all of these issues was the insistence by a growing movement of the Christian Right that America had fallen far from God's intentions for the nation and its people. As a consequence, the nation itself was disintegrating from the inside out. Politicians stressed again and again that teenage sexual abstinence was a primary solution, a bulwark against the potential for the moral and social decay of the (Christian) American body. Though denominational efforts for faith-based responses to concerns about teenage sexuality often reflected a more thoughtful concern for the ecclesial care of young people, the curricular products developed in response nonetheless often remain deeply influenced by the rhetoric of fear and crisis which permeated this period. The dominance of the New Right effectively situated its version of "Christian" sexual values as the "traditional" values of American civil society and made them instrumental in that

society's self-preservation. Teenage sexuality must be marked by early intervention if teens are to remain single-minded in their pursuit of premarital sexual abstinence and the virtues it represents.

So just what are “traditional” and “Christian” sexual values? Can these values, once identified, also be observed as the founding principles of the sex education curricula examined in this project? The answer is complex. Western Christian attitudes about sex and sexuality as they are revealed in prescription and prohibition (most notable in various exhortations to virginity, continence, chastity, and celibacy) tend to be generated from two discourses. The first is probably the more well-trodden history of negative attitudes towards bodily desire and the stain of sexual activity upon the soul, perceived as either polluting to or revelatory of the sinfulness of soul and body alike. This attitude has been great fodder for those concerned with a more "sex-positive" Christian discourse. However, Christian sexual rhetoric also has historically deployed the images of virginal, sexually intact bodies and the practice of sexual continence as signs and symbols for ecclesial and social control. The early church fathers advocated for continence as a sign of spiritual progress and a marker of clerical authority. Medieval virgins guarded the sanctity of an entire community. The sexual discipline of its members guided the early Puritan communities of the American colonies, and later an imported Victorianism made sexual virtue a sign of a well-ordered society. This has had profound consequences for how Christian speech about sex can be rendered intelligible in form and transparent in its intentions.

Especially in the wake of the Reformation, Christian history—first in Europe and later in America—exhibited the frequent conflation of bodily piety with the control and

discipline of marriage, reproduction, and sexual practice. To be sure, popular civil traditions have been marshaled in support of a specifically Christian vision of social and sexual life. However, perhaps more telling for the situation American Christianity finds itself in today, Christian sexual rhetoric and conviction has proved a handy tool for the advancement of economic and political aims. This chapter will re-visit “traditional” resources for Christian theological notions of sex, beginning with Paul and ending just before where Chapter 1 began, in beginning stages of a national debate on the role of public sex education. Several historians and historical theologians have noted that treatises on virginity, celibacy, and sexual continence have frequently accompanied efforts to not only order, but also preserve the church community against the threat of various compromising influences. In particular, the management of premarital and marital sexualities is examined. It is to this trajectory that the majority of this chapter will attend.

Early Christianities

Peter Brown describes how an early Christian focus on perpetual continence served to unify church communities while marking them as set apart from their pagan context. The experience of sexual desire was a characteristic common across the stratifications of gender and age, and corresponding ascetic practices could be shared as well. Sexual continence allowed early Christians to signify with their bodies the eschatological expectation that guided their commitments. By refusing to engage in sexual intercourse, Christians could literally stop the flow of creation, anticipating the break in the endless flow of time that would come with the *parousia*. Further, as celebrated in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, sexual continence could be elevated to the

heroic, an appealing motivation for members of a community still in the process of defining its central practices and ethics.¹

Though early Christian communities would go on to uneasily accommodate marriage and childbearing in the shadow of a delayed *parousia*, they remained deeply concerned with the suitability of sexual relationships in light of a gospel of imminent eschatological consummation. Further, early theologies of body and spiritual ascent had deep roots in the influence of Manichaeism and Gnosticism, which generated strong suspicion, if not outright antipathy, towards the body and its impulses. These competing traditions presumed that the baseness of the body's appetites must be countered with the pursuit of higher rationalisms. Through ascetic discipline, the Manicheans and Gnostics regarded the rejection of sex as a crucial component for escape from the endlessly reproducing material world and a reestablished union with God.²

Early Christian theologians had to strike a balance between the sexual renunciation of eschatological anticipation and a resistance to the full anti-materialism of these competing traditions. The gospel message of participation in the resurrection and glorification of the Body of Christ had demanded a reconsideration of the role of procreation in human life during the presumed last days of worldly time. As such, the role of marriage and family life would come increasingly into question. This had implications for the relationship of the fledgling Christian community to the Roman state as much as it did for the workaday concerns of its growing membership. Paul is frequently credited with establishing a suspicion of sexuality that would persist across the

¹ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Lectures on the History of Religions (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 62-64.

² Janette Gray, "Celibacy These Days," in *Sex These Days : Essays on Theology, Sexuality and Society*, ed. Jon Davies and Gerard Loughlin (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 145.

ages, but historian Peter Brown has shown that Paul's prescriptions for the church at Corinth reflected a much greater concern for communal stability than for the threat of sexual depravity.

Still, by the second century, sexual renunciation and asceticism had come to be regarded as correspondent to a certain level of moral authority and bodily purity that could become a sign for the integrity of the community at large. In the shadow of the delayed *parousia*, sexual renunciation served as a metaphor for a community with one foot in the present and one in the eschaton. The preservation of this ethic meant the preservation of a theology of ecclesial unity. The community had not given up hope in a future transformation of individual and communal bodies. This metaphor became a useful rhetorical device for several centuries of polemic.

Paul and the body

Paul's writings and their particular distillations have largely emerged as a fundamental piece of source material for both the justification and criticism of sexual renunciation and theological anthropology. Significant attention to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and in particular Paul's injunctions to the church at Corinth in I Corinthians 7, has been paid across time and history, from Cyprian to Cannon (footnote). Recent feminist theologians have pointed to this passage as ground zero for Christian distaste for the body and its desires. Paul's cautions against fornication likewise form the basis for many of the injunctions against premarital sexual intercourse found in popular Christian sexuality education literature. Over and over, this passage emerges as a point for tussle and toil over the proper place of sexuality within the life of the faithful Christian believer.

Paul understood Christians to be living in a moment characterized by both the rebellious bodies of "the flesh" (*sarx*) and the freedom of being "in the spirit" in Christ.³ This freedom was extended to human beings by way of participation in the Holy Spirit. Christians were expected to wrestle with the desires that ran counter to their own bodies now rendered sacred Temples of the Holy Spirit through resurrection with Christ. Christians were not obligated by social convention, but by an identity characterized by being caught in a moment of tension between rebellious humanity, characterized by a disorderly body, and the gracious freedom of God, characterized by the overcoming of the frailty of human *sarx*, or flesh, in the resurrection of Christ.

Paul had drawn popularly Roman notions of the body together with apocalyptic expectation, yielding a theological anthropology and theology of sexuality tightly wound with the question of how to reconcile the notion of a sinless incarnated savior and a resurrected redemption of a body that so often betrayed the Christian's desire for holiness. Sexual renunciation through celibacy, his letters reveal, came to be for Paul a preferred state for quite pragmatic reasons, offering more time and mental clarity for the task at hand. However, Brown demonstrates that Paul's rhetorical strategy for making this case relied on a construction of sexuality defined by fear and risk, with *porneia* always threatening to dismantle the successes of Christian piety.

Paul's efforts to address the forms of sexual renunciation being practiced at the church at Corinth and the accompanying expressions of gender subversion and general communal discord in fact reveal a strong ambivalence about the sexual body and the role

³ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society : Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Lectures on the History of Religions ; (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 49.

of human sexual relationships in a resurrected world marked by the resurrection of Jesus.⁴ What Paul contributed, therefore, was not so much a strict exhortation to premarital chastity as an attempt to relate the disjuncture between bodies, desire, and eschatological hope to the practical management of early Christian communities. However, by the third century the pairing of rhetorical polemic with a surprisingly measured prescriptive approach lost its balance, and Paul's argument against abandoning sexual intercourse within marriage and in favor of allowing the younger generation to continue to have children slid imperceptibly into an attitude that viewed marriage itself as no more than a defense against desire. In the future, "a sense of the presence of 'Satan,' in the form of a constant and ill-defined risk of lust, lay like a heavy shadow in the corner of every Christian church."⁵

Towards sexual renunciation

Rosemary Radford Ruether notes that, in their efforts to resist the anti-materialistic dualisms of Marcion and Valentinus, both Tertullian and Clement also appealed to what she calls "a Christianized version of the Stoic philosopher-householder."⁶ Tertullian advocated for an austere ordered pattern of marriage and family life that included early marriage for the young, periodic procreative sex, much prayer, and the eventual cooling of sexual energies.⁷ Marriage was to serve as a "school

⁴ Ibid., 54-55.

⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 40.

⁷ Ibid.

of continence.”⁸ Virginitly, celibacy, and continence within marriage all anticipated (though could not accomplish) this glorified state. However, even virgins were not exempt from the shame of sexual sin, which rested within the frailty of the human body itself.⁹ In other words, the unavoidable problem of sexual desire was to be best dealt with through rightly ordered social institutions that did not look, on the surface, too far different from their pagan Roman counterparts. Attending to bodily stability by addressing the problem of sexual desire could contribute to the both the construction and destabilization of particular social conventions.

Still, by the second century, both wandering ascetics and theologians including Tertullian had invested in the idea that the gifts of the Spirit might be more fully cultivated through ascetic practice.¹⁰ Paul had resisted the universal valorization of sexual renunciation. For Paul, the benefit of celibacy and virginitly for the young was largely as preparation for spiritual trials anticipated to occur prior to Jesus' coming. Further, an undivided heart was considered better suited for full service before the coming of the Lord. However, Paul stressed that this was not absolutely necessary for all Christians.¹¹ However, as a practice sexual renunciation was quickly aligning itself with soteriological models that depended significantly on juxtaposing sexual appetite and the bondage of sin. The *body*, therefore, was to remain a site of soteriological contention and perturbing vulnerability, laid bare in the persistence of sexual desire.

⁸ Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 149.

⁹ Brown, *The Body and Society : Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 81.

¹⁰ Glenn Holland, "Celibacy in the Early Christian Church," in *Celibacy and Religious Traditions*, ed. Carl Olson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Brown, *The Body and Society : Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 56-57.

Virgin territory: Recapitulative parallels and eschatological hope

Theological developments during the same period also served to shift the valorization of sexual renunciation towards virginity in particular. Recapitulative Eve-Mary parallels appeared in the work of Origen, Nyssa, and Ireneaus, establishing a firm link between the sinlessness of Christ's incarnation, the prelapsarian Adam, and the virgin birth. Virginity tracts began to flourish across Asia, Africa, and Europe. The subject was addressed by Clement of Alexandria, in the *Epistle of Polycarp*, by Ignatius of Antioch, by Pseudo-Clement, and by Tertullian.¹² Many of these treatises began to suggest that virginity and sexual renunciation might lead to the supersession of human iniquity, awarding those who undertook such a challenge a particularly exalted status and challenging social arrangements that seemed largely dependent on the awkward and frequently licentious relationship between the sexes.

The Body of Christ was plagued by human frailty, and the rhetoric of sexuality was arguably as much about the individual body as it was about collective vulnerability to disorder, violation, and impregnation by corrupting influence. Brown also notes that the third-century threat of imminent persecution hovered over the field of theological discourse. Discussions of virginity and the rejection of sexual intercourse emerged as symbolic tropes for describing threats to the emerging religion. As persecution approached, virginal rhetoric proved useful for describing Christian resistance to outside influence, signifying both worldly and otherworldly preservation and salvation. As an

¹² Roger Steven Evans, "Sex and Salvation : Virginity as a Soteriological Paradigm in Ancient Christianity," (Lanham, MD: Lanham, MD : University Press of America, 2003).

increasingly structured Christian Church began to take shape, the body itself was foregrounded in its saving mission. The material boundaries of the body could mark the symbolic vulnerabilities of Christian society, with implications for discourses on sex and sexual renunciation.

According to Brown, Tertullian had located human sexual desire deep within the body, a lifelong source of sinfulness and temptation. The social organization of Christians could distinguish them over and against the fallen world through sexual regulation. For Tertullian, advocacy for the primacy of sexual continence also had implications for household social structure. The rhetoric of sexual surveillance and control could also prove in the rhetorical construction of Christian authority and identity in periods of instability. In the third century, Cyprian would evoke this paradigm, claiming that the body is a battleground between the soul and the world. A particular policing of sexual desire was necessary for individual and communal holy living.¹³

Likewise, Origen argued that virginity served as the "privileged link between heaven and earth," historically altering the relationship between humanity and divinity.¹⁴ In the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, Origen argued, divinization was now possible for all human beings, who could mold their bodies into temples of the Holy Spirit. Jews and Christians "have already learned...that the body of a rational being that is devoted to the God of the Universe is a temple of the God that they worship."¹⁵ The embrace of virginity, a material sign of faith in the spiritual truth of the world as revealed in Christ, meant that the body of any Christian believer could be a sign for the

¹³ Holland, 74.

¹⁴ Brown, *The Body and Society : Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 175.

¹⁵ *Contra Celsum*, 4.26, quoted in *ibid.*, 177.

community's hope, achieving the closest state to spiritual purity possible in this world. As such, the virgin body could be a barometer for the perceived depravities of the external world, a boundary marker between communal purity and corruption. The image of virginity had the power to both destabilize secular allegiances and draw together the emerging Christian doctrines of anthropology and soteriology.

Brown writes that the implications of Origen's concept of virginity extended beyond Christ's maternal origins and could also speak to eschatological hopes.¹⁶ For Origen, virginity represented the intact glory of the spiritual body. Marital intercourse only "coarsened" the soul, drawing it away from spiritual freedom and miring it in the demands of the material body and the social obligations of the material world. The human soul was not meant to be bound by social or civic convention, and a refusal of marriage or intercourse could manifest the "imprint" of the pure soul in this otherwise material world.

By the fourth century, the superiority of sexual renunciation, with virginity as the apex of spiritual piety, became a consistent trope in a didactic tradition that began with Paul's exhortations to celibacy and emerged as an emphasis the work of Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine, as well as Ambrose and Jerome. Historian Jane Schulenburg notes that the writings of these Church Fathers "established the notion of a hierarchy of sexual perfection with distinct grades measured in terms of the degree of a person's denial of or withdrawal from sexual activity."¹⁷ Such practices offered glimpses into the eschatological corrective that God was in the process of issuing to human society—

¹⁶ Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 169-174.

¹⁷ Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, "Forgetful of Their Sex : Female Sanctity and Society, Ca. 500-1100," (Chicago: Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1998), 128.

initiated in Christ and continuing through the presence and authority of the Church on earth. Virginity and continence could serve to unveil the deep discord and striving of human life created by the presence of sin. Ecclesial institutions could mark spiritual status according to habits of sexual renunciation or, for the common Christian, efforts at chastity and continence.

Early church fathers including Jerome, Ambrose and Cyprian would enshrine the hierarchy of virginity and continence over married life. Virginal heroism appeared especially in the work of both Jerome and Ambrose, who applied the principle to a celebration of preserved virginity. The early theologians' letters, tracts, and sermons apply imagery likening the body to a reinforced tower, invulnerable against the penetration of invading hoards.¹⁸ To this, Ambrose would add an appeal to Mariology that linked merging theories on the perpetual virginity of Mary to the recapitulative Eve-Mary parallel first established in Origen, Nyssa, and Ireneaus. Virginity was made paradigmatic to Christ's salvific nature by virtue of his virgin birth, and it likewise became imperative to affirm Mary's perpetual virginity. For Ambrose, the ascetical implications in his soteriology naturally led to a hierarchy of virtues that crowned virginity at its apex. Celibacy was the natural correlate to the acceptance of the gospel signified in baptism. "The waters of baptism were expected 'to cool the fires of carnal passions,' because the Spirit in the baptismal font was the same Spirit that had descended on Mary at the moment of her son's conception."¹⁹ Ambrose's elevation of celibacy

¹⁸ Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 383.

¹⁹ David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 203-204.; *Myst.* 3.13 (SC 25bis, 162)

would anticipate both the cult of the consecrated virgin and the ascetic structure of monastic houses.

Theological and ecclesial evolution in the fourth century

Fourth-century theology linked virginity to the integrity of the Church as a whole, with implications for human society. However, theologians including Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine argued that virginity and continence were not about the *rejection* of the material world and its structures, but about the transformation of their meaning and content. The truth of material, bodily resurrection and redemption meant that the social body too would not be made to disintegrate, but rather to be transformed by a redemption of desires, appetites, and impulses that ran counter to communion with the Spirit of God.

As Christianity grew in influence, the growing theological consensus on the preference for sexual renunciation shaped ecclesial theology as well as the individual's pursuit of piety. For Cyprian, the Church and individual Christians alike were consistently under siege, with the integrity of Body and body at stake. Ambrose linked the rhetoric of the inviolable virgin body to the Church's unchallengeable divine authority. Brown writes that Ambrose took "paradoxical qualities in the individual virgin and applied them to the Catholic Church as a whole." The Church was no longer simply an institutions for Christians; it held transformative power for human society as a whole. The possibility of a Christian Roman world anticipated not only the empire's adoption of Christianity, but the increasing political theology of Augustine's *City of God*.²⁰ However, these early theologians saw much work to be done in the sexual redemption of

²⁰ Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 363-364.

the world, in which sexual desire was seen as eclipsing the proper desire for loving service to God.

Like the presence of dedicated virgins and celibates in a world of well-ordered marital households, the virgin Church could place an alternative to the “fallen” world in stark relief. At the same time, virgins and the virgin Church could stand as proleptic intermediaries between heaven and earth:

In [Ambrose’s] writings and sermons, the virgin's body was an object charged with powerful, conflicting associations. It was at one and the same time static and dynamic. Precisely because the normal, sexual associations of a woman's fecundity had been renounced in them, the bodies of virgins were calculated to conjure up, in the mind of believers, all that was most 'untainted,' and so most unambiguously exuberant, in the notions of fertility, of continuity, and of creativity. The closed womb was not only a barred gate. Precisely because it was so closed, it could be most open: it was also a bubbling cauldron; it was a source from which light streamed; it was a cloud showering gently rain. By reason of the very closedness of her body, the mind, the heart, and the hands of the virgin woman had come to open wide--to the Scriptures, to Christ, and to the poor."²¹

Sexual renunciation as theology and practice

Likewise, Jerome argued that a robust eschatological understanding of the human body that sought freedom from corrupting desires had social and political implications. This view was to be refracted backwards, shaping life on this side of glory. Both individual human beings and the Church at large should be appropriately vigilant against the dangers of social institutions, including marriage, that risked corrupting the soul’s project of Christian living. Guarding the Church meant guarding virginity, and vice versa. In *Letter to Eustochium*, Schulenburg writes that Jerome “stresses the need to

²¹ Ibid., 363.

guard one's virginity with jealous care. A strong eschatological concern underlies his patristic admonitions. The bride of Christ must spend her earthly life balanced precariously between a continual fear of defilement and the steadfast hope of eternal life with her bridegroom, Christ."²² Virgins, like the Church, cannot walk "without anxiety amid serpents and scorpions."²³

The prevailing theological endorsement of virginity and consequent denigration of marriage accompanied the increasing normalization of clerical celibacy. Theological exhortations about sexual practice thus had significant implications for qualifying forms of ecclesial authority while confirming the social structures that would mark increasingly Christian societies. Ruether and Brown both describe Jerome's polemic against marriage in the context of not only the Jovinian controversy, but also a larger set of tensions between the increasing influence of Christian ascetics and the persistence of general household structures. Jerome's polemic against Jovinian firmly entrenched a sense of pious hierarchy that socially and spiritually privileged the virgin and celibate. However, the granting of spiritual and ecclesial authority to such a social minority required significantly persuasive rhetorical moves.

The promulgation of a Christian community of virgin and continent bodies had implications for both pre-eschatological and glorified social life. As the influence of Christianity continued to grow, the institutions that had emerged from within the religion were being forced to negotiate entrenched patterns of civic and social life. Coexistence required a firm policing of the boundaries between purity and pollution. "The heaven

²² Schulenburg, 129.

²³ Jerome, Thomas Comerford Lawler, and Charles Christopher Mierow, *The Letters of St. Jerome*, trans., Charles Christopher Mierow, *Ancient Christian Writers : The Works of the Fathers in Translation* (New York: Newman Press, 1963), 135. Quoted in Schulenburg, 129.

now imagined by Jerome and his Latin readers was no place of featureless, entirely spiritual perfection. It was a Roman society from which the corrosive flaws introduced by personal desire had been expunged. A heaven where the disorder of earthly life had ceased would cast a glow of glorious stability on social structures which seemed, for the first time, to be at risk."²⁴

In the prescription for sexual surveillance accorded to the Church, these theologians likewise reinforced the importance of sexual purity as a construct, rendering ecclesial and civic identity increasingly dependent on the theological demotion of marriage and sexuality. In the years preceding Augustine's rise to preeminence, Jerome would also extend this even further, arguing that no married Christian could fully commit himself to holy living without abstinence from all conjugal obligations.²⁵ Virginity and continence were not simply preferred, higher states of Christianity, glimpses of the eschaton, but were in fact the only states possible for the pursuit of the Christian life. As he wrote, virginity was quickly reaching its apogee as the primary expression of Christian virtue. For Jerome, "a social and political order based on marriage and family had become so corrupted in the fall that they were now virtually irredeemable, better to be abandoned than preserved."²⁶ Though his conclusions—the necessary abandonment of marriage and sexual procreation--would be considered specious today, Jerome's theology is markedly prescient as an early example of the connection between the integrity of society's moral fabric and the sexual practices of its citizens. However, the shift from

²⁴ Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 384.

²⁵ Ruether, 45.

²⁶ Brent Waters, *The Family in Christian Social and Political Thought*, Oxford Studies in Theological Ethics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18.

abandonment to regulation had its own theological foundations anticipated in Augustine and most clearly articulated in the Reformation, as we will see below.

Augustine: Sex and the Will

Both Brown and Jeanette Gray note that, until Augustine, sexual desire and corresponding Christian exhortations to celibacy and virginity were centered on the issue of the material body itself. Sexual desire and sexual intercourse were inexorable ties to the inferior physical world. They were held in stark relief to the heavenly purity of both Mary and Christ, whose intact and unsullied bodies were the only ones capable of bearing salvation to a fallen world. Theologians including Jerome and Ambrose, in a departure from Origen, had established a firm tradition of the material reality of the resurrection body.²⁷ The development of an associated proleptic vision would have inevitable consequences for how Christian communities would order themselves in anticipation of the eschaton. The yearning of bodily appetites reminded human beings of their insatiable yearning for God without that salvation.

The eschatological expectations for human bodies demanded an accounting of how social relationships between those bodies would be arranged. The entrenchment of “Christendom” by the end of the fourth century presumably also provided opportunity for greater reflection on the social and civil nature of Christianity. As Christianity became the shared religion of Western societies at large, this would come to mean that eschatological accountings of the materially resurrected body would have direct

²⁷ Margaret R. Miles and American Academy of Religion., *Augustine on the Body*, Dissertation Series - American Academy of Religion ; No. 31 (Missoula, Mont.: Published by Scholars Press for the American Academy of Religion, 1979), 106.

implications for prescriptive exhortations on sexuality. Celibacy and virginity were quite literally matters of the body—the best one can do with corrupted sexual bodies is to discipline your own and avoid contact with those of others. It was much the same for desire. In rejecting the snares of carnality, one might embrace the transcendence of heaven.

In the turn first to the voluntarism of Augustine and later to early monastic scholasticism, the human body and its sexual desire became matters of the mind and will. Augustine's introduction of *concupiscentia carnis* made the erratic nature of the body and its desires not *the* problem of material existence, but *the* symptom of the deeper problem with human being. Augustine argued against Manichean and Gnostic dualisms that in fact humanity had been created to embrace the material world, participating in the love of God for God's creation. The deep shame of humanity, therefore, lay in the consequence of Adam's fall—an inability to wholly love God and thus rightly love creation. Instead, human beings were destined to desire to control and appropriate that was to be loved as good. The body's own appetites now corresponded to this fallen state, proving resistant if not antithetical to any effort at correction. The human body, mind, and will had become fragmented and at odds with itself. No better could that be illustrated, Augustine argued, than in sexual desire:

But, in Augustine's mind, sexuality served only one, strictly delimited purpose: it spoke, with terrible precision, of one single, decisive event within the soul. It echoed in the body the unalterable consequence of mankind's first sin. It was down that single, narrow, and profound shaft that Augustine now looked, to the very origins of human frailty.²⁸

²⁸ Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 422.

Fallen bodies

Augustine enacted a key development in this trajectory by shifting the concern for spiritual purity from the body to the will. At the same time, he acknowledged earthly social arrangement of bodies to be crucial to the practices of Christian love and eschatological anticipation. Sexual desire was something to be managed to these ends. The struggle to bodily and spiritually celibate discipline served as an emblematic sign of the deep difficulty, if not impossibility, in doing so prior to the resurrection. Sexual continence and celibacy were conceived as crucial but proleptic acts.

Notably, despite Augustine's emphasis on the universal necessity of continence and celibacy that corresponded to the universality of human sin, the most strident strictures on sexual behavior emerged alongside the rise of the monasteries. Brown acknowledges that though Augustine's major works lament the Fall of humanity and its manifestations in sexual desire and bodily disorder, his sermons are relatively gentle on the subject. The pastoral demands of his congregation often revealed that Augustine had enough trouble convincing husbands of the value of marital fidelity, let alone moving a general congregation to collective continence.²⁹ The unmarried were advised exhorted to celibacy, while married couples were reminded to undertake their procreative duties with

²⁹ “[Y]ou are not ashamed of your sin [in committing adultery] because so many men commit it. Man's wickedness is now such that men are more ashamed of chastity than of lechery. Murderers, thieves, perjurers, false witnesses, plunderers and fraudsters are detested and hated by people generally, but whoever will sleep with his servant girl in brazen lechery is liked and admired for it, and people make light of the damage to his soul. And if any man has the nerve to say that he is chaste and faithful to his wife and this gets known, he is ashamed to mix with other men, whose behaviour is not like his, for they will mock him and despise him and say he's not a real man; for man's wickedness is now of such proportions that no one is considered a man unless he is overcome by lechery, while one who overcomes lechery and stays chaste is considered unmanly.” Augustine and others, *Sermons 1-19, The Works of Saint Augustine : A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. III (Brooklyn, N.Y.: New City Press, 1990).

only great sadness. Marital intercourse was not a seat of pleasure and delight (as it is certainly portrayed in modern sexuality curricula), but an event evocative of the Fall.

Augustine's momentous shift to an emphasis on the will meant that celibacy and continence could no longer be considered legitimate routes to salvation. No amount of bodily discipline alone would bring one to closer relationship with God. Further, bodily discipline alone was beside the point—the problem lay behind the will. Sexual continence and celibacy were reconceived as crucial but proleptic acts. Humans were called to discipline the fragmented body in anticipation of the future unity that would be restored in the eschaton:

Let me put it to you much more intimately. Your flesh is like your wife...Love it, rebuke it; let it be formed into one bond of body and soul, one bond of married concord...Learn now to master what you will receive as a united whole. Let it now go short, so that it will then enjoy abundance.³⁰

Augustine reconfigured the Christian understanding of the tensions between nature and the body. Further, sexual desire and bodily appetites were to be regarded not with shame for their particular materiality, but shame for their sin-full signification of a universal human predicament. Augustine's admonitions to continence and the prayerful tending to the lustful heart expanded upon Paul's early calls to celibacy for early Christians seeking to create a distinct set of identity-making practices amidst the liberties of first-century pagan life.³¹ The secrets and shame of sexual fantasy and desire

³⁰ Augustine, *Enarratio in Ps. 140*, quoted in Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 425.

³¹ Arguably, the shift in attention from the body to the will as the primary medium for the action of both sin and redemption meant that, given the influence of Aristotle, the connection between political will and Christian conviction were beginning to dovetail, so that the practice of interpersonal association and governance has the capacity to reveal the turn of the will towards *caritas* or *concupiscence*. The persistence of sexuality as a marker of the fall, however, also makes sexuality a helpful marker for discerning the social and moral health of civil and ecclesial society.

made fecund soil for the rise of ascetic discipline, particularly for a religion that had been steadily looking further and further through the desires and affects of the body “to the black shadow of self-will that lay at the very back of the heart.”³² As early Christianity transitioned to the Middle Ages, “human flesh emerged as a quivering thing. Its vulnerability to death, even to delight, was a painfully apposite concretization of the limping will of Adam.”³³

While this preoccupation with the sinfulness of the will revealed in flesh remained pertinent to humanity as a whole, it also provided an opportunity to apply extraordinary sexual discipline to a particular class of Christians. And, in so doing, the clergy and special religious found a means for illustrating their own divine authority. The deployment of clerical celibacy as a central technique for the church’s consolidation of political and economic power was accompanied by significant theological implications.

Sex and the Cities of God: The Rise of the Monasteries

Medieval monastic communities were designed to anticipate the eschatological consummation that would bring an earthly City of God. Celibacy enabled the “intellectual interiority” necessary for attention to the corruption of the will. Medieval monastic communities were designed to anticipate the eschatological consummation that would bring an earthly City of God. The redemption of the human body from its disordered desires and corruptible flesh was to have social implications. Hence, the anticipatory practice of celibacy became, as in the primitive church, a social practice of identity formation as much as it was a proleptic discipline of the body. Medieval

³² Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 433.

³³ *Ibid.*, 434.

monastic life transcended “the individual limitations of human nature” and abandoned “the corporeality and sinfulness of the personal body for the spiritually enhanced communal body.”³⁴

In the monasteries, celibacy developed as a social practice of identity formation as much as a proleptic discipline of the body. The soul was to undertake the single-minded pursuit of God, and so celibate community proved the superior form of social organization that eliminated the distractions of socio-political and familial entanglements. Early forms of ascetic practiced by the desert fathers evolved according to shifts in Christian theology. The “white martyrdom” of desert monastic “angelism” had also been enhanced by Augustinian emphases on will and intellect.³⁵ Celibacy no longer signified the discipline of the body’s passions. Self-denial was now to extend to the cultivation of the will itself. The irrationality of bodily lusts mirrored itself in the perceived irrationality of the sinful mind. As we will see, the social body was not immune from the need for a more disciplined ordering as well.

The monasteries combined the ascetic impulse with the material establishment of centralized ecclesial power. The redemption of the human body from its disordered desires and corruptible flesh had implications for social organization, community economics, and governance. As I will discuss below, the celibate habits expected among clergy in these communities yielded increasingly codified forms of discipline that would also be echoed later in broader attempts at bodily and social discipline in society at large during the post-Reformation period.

³⁴ Gray, 146.

³⁵ Ibid.

Virginal heroism and women religious

Ascetic and monastic structures during this period offered a set of rhetorical categories that would reproduce themselves in latter centuries. Along with the valuation of clerical celibacy and monastic authority, tropes of virginal heroism and admonitions to keep females protected from pillaging hoards in the face of incursion and instability were also crucial to the period. The corresponding approaches to virginal preservation share much in common with later attempts at bodily and social discipline in post-Reformation civil society.

Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome all offered recommendations and meditations on the violation of virginal *integritas*. These reflections found practical application in direct recommendations to groups of women religious. In the context of Germanic women religious, for instance, the risk of invasion by Viking, Magyar, and Saracen intruders were met with encomiums of praise for the “pure,” “intact,” “incorrupt,” “inviolable,” and “uncontaminated” virgins who were the “pearls of Christ, jewels of Paradise, participants in the celestial homeland.” Schulenburg describes how “an uneasiness of the period,” characterized by “extreme disorders and violence” was accompanied by an increase in the number of female monasteries. Women were admonished to strict claustration during this period of crisis. The perceived increase in the violation of women religious and the ongoing threats to their chastity and *integritas* were demonstrated in frequent entreaties to bishops for protection by abbesses and male theologians and clergy of the period. While a surge in attacks against women of the period were tragically documented, they also provided material for a literature of the

heroics of virginity that could grant narrative imagination to the ascetic glorification of virginity that had become firmly ensconced in medieval Christian tradition.³⁶

Jane Schulenburg has described how the valorization of virgin female saints in the period from 500 to 1000 ce had significant implications for the arrangement of women religious communities and the practice of dedicated virginity during that period.

“Although there has been a very long and persistent tradition in the heroics of virginity, the concern with virginity and the need for *integritas* seem to have a special hold on the religious collective consciousness of the medieval world.”³⁷ Virginity became a constant trope in stories about the heroic martyrdom of women saints. Both patristic and papal treatises dealt with injunctions to chastity and extensive recommendations to those threatened with sexual assault from barbarian hordes.

Legendary accounts of virginal heroism juxtaposed inviolate bodies with the corrupting threat of pagan invaders. The language applied to these virgins, intact “pearls” whose sanctified lives gave them a special place in heaven and a persistent example in the Holy Mother, had already been paralleled in descriptions of the Church at large by Clement, Ambrose, Jerome, and Chrysostom, among others. The monastics created eschatological previews on earth in which one’s hope could be placed. Their celibacy, rendered most pure in the period’s accompanying soteriologies of virginity, stood as a preservative presence lest the trappings of daily life become conflated with God’s intentions for a redeemed humanity. It should not go unnoticed that the

³⁶ Schulenburg, 173-176.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

celebration of virginity in the face of violation accompanied the increasing consolidation of Church power and authority over social and civic life.

Monasteries as social managers

The monastery quickly came to stand at the center of medieval life. Waters writes, “Freed from the distractions of running a household, celibates could devote their time to ordering (or more likely explicating the theological and philosophical principles underlying the social and political structures of this ordering) the affairs of church, state, and civil society.”³⁸ The monasteries themselves rapidly replaced the large family manors and kinship structures of the early medieval period. Emphasis shifted from complex family networks to individual household units presumed to serve as building blocks for a thoroughly Christian society, with ecclesial authority as the dispassionate head. As such, the integrity of both marriage and the family unit were being transformed into the representative correlates of Christian power over state and civil affairs. Communities defined by ascetic sexual renunciation were no longer the guarantors of salvation against the hostile pagan city. Instead, they were salvation’s arbiter, a monastic ruling class that would ostensibly govern a now entrenched theo-political system consisting of faithful households of artisans, tradespeople, and laborers. As such, the successful marriage and procreation of the citizenry was to be guarded as part of the sacred task of the Church and its representatives.

In *The Family in Christian Social and Political Thought*, Waters demonstrates how the established Catholic sacramentality of marriage signified an evolving role for the

³⁸ Waters, 27-28.

family in Christian medieval society. Whereas virginity had previously operated as the primary symbol of inviolate union between human flesh and divine grace, by the twelfth century the marriage bond was seen as possessing a similar integrity. Far from simply serving to offset the persistent concupiscence of the flesh, marriage itself could be both a means of grace and a sign of Christ's fidelity to the church.³⁹ This was augmented by period understandings of natural law and an inherited understanding of Augustine's established balance between concupiscence and marital fidelity, with the clearest articulations found in the *Summa*.⁴⁰ Waters notes that this increasing regulation and endorsement of marriage by the Church was strategically balanced with an ongoing hierarchy of celibate vocation over the married life of the householder.⁴¹ Clerical leaders were expected to be continent if married and preferably single and celibate. And perhaps most tellingly, the fifteenth-century decrees of the Council of Trent included not only condemnations of the Protestant reformers, but also formalized statements on the sacramental nature and purpose of the marriage bond.⁴²

It was just this phenomenon that the Reformers would rally against, arguing that such an arrangement ascribed an inordinate amount of power to the ecclesial class. As celibacy signified the broader discipline and identity of the monastics, it would also come to serve as the avatar for monasticism's critics. Luther attempted to delineate between properly ordered celibacy and married life, introducing the notion of vocation and

³⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁰ *Summa theologiae*, Q. 74, a. 8.; Q. 106. Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologica," ed. Sandra K. Perry (Perrysburg, OH: Benziger Bros., 1947).

⁴¹ Waters, 27.

⁴² *Catechism of Trent*, Part II, VII, §§ 13-14 in Online, "The Council of Trent," ed. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848). <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/trentall.html>.

suggesting that the integrity of marriage was crucial to Christian sexuality.⁴³ This direct theological linkage between sexuality and marriage as a symbiotic vocation would further influence sexual rhetoric going forward. The Reformation perspective, however, differed from the Council of Trent in its emphasis on civil, rather than ecclesial, institutions as the proper arbiters of God's moral law. Improperly ordered social institutions could often be to blame for the sexual licentiousness of its citizens. A proper place for marriage meant a society safe from a variety of social ills. Sex outside these bounds was perceived to have dire consequences for the integrity of church and society alike.⁴⁴

Paradigm Shift: The Protestant Reformation

When the Reformation commenced in the early sixteenth century, clerical celibacy and the role of marriage would serve a central role in a larger discourse questioning the consolidation of ecclesial power. Essentially, the groundwork was being laid for a Christian social order expressed through the organization of the state, rather than through partnerships of ecclesial and monarchic authorities. Theological foundations would join with political shifts to entrust the state itself with the arbitration of social morality and personal piety, exemplified in the regulation of sexuality and marriage.

Against the Catholic notion that celibacy allowed for the pursuit of a higher state of holiness, Luther argued against the possibility of holiness by degree. Social hierarchies and organization could not, therefore, derive their moral authority from any sort of elevated form of sexual piety. Further, God had in fact intended sexuality to have

⁴³ Ruether, 74-75.

⁴⁴ Waters, 28.

a central role in human society. Marriage both manifested the material observance of God's desire for men and women to join in procreative union and safely contained the sinful excesses of lustful desire.

Luther asserted that God had given marriage as a "basic unit of society for companionship and procreation."⁴⁵ Marriage itself was providential, a vocation ordained by God for most human beings designed to facilitate the human need for community. Marriage extended beyond the good of the individual for the good of society. Marriage was a remedy for sin, but for most persons it was also a duty. As such, both marriage and family were presumed to "have an inherent integrity ordained by God which both church and state must respect, protect, and promote."⁴⁶

Reformation theology developed the idea that, in marriage, human sexuality could be a guarantor of the social order. The Reformers affirmed marriage and marital sexuality as expressions of the divine will for human life rather than consolations for fallen humanity. Calvin portrayed marriage as a covenant that overlapped both individual and civil society. As a divine creation, that order likewise reflected the hierarchical orders of authority present in the relation of the Creator to his creation. Marriage was a matter of multiple parties all committed to hierarchical obedience. In each of these parties, from husband and wife to civil magistrate, various facets of God's involvement in the social order were reflected.⁴⁷

The emphasis on marriage and family as the foundation of a social order, rather than the ecclesial control epitomized in the centrality of the medieval monastery,

⁴⁵ Ruether, 74.

⁴⁶ Waters, 29.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 31.

indicated a fundamental shift in where the Reformers were locating their understanding of divine authority and its expressions on Earth. Reformers understood society to be composed of family units organized in patterns of civil authority. Hence, governmental authorities became perceived as the divinely sanctioned arbiters of morality. Brent Waters writes,

While the Council deliberated in Trent, marriage and family were already undergoing extensive reform throughout much of northern Europe. The Reformers produced a voluminous literature on marriage because the Catholic Church's jurisdiction exemplified, they believed, a particularly egregious usurpation of political authority, lodged properly in the secular, rather than ecclesial, sphere. In short, the social ordering of the earthly household was more the concern of the civil magistrate than the priest or minister.⁴⁸

Ruether highlights the theological import of these shifts. The elevation of civil authority and the centrality of marriage reflected a transformation of theological anthropology, particularly around the question of embodied holiness. Theological rhetoric from Origen to Augustine had juxtaposed the pure, intact virgin body with the polluting sinfulness of the sexual drive and corresponding acts of intercourse. Sexual continence had been celebrated as an idealized expression of holiness, an embodied preview of eschatological glory and a reflection of prelapsarian humanity. This theological principle had deep roots in the developed Catholic notion of creation as a means of grace that had been recently and skillfully enumerated by Thomas Aquinas. The body itself was perceived as a means of grace, and even marriage could mediate the particularity of salvation. In rejecting this idea and redirecting attention to the specific “ordinances” of Christ, the Reformers essentially rejected an understanding of the human body as a site for the transmission of divine grace. Bodies themselves had roots only in

⁴⁸ Ibid., 28.

fallen nature. They could not find salvation within their own virginal intactness—sin had already penetrated to their very cores.⁴⁹ Human hope lay only in divine grace and *reflected* itself in obedience to God. A crucial expression of this obedience was the acquiescence to divinely ordained patterns of social organization.⁵⁰ Marriage and family systems were to be duly dependent on the civic maintenance of the social order, and civil magistrates were beholden to a divine duty to maintain the providentially ordained human vocation to marriage and procreation.⁵¹

From confessors to the city council

This shift to civil control meant that sexual desire and transgression outside the boundaries of marital sexuality were no longer simply matters of sin. They were matters of criminality. Acting upon “unnatural” sexual impulses, be they adulterous, illicit, or other, threatened social stability. Communities influenced by the Reformation, including Augsburg, passed ordinances enabling the civil prosecution of marital and sexual indiscretion. As Ruether notes, such initiatives effectively “transferred control of marriage and morals from confessors and church courts to the city council.”⁵²

⁴⁹ Ruether, 76.

⁵⁰ This distinction derived from Luther’s eschatological distinction between the “earthly” and “spiritual” kingdoms. Salvation would come entirely from unmerited grace, and social order derived from this acquiescence. Social institutions could not, in and of themselves, facilitate redemption. They could only reflect God’s divine intention for humanity. See Waters, 29.

⁵¹ R. Ward Holder, *A Companion to Paul in the Reformation*, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2009), 499.

⁵² Ruether, 72.

Further, as Waters argues, the Reformed state pronounced an obligation to promote and protect marriage and family.⁵³ The corresponding need for order, therefore, fell not to the purification of bodies for their own sake (and the reflection of the purity of those bodies upon the perceived purity of the Church at large), but for discipline according to the governing of the world through increasing levels of civic organization rooted in the household. The proper ordering of sexuality, directed toward marriage and procreation, was a matter of state integrity. Both Waters and Ruether have noted how post-Reformation civil authorities assumed the role of “inquisitors.”⁵⁴ However, rather than acting as protectors of Catholic authority, civil institutions were now to serve as defenders of God’s social order on earth, parsing out and prosecuting perceived sexual sins. By way of the “orders of creation,” the state was awarded a divinely-ordained authority to arbitrate the proper application of human sexuality (towards marriage and procreation). This changing approach meant that sexuality was an essentially public matter, not solely an issue of personal vice or even ecclesial purity.

The centrality of the household as a seat for good, providential governance would be increasingly refined by the Puritans and exported to the American colonies, as would the corresponding conviction that the institutions of marriage and family required a God-ordained civil defense. The discourses of sexual discipline and control that emerged alongside early Christian considerations of the body and extended first to ecclesial and then civic struggles for authority would prove crucial to forming America’s civil and theological identity. Sexuality persisted as a key rhetorical tool for prescribing and

⁵³ Waters, 29.

⁵⁴ Ruether, 73.

prosecuting particular visions of national identity as well as for describing threats to the health and integrity of the union. In asserting the universal and intractable fallenness of human beings, the theological concern for the vulnerability of the human body and spirit to sexual pollution proved an effective illustration for the vulnerability of civil society. Puritan Richard Baxter's *A Christian Dictionary*, for example, asserted that God ordains, owns, and uses the household community to govern the world. It is toward the origins and development of the United States that the remainder of this chapter will turn.

Social and sexual order in colonial America

In sixteenth century England, marriage had been primarily considered a matter of commitment, with the consent of a couple to unite commonly recognized as sufficient to form a family unit. Church weddings were predominantly reserved for landed classes. Further, among the agrarian working classes, premarital sexuality was widely considered morally acceptable so long as the couple had declared the intention for a conjugal union.⁵⁵

However, Godbeer contends that the religious, political, and social instability produced by the Protestant Reformation prompted the Church of England towards a revival of sexual regulation as an expression of ecclesial power. "Premarital intimacy had political as well as moral implications since it brought into question the authority of local clergymen--and, by extension, the church as a whole--to control the moment at which a man and a woman became a couple."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History : From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005).

⁵⁶ Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America, Gender Relations in the American Experience* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 3.

Ruether has also suggested that the Reformation marked a revival of a certain Puritan asceticism. Celibate monastics were accused of sexual licentiousness, and brothels frequented by tradesmen were closed across Europe:

The sexual anxiety that fueled this new rigor was surely founded not merely on outrage at the sins of others, but also on the moral crusaders' awareness of their own struggles and lapses. Protestant reformers had themselves recently departed from vowed celibacy after long struggling with a way of life that told them they could obliterate the sexual drive if they had enough ascetic discipline. In rejecting this view of human potential in favor of one that held that the sexual drive must be satisfied, and that God's ordained means of satisfaction was marriage, they adapted rather than abandoned the ascetic anthropology of Saint Augustine.⁵⁷

The control of marital sexuality not only allowed the Church of England to reassert its role as the arm of both civil and religious authority in England but also contributed to the early discourse of social reform that would come to define popular understandings of sexuality by the late nineteenth century. "In a period beset by political, economic, and religious uncertainty, commentators often framed anxieties about the future in terms of encroaching disorder and immorality. Nonmarital sex handily exemplified both of these threats and became a primary target of those who sought to protect English society from sin and chaos."⁵⁸ While moderated differently, through the horizontal structures of colonial life rather than the more tightly controlled Anglican hierarchy, similar social and theological ideas were reflected in the American settlements.

In the American colonies, an emphasis on the survival of the community was coupled with a conviction that God required fervent observation of sexual norms as expressed in faithful marriage and diligent reproduction. Historians John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman have shown that the preindustrial American colonial regime

⁵⁷ Ruether, 68.

⁵⁸ Godbeer, 3.

depended heavily on a sexual system of marriage and procreation to provide a labor force and offer a framework for social stability. The Puritan theology that regulated life in the British colonies asserted that the entire community was responsible for upholding morality, lest God's judgment be pronounced upon the fledgling society. Marriage and family were matters of earthly survival and indicators of the state of the community's collective soul. Offspring were necessary to supply a proper labor force, but their legitimacy was crucial to the moral standing of the entire community.⁵⁹ Cotton Mather himself warned that "heinous breaches of the Seventh Commandment" threatened to consign New England to the fate of Sodom.⁶⁰

In keeping with the Reformation principle of civil discipline for the regulation of morality, the Massachusetts Bay Colony, for example, made crimes of sexual immorality equivalent to other forms of criminal transgression. Adultery, sodomy, and rape now carried the same capital penalties as treason, murder and witchcraft.⁶¹ Marital sexuality was a matter for the community, with fornication often carrying civil and capital punishments. However, D'Emilio and Freedman suggest that the formal work of church and court to prosecute sexual deviance in the colonies was complemented by an increasingly diffuse surveillance achieved in popular forms of social ostracization. Because the morality of the entire community was at stake, it also fell to the community as a whole to enact practices of surveillance, which frequently manifested themselves in public mocking and aspersion. Public taunting of both adulterers and cuckolds

⁵⁹ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters : A History of Sexuality in America*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), xix.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

effectively contributed to the socialization of colonial inhabitants, and particularly young people, reinforcing marital sexuality as the principle sexual norm for both communal morality and appropriate Christian practice.⁶²

Revolutions Industrial and American

Cities built up in the wake of the Industrial Revolution began to change the shape of marriage and family life in the colonies. Demographics and geography were certainly contributing factors, but the impact of shifting political and moral philosophy should not be discounted. In the American colonies, the weakening of Protestant churches as well as the bond between church and state following the Revolutionary War had eroded the role of civil and communal society in regulating the sexual and moral behavior of its populace. Economic changes complemented this trend. The shift to commercial agriculture and maritime trade undermined traditional methods for regulating sexual and communal life. As generations of enterprising family members were often separated in pursuit of interest and occupation, young people were released from the close supervision of their parents. Particularly in the North, sexual license became an increasing part of the social order. First-hand accounts of the period often lament the bawdy parties and misadventures enjoyed by young people, the increasing rates of premarital pregnancies attested to a rise in sexual experimentation.⁶³ "In some parts of New England, as many as one-third of all brides were pregnant in the late eighteenth century, compared to under 10 percent in the seventeenth century."⁶⁴

⁶² Ibid., 19.

⁶³ Ibid., 42-43.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 43.

In the North, this was met with a paradoxical mix of grave concern and rhetorical co-optation for a growing class of intellectual elites enraptured with Enlightenment republicanism. The Enlightenment ideals of individual choice, autonomy, happiness, and the celebration of nature undermined Puritanical suspicions of sensual delight. “[A]t a time when 'the pursuit of happiness' became a political ideal, individual pleasure, and not simply the duty to procreate or to give comfort to one's spouse, came to be valued as a goal of sexual relations.”⁶⁵ Godbeer observes that Revolutionary rhetoric and its celebration of personal liberty proved helpful to young adults seeking to “justify their insistence upon sexual independence.”⁶⁶

At the same time, “republican ideology stressed the need for moral virtue as the lifeblood of free institutions.”⁶⁷ Sexual morality marked the inherent tension between individual liberty and rationally-minded civil governance that guided the architects of the new republic. Sexual license became both literally and rhetorically emblematic of this concern. D’Emilio and Freedman describe how “the formation of a republican government intensified fears that strong passions would undermine the virtue of the citizenry. Patriots like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Rush called on Americans to exercise moderation in all things, including sex, to resist the dissipation that, they believed, weakened European governments.”⁶⁸ Sexual virtue was proposed at once as a literal necessity to democratic reform and a powerful rhetorical image for the success of the American experiment.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁶ Godbeer, 15.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ D’Emilio and Freedman, 44.

Though moral surveillance was becoming increasingly diffuse, popular culture was proving increasingly adequate to the task. Popular rhetoric, imagery, and anti-British propaganda frequently played upon social anxieties and utilized images of chastity and moral depravity to describe the threats to personal and political freedom posed by monarchists and populists alike. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* urged that "...the domestic tranquility of a nation depend[ed] greatly on the chastity of what may properly be called national matters," while John Adams compared populists to the seductive villains of popular fiction, threatening to unmoor the chaste virtue of the republican project.⁶⁹

Sex in the South

In the Southern colonies, things developed somewhat differently but with a similar application of sexual morality to social engineering.—a necessity for the justification of an increasingly hierarchical social organization in the agrarian South. In the Southern states, connections between social stability and sexuality were especially infused with questions of racial and religious identity. Rhetorical attempts to defend white purity and cultural identity effectively commingled with the preservation of “Christian” sexual morality. Racial miscegenation laws frequently aligned “white” identity with “Christian” identity, so that a “Christian, not being a Negro, mulatto, or Indian,”⁷⁰ was afforded both special protections against violence and also subject to harsh

⁶⁹ Godbeer, 294.

⁷⁰ Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America : A Genealogy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 74.

penalty for sexually intermixing with nonwhites.⁷¹ Those who were not situated within the appropriate boundary markers risked classification as sexually deviant and socially suspect. Godbeer and D’Emilio and Freedman agree that the question of communal sexual morality reinforced notions of “civility” among the white owner classes. Sexual morality was seen as a marker between gentility and savagery, with the policing of intermarriage and miscegenation intended to preserve structures of dominance and cultural superiority.⁷²

Women as Sign and Seal of Regulated Virtue

While women have always figured prominently in the prescriptions for Christian sexual morality, the post-Industrial American context marks a particularly acute moment in sexual surveillance.⁷³ Despite the differences in the development of sexual ethics and rhetorical imagery in the North and South, the regions shared a conviction that sexual virtue, and particularly the virtue of white upper class women, rightly served as the guarantor for social stability and moral purity. In popular rhetoric, women’s chastity was called upon as a foil to aristocratic libertinism and both a source and model for Protestant moral reform.⁷⁴ Paradoxically, the trope of the “fallen woman,” left violated and pregnant by some libertine rascal after an unfortunate sexual indulgence, could

⁷¹ Ibid., 71.

⁷² Godbeer, 14.

⁷³ Ruether argues in *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* that Christian sexual morality is itself actually veiled instruction for how women are to be in relation to men.

⁷⁴ D’Emilio and Freedman, 45.

“serve as a convenient symbol for the irrational and the uncontrollable in all people,” who teetered on the brink of moral collapse under the weight of their desire.⁷⁵

A new clausturation

The vulnerability of medieval women religious to rape and abuse by invading hords had corresponded in a rise of narratives of virginal heroism, celebrating these women as paragons of virtue, symbols of the integrity of ecclesial authority and perseverance on earth. In a telling feedback loop, however, the fact of increased vulnerability coupled with these narratives resulted in an increased argument for the strict cloistering of both nuns and dedicated virgins. These women were locked away deep within the convent or private household for both their own security and their power to secure the moral and spiritual fate of both fellow householders and the Church at large. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the address of the female sexuality as the post-Industrial period progressed into the Victorian Era, with the post-Reformation, post-Revolutionary republican state now in need of a moral gatekeeper.

Historians have argued that the post-Revolutionary period was in fact an increased time of sexual vulnerability for women. The sexual license afforded young people less subject to the collective surveillance of pre-Industrial agrarian communities and strict parental oversight meant less marital security for women. Premarital pregnancies had generally resulted in marriage (or occasioned by the informal sanctioning of sexual intercourse following betrothal), with up to a third of all brides in parts of New England pregnant prior to their wedding days compared with fewer than ten

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

percent in the seventeenth century.⁷⁶ However, the increasing transience of both the new *bourgeois* and working classes meant a lower likelihood of accountability for men who had “ruined” their paramours. At the same time, as Ruether has noted, the increasing professionalization of trades and artisanal production away from the activities of the household left women largely unable to generate self-sustaining income. Outside the care of their fathers or husbands, women were largely left with little resource or recourse. Illegitimate pregnancy or the ruination of a reputation could have dire implications.⁷⁷

Women also symbolized the para-innocent New Republic, promising in the purity of its ideals but still subject to seduction. In both Europe and America, women were being exhorted to take special care to control their passions and guard their chastity. Godbeer offers a compelling description of this idealization, as apparent in the popular fiction of the period:

Male villains who stalked the pages of novels and short stories embodied the forces of corruption and depravity that might overwhelm the republic if civic virtue faltered; the fate of young women such as Eliza Wharton dramatized the grim consequences of giving in to dishonorable impulses. A carefully designed governmental structure could minimize the dangers, just as familial and community surveillance could protect young women to some degree from male abuse of sexual freedom. But safety in both contexts depended in large part upon individual virtue and perspicacity. Given the frequency with which Americans of this period insisted upon the interdependence of personal and public virtue, these parallels would have been obvious to readers. John Adams' equation of politicians whom he considered corrupt with Lovelace and of novice citizens with the much abused Clarissa was neither obscure nor far-fetched in the cultural context of the new republic.⁷⁸

The domestic sphere would make for an apt cloister, drawing an association between femininity and home that expanded the realm of necessary protection.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷⁷ Ruether.

⁷⁸ Godbeer, 296.

Guarding the Victorian home

In the harsh post-Industrial world of business, with its Enlightenment environment of intellectual uncertainty and materialistic competition, the home was characterized as a restorative sanctuary. This haven from the business world, the world of men, was also a haven from cutthroat moral license. The virtuous woman found safety in the home and preserved it by her virtue. Chaste femininity was rhetorically aligned with the celebration of the home as the site for the moral and spiritual salvation of a nation. Efforts to create a godly society were being transferred towards an overwhelming confidence in the power of the godly household. This was echoed in both mainline and Evangelical Protestantism of the period, which was making an increasing case for the alliance of Christian morality with domestic life.⁷⁹

As men had a vocation to the market, women were “finding” a vocation to the nurturance of the domestic sphere. Ruether writes,

In the home, a religious world of fixed certainties was to be maintained, in contrast to the secular world of rationalism and skepticism. In the home, emotion and intimacy reigned, against an outside world dominated by unfeeling technological rationality. In the home, sublimated spirituality compensated for an outward capitulation to the fierce materialism of the commercial quest for profits. Home was an Eden of beauty and peace located in a quiet suburb far removed from the ugly world of the factory.⁸⁰

Ruether demonstrates that the ideal of Victorian womanhood already had deep roots. The celebrated altruistic femininity and Mariology that had accompanied feminine ideals since the early Middle Ages were once again popularized in revival-era women’s

⁷⁹ See Peter Gardella, *Innocent Ecstasy : How Christianity Gave America an Ethic of Sexual Pleasure* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁸⁰ Ruether, 104.

magazines of the 1830s.⁸¹ Ruether calls this a “new religious ideology” that, by aligning femininity with the domestic sphere, rendered the home as the paradisaal bastion of unspoiled morality and virtue. However, the ideal had previously existed against a paradoxical insistence on the seductive danger of female desire. Now, women were portrayed as “asexual innocents, permanent servants of the domestic sphere of purity and goodness against the evil outside world.” “In effect, middle-class America gave up trying to create a godly society and retreated to making a godly home.”⁸² Women were considered safest when engaged in the shaping of domestic life, and the nation itself was most secure when women were engaged in this endeavor. Further, the security of the home life was no longer in direct service to the preservation of the Church, or, by Protestant extension, civil society. Rather, theological commitments were shifting towards the preservation of the home.

During this period, theologian Horace Bushnell called for the reestablishment of Christian morality through the promotion of “Christian families.” Bushnell understood the church to play only a supplementary role in the promulgation of Christian conversion and sanctification. The family was not at odds with the mission of Christianity, but actually its chief arbiter. This was not, as Waters points out, a call to “families of Christians.” Such a term would have been a far more familiar appellation in former periods of Christianity, when theologians were still attempting to reconcile the divided sexual and social commitments of domestic life with personal holiness and ecclesial mission. For Bushnell, the domestic sphere was responsible for the literal passing on of

⁸¹ Ibid., 103.

⁸² Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Church and Family III: Religion and the Making of the Victorian Family,” *New Blackfriars* 65, no. 765 (1984): 103.

sanctification through offspring. Bushnell argued that Christian families could actually "out breed" non-Christians, whose moral and spiritual laxities were threats to their own piety.

Waters has marked this period of theological shift, embodied in Bushnell, as a crucial moment in Protestant theology. The privileging of the family in the regulation of morality augured a conflation of Christian eschatology with the promulgation of a new "reproductive order" based in middle class family life. The domestic sphere—and not the local congregation—was also the proper site for the nurture of the young in Christian faith:

The price for placing this burden on the family is dear, for in fixating on the nature of its organic unity Bushnell disfigures its theological unfolding. The family's *telos* is no longer transcendent, drawing it out of itself towards larger spheres of human association, but is contained within itself. There is no necessary tension between the family and the church, because the latter is a confederation of Christian families instead of an eschatological community of Christians with families. The church and the family share an identical rather than complementary witness: one need look no further than the earthly household to see humankind's destiny. The new creation entails no transformation of familial affinity into a fellowship of sisters and brothers in Christ, but it is the perfection of a reproductive order. And in building the kingdom on a foundation of godly seed, parents are the primary evangelists, and their offspring the harbinger's of God's new age.⁸³

These sentiments would reemerge in the mid-twentieth century debates suggesting that the state had usurped the central role of parent and family (rather than the church) in the moral formation of children.

⁸³ Waters, 58.

Theological Capitulations in Modernity

The confidence in reproduction and the family to achieve moral, spiritual, and social progress meant an additional theological capitulation. The declining role of clergy and state as arbiters of social morality also gave way to the rising cult of medical expertise. Doctors became the new theorists of sexuality and social engineering, epitomized in the hygiene movement of 1870s and its medical response to prostitution. The middle class domestic sphere remained the figuratively asexual ideal and seat of the reproduction of the Christian moral order. However, the medical sphere was perceived as the rightful arbiter of “normal” and healthy sexuality while also acting increasingly as the gatekeeper that confined sexuality to procreation and affection in the family home. Medical science proved well-suited to these aims, offering a “biological” basis to dominant sexual ideologies while promising correction through the appropriate delineation and routing of desire. In turn, newly minted American consumers would rapidly embrace a religion of health that promised personal and social salvation through sex.

From this period forward, popular rhetoric around sexuality in the U.S. carries with it several themes particularly pertinent to framing Christian sexuality education within a larger sense that sexual surveillance and discipline are necessary for collective stability and the achievement of biopower. In *Innocent Ecstasy*, religionist Peter Gardella tracks this as turn towards the “Religion of Health.”⁸⁴ I would suggest two additional categories: the Religion of the Market and the Religion of Home(land).

⁸⁴ Gardella.

Religion of health

The practice of “sex education” that would be most recognizable to contemporary audiences has its foundations in nineteenth century movements to eradicate venereal disease and discourage the practice of prostitution. Protestant clergy and middle-class women activists had joined together to attempt the elimination of these two obstacles to “social purity” by announcing “renewed calls for a spiritual, romanticized sexual bond between husband and wife, an elimination of the double standard, and curbs on male lust and out-of-control sexuality.”⁸⁵ The dissemination of short pamphlets and guides developed into early twentieth century calls for education initiatives in public schools directed at the eradication of venereal disease. These were cooperative campaigns, led by “a disparate group of moral reformers including suffragists, clergy, temperance workers, and physicians.”⁸⁶ Culture had become afflicted with a variety of neuroses and confusions. Sex, and sexual bodies, could be disciplined in the pursuit of liberation through ecstasy, provided the outlets were appropriate. Otherwise, sexual deviation could offer quite scarring cautionary tales. Modern science was available with the cure, as well as with an ability to offer telling accounts of the “natural” and the deviant in human sexuality.

Science and medicalization of sex were quickly reshaping public notions of its meaning and value. Through the first half of the twentieth century, the science of “sexology” and the increasing volume of speech about sexuality in the public sphere from theorists and researches including Sigmund Freud, Havelock Ellis, and Alfred Kinsey

⁸⁵ Irvine, 6.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

began to press for the alleviation of social anxiety and personal guilt about sex through the proliferation of scientific knowledge.⁸⁷ Sexuality, these discourses affirmed, was primarily a health issue for mind, body, and society itself. Approached scientifically and rationally, human sexuality could be relieved of both its potentially harmful attributes and the forms of superstitious guilt that prevent its full realization and enjoyment. The increasing acceptance of family planning among American Protestants had likewise sanctioned the separation of sex and reproduction. Sexuality could not necessarily be directly relied upon to secure the societal foundations of marriage and reproduction it once did.

The corresponding “religion of health” also was quickly supplanting previous theological notions of sex, sin, and salvation. Gardella observes that the rise of American Christian perfectionism corresponded perfectly with the transference of sexual authority to medical professionals, who offered a hope for material perfection of even the “animal nature,” wherein lay the last vestiges of original sin.⁸⁸ Theologians and psychoanalysts alike were displacing concupiscence and desire with the problem of anxiety, confident that a better relationship to sexuality could yield better human relationships in general. Sexuality’s purpose was to serve the family that in turn would save society. Hence, the particular machinations and manifestations of sexual behavior were to be judged according to whether they achieved this end. Sexual desire and pleasure were matters of grave import to the success of the domestic sphere

⁸⁷ Ibid; Weeks.

⁸⁸ Gardella, 90-91.

This did not mean, however, an adherence to an Augustinian or even Victorian vision of the endurance of sexual intercourse purely for the sake of procreation. Rather, “sexual health” itself was shifting from a rhetoric of medicalized release from passion to a necessary realm of accomplished pleasure within the marital relationship. From the early family planning pamphlets of Margaret Sanger to the rise on Evangelical and medical sex manuals by the mid-twentieth century, sexual fulfillment was being fashioned as an obligation of the healthy American Christian, so long as that fulfillment was being constrained within the institutional confines of a heterosexually married, reproducing consumer household.⁸⁹

Religion of market

The emergence of a middle class consumer market meant that the trends noted above could be disseminated quickly across new channels of communication. In addition, these concepts were packaged and sold as part of a dream for economic prosperity and a solidified national identity. Sex could not only be redeemed and put to proper use. It also had the power, through pleasure and discipline, to produce a healthy and stable society that could support a consumer-based economy. Sexual values were market values, and vice versa. The construction of a moral domestic sphere well-appointed with consumer goods and held together with female sexual virtue, Ruether, argues, placed the question of morality and religion squarely in the realm of family life. The unquestioning superiority of the home as moral and physical sanctuary suggested that the questioning of the values of the market were unnecessary, as it stood outside the

⁸⁹ D'Emilio and Freedman, 268-269.

concerns of church and family. However, the ascription of this great power to sexuality also meant that it served also as a consistent threat. The increasing number of working women seeking resources for participation in the consumer economy was viewed as a marked destabilization of sexual gender roles.⁹⁰ Sexuality outside the bounds of discipline always threatened to afflict and vitiate the America held together by middle class consumers.

The primacy of the domestic middle class consumer family certainly served to mask the increasing influence of mass media marketing, public schooling, and changing work patterns on sexual surveillance and regulation. Summarizing sociologists Brigitte and Peter Berger, Waters notes that post-Industrial secularization and modernization shifted the primary role of the family from production to consumption, “effectively diminishing the value of household labor because it is not productive. Moreover, accommodating modernizing and secularizing trends means that the socialization of children is no longer confined primarily to the family, but is shared with other social institutions such as schools and social service agencies. The practical effect is to reduce the family household to a private enclave of intimacy, affection, and, most importantly, consumption.”⁹¹

This “sharing” of the socialization of children would be increasingly problematic to groups who nonetheless otherwise wished to push the primacy of the family as the seat of sexual and moral arbitration. The answer would be found not in unseating the market, but in reshaping an understanding of government as a regulatory arm of the values of the

⁹⁰ Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, 126, 132.

⁹¹ Waters, 84.

family. Children were not to be “shared” with secularized institutions. Rather, institutions were charged with thwarting secularization through the management of sexual behavior and morality. The values, which secured the safety of the home as a seat of affection and consumption, could also be promoted and regulated politically. In a sense, such an ideological shift harkens back to Reformation-era ideas about the role of the state as the moral arbiter of divine orders of creation, with the discipline of sexuality through the promotion of marriage and family as the primary means of securing this goal.

Religion of home(land)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, medical professionals, advertisers, and popular religionists alike had come to argue that a “healthy,” unrepressed sexuality was not only a good, but also a necessity for adult life. At the same time, the consuming, middle-class family unit was being billed as the bulwark against the temptations and freedoms of modern life as well as the natural and necessary foundation for a prosperous society. Liberal Protestantism offered an almost wholehearted embrace of religion’s capacity for personal and social improvement as well as a growing devotion to historical criticism. Mainline denominations were increasingly willing to embrace the changing sexual ethics of the period without concerns of apostasy. As a consequence, the theological visions offered by denominational representatives quickly came to mirror the vision of a sexually healthy, well-planned, and domestically ordered middle class consumer society. Gardella describes a 1929 report from the Federal Council of Churches declaring that the normalcy of an entrance into marriage that “has been deeply and consciously rooted in sex experiences...thought of as natural but at the same time as

spiritual.”⁹² Mark Jordan notes that the general approval of contraception during this time is a sign not only of Protestantism’s accommodation, but also of a general shift in moral authority wholly out of Christian hands, at least in the West and certainly in the U.S.⁹³ In its place entered the scientific, the political, the marketable, and the popular.

Still, historian Jeffrey Moran has described how the mid-century rise of the “cult of domesticity” was characterized by a concurrent celebration of middle-class family life and mounting fears for the future of democracy in the face of the Cold War. Special concern emerged for juvenile delinquency, exemplified in pop culture by *Rebel Without a Cause* and similar books and films. “Juvenile delinquents” were not only viewed as a sign of destabilized home life, but also a sign that democracy itself was under threat. American youth required the formation of democratic character necessary to resist Communism, and that was expected to be found first in the home.⁹⁴ In response, public school “life adjustment” curricula were designed to act as preventative solution. Child abuse and familial breakdown were always portrayed as the root cause of “delinquency,” and the solution presented was the inculcation of middle-class standards for marriage and family life.⁹⁵

Christians were to be fearful over this development, and their anxiety would be relieved only through an active resistance to this illegitimate destabilization of God-ordained norms for the family. Christian fundamentalists were confident that a re-

⁹² Gardella, 151-152.

⁹³ Jordan, 138-140.

⁹⁴ Jeffrey P. Moran, *Teaching Sex : The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).-139

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

ordering of social systems, with biblically grounded reproductive married sexuality at the center, could reinforce democratic citizenship and secure the nation itself against threat of incursion. “Secular humanism,” Communism, and a variety of corrupting influences from Catholic immigrants to historical criticism were all legitimate threats to the nation-state, insidiously entering into the vernacular of even mainline American Protestants.⁹⁶

Ethicist Anne Bathurst Gilson has argued that this shift in American popular thought would also galvanize American evangelicals, who found themselves witnessing the rapid shift of public and private perspectives on ideological and moral foundations. For Evangelicals, the Scopes trial, while not immediately about sexuality, was viewed as emblematic of the troublingly destabilized connection between reproduction and God-ordained family structures wrought by societal shifts in moral commitments. Evolutionary disavowal of the notion that beings did not descend immediately from the original Adam and Eve were perceived as claims that God had not ordained the human family as the seat of uniquely human reproduction. The Supreme Court decision cemented Evangelical certitude that America was rapidly losing its identity as “Christian nation,” with the risk of gravely deleterious consequences.⁹⁷ Even as the American “Sexual Revolution” continued to roll forward, this simmering discontent would soon reemerge as a political juggernaut, with adolescent sexuality as a key rallying cry.

⁹⁶ D’Emilio and Freedman, 293; Anne Bathurst Gilson, *The Battle for America’s Families : A Feminist Response to the Religious Right* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1999), 18-19.

⁹⁷ Gilson, 18.

Modern Development of Sex Education in the United States

Christian sex education as it is popularly conceived today—youth group nights and weekend retreats guided by professionally-produced studies and curricula—is a relatively recent phenomenon. Most of these programs have emerged in the last twenty years or so, following a significant shift from ecclesial attention to public health campaigns and sex education’s role in public schooling. The concept of “sex education” in general has been shaped by discursive developments in public policy and politics steeped in the language and action of Christian communities and activists. The work of a 1968 interfaith coalition that included the National Council of Churches created a turn towards comprehensive sex education in public schools that was met swiftly by the vocal outrage of the Christian Right. Debates over the content of sex education in schools marked the entrance of Christian speech about formal sexuality education into the public sphere, and I argue that it shaped the later manner in which churches took up the mantle of sex education. Regardless of where churches sit on the spectrum of liberal to conservative, the content of the sex education produced has much to do with the framing of the question by the Christian Right and the positioning of that church or Christian denomination in relation to it. The vehement insistence by Christian conservatives that public school education be “abstinence-based” has done much to shape corresponding content in churches.

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“social purity” by announcing “renewed calls for a spiritual, romanticized sexual bond between husband and wife, an elimination of the double standard, and curbs on male lust and out-of-control sexuality.”⁹⁸ The dissemination of short pamphlets and guides developed into early twentieth century calls for education initiatives in public schools directed at the eradication of venereal disease. These were cooperative campaigns, led by “a disparate group of moral reformers including suffragists, clergy, temperance workers, and physicians.”⁹⁹

Through the first half of the twentieth century, the science of “sexology” and the increasing volume of speech about sexuality in the public sphere from theorists and researches including Sigmund Freud, Havelock Ellis, and Alfred Kinsey began to press for the alleviation of social anxiety and personal guilt about sex through the proliferation of scientific knowledge.¹⁰⁰ Sexuality, these discourses affirmed, was primarily a health issue for mind, body, and society itself. Approached scientifically and rationally, human sexuality could be relieved of both its potentially harmful attributes and the forms of superstitious guilt that prevent its full realization and enjoyment.

A sexual revolution

In 1964, physician and public health advocate Mary Calderone founded the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), which would go on to serve as both a catalyst and lightning rod for debates about the appropriateness and content of sex education in the U.S. A convergence of influences shaped the Council’s

⁹⁸ Irvine, 6.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid; Weeks.

work. By the early 1960s, the U.S. had found itself in a period of political upheaval marked by student protests, civil rights demonstrations, the onset of the Sexual Revolution, and specter of the Cold War. Oral contraception in the form of the “birth control pill” had also been made widely available by 1960.

SIECUS shared the rationalist viewpoint of its scientific forebears. The organization set about advocating, to some level of success (*need more here, or at least a footnote*) for comprehensive sex education in public schools. At the same time, ecumenical attention began to be paid to the new challenges of a far more sexually permissive society. An interfaith statement on sexuality education produced by the National Council of Churches Commission on Marriage and Family, the Synagogue Council of America Committee on Family, and the United States Catholic Conference Family Life Bureau in 1968 offered both an understanding of human sexuality and called for religious advocacy for public sexual education in schools:

Human sexuality is a gift of God, to be accepted with thanksgiving and used with reverence and joy. It is more than a mechanical instinct. Its many dimensions are intertwined with the total personality and character of the individual. Sex is a dynamic urge or power, arising from one’s basic maleness or femaleness, and having complex physical, psychological and social dimensions. These dimensions, we affirm, must be shaped and guided by spiritual and moral considerations that derive from our Judeo-Christian heritage. The heritage teaches us that the source of values to guide human behavior is in God.¹⁰¹

The Interfaith Statement echoed sex-positive developments in science and the popular rhetoric of the “Sexual Revolution.” Sex was to be understood, unashamedly, as a gift. Attention to this “gift” was best paid through the discernment of appropriate human behavior, in this case in light of Judeo-Christian ethics. The statement repeatedly

¹⁰¹ Deborah M. Haffner and Kate Ott, *A Time to Speak: Faith Communities and Sexuality Education, 2nd Edition*, 9.

advocates for “healthy attitudes” towards sexuality as key to positive sexual development in children, with the primary responsibility for this environment falling on the parents. Churches and congregations were seen as able to provide “supplementary assistance” to parents in this endeavor, so that “its young people” can “learn about their development into manhood and womanhood, and for adults to grow in understanding of their roles as men and women in family and society in the light of their religious heritage.”

The 1968 Interfaith Statement called on religious communities, leaders, and families to understand themselves as responsible for sexuality education in homes and congregations *and* advocacy for sex education in schools that reflects not “sectarian religious doctrine, but the moral heritage of Western civilization.”¹⁰² The statement goes on to proffer eleven guidelines for this standard, six of which make appeals to “moral and ethical values” assumed to be held relatively in common by their audience. Guideline “j” suggests that sex education “should teach that sexual intercourse within marriage offers the greatest possibility for personal fulfillment and social growth.”¹⁰³ However, it should be noted that while this statement makes a somewhat imperialist appeal to the “moral heritage of Western civilization,” it is careful to suggest that schools should be mindful of moral, ethical, and religious pluralism, foster critical reflection on competing perspectives, and the use of “human values and human dignity,” *not* biblical or Judeo-Christian morality, as “major bases for decisions of right or wrong.”

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 10.

Backlash

Still, by the late 1960s, the burgeoning Evangelical movement that would eventually coalesce into the “Christian Right” had gone on the offensive. Organizations including the John Birch Society began to include public school sex education in their litany of examples of anti-family developments in U.S. domestic policy. The Christian Right accused public school sex educators of all manners of depravity, successfully gutting the content of most public school sex education to a minimal level of reproductive biology and exhortations for abstinence until marriage.¹⁰⁴

The Right found an effective target for their fervent opposition to public sex education and its expression in schools. SIECUS was accused of being overly permissive and an embodiment of secular humanism and relativism. The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) faced virulent opposition from politicized evangelicals. The previously-mainstreamed organization had been the most influential voice for shaping public school sexuality education. While comprehensive in its approach, SIECUS had maintained a historical sympathy for religious groups in their own literature, recognizing in that sexuality was “God’s gift” and should be negotiated in reference to morals and values. Still, the Right argued that SIECUS’ recommendations for sexuality education in schools “repudiated evangelical sexual morality simply by encouraging sexual tolerance and a nonabsolutist approach to values.”¹⁰⁵

Comprehensive sex education was portrayed as usurping the rights of parents to determine how and what to tell their children about sex. As the Evangelical Right grew

¹⁰⁴ Irvine.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

more vocal, parental and “family” values became reframed as the antitheses to public school sex education. Their polemic would soon prove an effective way to mobilize the growing Evangelical political base. For the Right, teenage sexuality became the ideal stand-in for its larger intentions for sexual regulation of the American culture at large. Arguing about what should and should be taught to young people regarding sexuality was, essentially, an argument about who could, and who could not (or should not) speak for America about sexual morality, behavior, and the arrangement of corresponding social institutions.¹⁰⁶

Still, it is important to note that Evangelicals were at the same time managing to promulgate other forms of prescriptive sexual speech highly influenced by the “Sexual Revolution” they were railing against. In what may very well be the earliest precursors to the current crop of church-based sex education materials available through denominational and parachurch publishing houses, Evangelicals published a plethora of sex manuals for married couples. As Janet Irvine points out in her history of the political debates surrounding sex education in the U.S., Evangelicals attempted to avoid charges of prudery by shifting their position from sexual censorship to the proliferation of a certain forms of sexual speech. Evangelical pastors and a whole cadre of women positioned themselves as sexual experts, publishing sex manuals and purporting that married Christians can and should have the best sex in media and publishing campaigns.¹⁰⁷ In so doing, the movement was able to establish itself not as an opponent to, but an authority on, sexual speech. Writes Irvine,

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 82.

The establishment of a conservative Christian sexuality industry was consonant with this tradition. Fundamentalists and evangelicals are also committed to winning souls to the salvation found in Jesus Christ. Add to this mix the powerful entrance of conservative Christians into the political arena in the mid-seventies and it was not surprising that they became intent not on simply injecting morality or even religious considerations into the sexual culture. Rather, they were determined to broadly establish sexual mores that were congruent with their interpretation of biblical standards. They began efforts to implement public policy regarding teenage sexuality.¹⁰⁸

Politicization

Successful efforts to dial back the presence of comprehensive sex education in public schools by agitating concerned parents with inflamed tales of corruption and sexual discourse gone wild confirmed the movement's growing political strength.¹⁰⁹ As parents were assisted in organizing against school boards and local governments, foundations were being laid for more wide-scale political mobilization. This effort of the Christian Right to link speech about sexuality to political action contributed to the solidification of the movement's visibility and the eventual rise to power of the New Right by the 1970s. With that rise to power, sex education would come to once again play an integral role, this time as a vehicle for legislating the movement's larger project of national moral reform through political legislation. As teen pregnancy, welfare reform, and AIDS became national topics of conversation, conservatives shifted their commentary on sex education from *whether* it should be offered in schools to *what* should be offered in schools. Instead of appealing to the primacy of the family for instilling sexual morality in young people, the New Right began to claim that the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 88.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 135-136.

government itself would serve the role of parent, legislating and promulgating “family values” through government services and public schooling.

In the 1970s, a brief rise in white, middle class teen pregnancy rates prompted the Right to call for “abstinence-based” sex education.¹¹⁰ The term abstinence, previously popularly attached to temperance movements, here became the flagship term for education geared at the prevention of premarital sexual intercourse. The term would quickly come to dominate federal, state, and local policy on sexual education.¹¹¹ It echoes in Christian sex education curricula today regardless of position on the liberal-conservative spectrum.

Teen pregnancy had become associated with a relaxing of Christian morality and the outcome of female sexual empowerment, auguring the disintegration of “traditional” family structures while illustrating the insidious insinuation of corrupting sexual values into the previously airtight family unit. The neo-Conservative takeover of the federal executive and legislative branches harkened by the election of Ronald Regan in 1980 would lead to a series of legislative acts that would inscribe Christian conservative expectations for sexuality education into law for the next two decades. Sex education itself had been implicated in that process. Sociologist Wanda S. Pillow has described this process in detail:

During the 1996 congressional hearings on preventing teen pregnancy, Representative Nancy Johnson [said], 'many of us believe the issue is not just teen pregnancy, but sex outside of marriage.' In these hearings, the problem of teen pregnancy is linked with a 'breakdown of the American family,' a 'prevalence of dysfunctional families,' and a rise of 'single parent families.' Representative Eva Clayton cited that 'our current teen pregnancy crisis evolved over several

¹¹⁰ Doan and Williams, 27-28.

¹¹¹ Wanda S. Pillow, *Unfit Subjects : Educational Policy and the Teen Mother* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), 179.

generations when the social fabric became worn and tattered and began to unravel.' The hearings included a call to bring morality through 'abstinence' into 'public housing developments' and cited the need to 'teach certain values that are irreplaceable in developing and sustaining committed and faithful marital relationships that can withstand the nearly 50 percent American divorce rate.' The linkage of abstinence-only programs as a solution for teen pregnancy helped situate abstinence-only within policy debates.¹¹²

Conclusion

Contemporary adolescent sexuality curricula portray marriage as the highest form of human relational intimacy, with (hetero)sexual intercourse as its physical correlate. It presumes that this has been “God’s plan” from the beginning, and that human sexuality properly undertaken is in fact a direct witness to the gospel. Such family values are at a significant variance from Paul’s early capitulations to the delayed *parousia*, the patristic “strong towers” of virginity, or Augustine’s lamentable approach to marriage and procreation as an inevitable consequence of the Fall. Still, we can see in those early tropes the capacity of sexual rhetoric for the elastic embrace of a variety of social anxieties. As Western European and early American Protestantism shifted towards civil governance and theologies of ordered creation and vocation, the theological rhetoric of sexual personhood and social (Christian) practice embedded itself in a far more proleptic model of God’s intentions for human life.

In our current age, popular rhetoric and legislative posturing seem to have taken the lead, and theology has followed suit. The language of the welfare queen and the promulgation of middle-class values have insinuated themselves into the well-intentioned

¹¹² Ibid.

rhetoric of church sexuality curricula. Even the popular rhetoric of “God’s gift of sexuality” seemed inextricably linked to “God’s gift of the upper middle class lifestyle,” and the “theology” of sex education appeared to be inadvertently lifted from the “theology” of the New Right’s efforts at reform through the sexual regulation of adolescents.

Sexuality education materials frequently offer a form of modern Protestant theology (or at least, Christian sexual rhetoric) that has drifted into biopower. God’s providence is inextricably linked to the discipline and control of bodies, real and symbolic, individual and collective. This can express itself as commentary on the role of sexual desire and physical expression as well as the regulation of marriage and kinship systems.

A particular strain of American Protestant Christianity has largely become the perceived theological gatekeeper for sexual rhetoric in our country. And across time, both then and now, that rhetoric has been written across the bodies of young people. As Mark Jordan has made plain in *Recruiting Young Love*, debating the sexuality of young people has stood in for deeper debates about the nature of human sexuality. However, even further, I would suggest that the attempt to control and discipline sexual behavior, directing it towards specific ends, has long been a rhetorical hallmark of theological attempts to define Church power, unity, and influence in the world. The contemporary use of theo-political rhetoric about adolescent sexuality reinforces the potential of Christian speech to be used as a tool in the advance of biopower. . In the next chapter, I will use an approach grounded in critical theory to unpack the ramifications of these rhetorical developments on Christian theological speech about adolescent sexuality.

CHAPTER III

SHIFTING SANDS: DISCIPLINE AND CONTAINMENT IN AN AGE OF SEXUAL INSTABILITY

Care, Crisis, and Discipline

The previous chapter drew us through Christian history and into the American century. I discussed how the rhetoric of sexual integrity and the meanings attached to sex and marriage have frequently mirrored concerns about ecclesial and state power and influence. This account sought to expand the field of necessary engagement when it comes to considering a “Christian” approach to sex. Suspicion of the flesh and its desires persists as a necessary matter for interrogation, but it is crucial that theologians begin to look more closely at the mutually informed narratives that have emerged from this history as modern political, scientific, and market discourses. These discourses are the very water in which youth and their caregivers swim. As such, any process of theological meaning-making undertaken in relation to sexuality will inevitably be shaped by more than ancient Christian dualisms.

During our text conversation, I recall a particular kind of anger. Anger on behalf of Jenny, who I knew had not wanted to initiate a sexual relationship with her boyfriend and yet had yielded to the persistent and conflicting desires to maintain a romantic relationship, and perhaps to enjoy physical aspects of that relationship, and yet also to set physical boundaries for herself. I was angry that, it seemed, as usual yet another young girl felt that her self-worth was distinctly tied to her sexual availability to a man. But in that moment, even that did not matter so much. What mattered is that Jenny was able to

begin the process of integrating this experience into her understanding of self, and self-in-relation. It mattered that Jenny knew she was still Jenny, still beloved, and still discerning how her sexuality could be part of her flourishing as a maturing person.

The problem, however, with these curricula is that they do not seek to enable this. They rather set up a perceived set of desirable objects attainable through delayed or disciplined sexuality. These objects are also constructed strictly in opposition to the perceived negative sexualities of popular culture. There is no reflection upon *what* Jenny wants, sexually, for herself and her relationships with others. There is only offered what Jenny *should* want in terms of vocation, romantic partnership, and lifestyle, and then a set of behavioral decisions deemed most likely to get her there.

Unfortunately, my pastoral text conversation with Jenny that day had nothing to do with a process of reflection and discernment, let alone real affirmation outside the context of transgression. The closest such ecclesial perspectives could get me was a loose form of triage or damage control as Jenny was steered back on track. Our interaction, the interaction between a young person and a caregiver, could have been an opportunity to invite considerations of desire as well as disappointment. Such encounters are not rare, and I find it reasonable to presume that they may well shape the construction of learning materials geared towards the sexuality of the young. However, such learning materials would have to make space amidst their dense preoccupations with abstinence and sexual health practices.

This in itself leaves me, as a caregiver, equally angry. As a theologian, however, it leaves me bewildered. How did our church's contemporary approach to adolescent sexuality, after decade of sexual revolutions and liberations, still emerge so detached

from any interest in the reflective capacities of young people? Why, instead, have persistent concerns about the illicit nature of adolescent sexuality and its discipline towards premarital abstinence continued to preoccupy us as a church? Beyond that, as I noted in Chapter 1, how is it that our discourses have so much in common with those that echo in legislative chambers and media punditry?

For illumination, I turn to the genealogical approaches of historian Jeffrey Moran, theologian Mark Jordan, and theorist Linda Singer. Moran tracks the development of public sexuality education, contending that it has been persistently shaped by popular panics and the increasing desire to encourage internalized sexual discipline as an alternative to waning external controls. Jordan investigates the dual emergence of sexology and human development theories, suggesting that the project of understanding and shepherding of adolescent sexuality has come to create a confluence of ideas about the stability of adolescent desire and the contingent stability of adult heteronormativity.

Finally, Singer effectively contextualizes American sexuality in a period of perceived crisis. As the rhetoric of epidemic has come to inform how we consider sexuality and sexual practice, Singer suggests that a logic of crisis and containment has come to dominate how the questions of licit and illicit desire are engaged. Together, I suggest that these thinkers illuminate an approach to adolescent sexuality characterized largely by discipline, containment, and the unquestioned stability of normative social structures. Further, these thinkers offer an alternative reading of the curricula examined in this project, not simply as artifacts of historical Christian suspicions of bodies and pleasure, but also as evidence for an entrenched link between sexual norms and social stability that bleeds across the boundaries of the secular and the theological.

Shifting Sexual Attitudes

In *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century*, historian Jeffrey Moran argues that modern adolescence emerged in tandem with efforts to classify and comprehend changing sexual attitudes and behaviors across age groups in America.¹ An increasingly differentiated class of "experts" undertook a quest to document the facts of human sexuality by developing taxonomies of sexual persuasion and human development. The medical and scientific communities took the lead among popular, political, and market discourses to ascribe a sensible narrative to the perception that the American social fabric was being radically destabilized. Again and again, changing sexual ethics were presented as the culprit:

Themselves products of smaller, emotionally intense late-Victorian families, [adolescents in the early twentieth century] governed their behavior more on the basis of personal interaction and peer acceptance than on abstract morality. This change in personality structure was buttressed not only by developments in family form but also by the broader shift in American culture from an economy based on production and delayed gratification to one based on consumption and immediate satisfaction. The same root of demographic change had nourished new patterns in adult marriage and youthful behavior.²

The emerging field of sexology offered up a set of vocabularies for narrating shifts in American sexual values, and its practitioners frequently turned their attention to the young. The "modern adolescent" appeared to exemplify the fluidity and instability of American society itself.

¹ Moran.

² *Ibid.*, 88.

In particular, Moran describes how the rising availability of automobiles and correlative freedom of the young, now corralled into high schools, created a picture of young life characterized by time away from the supervision of adult caretakers. In response, Moran suggests, moral authorities began to collude in an effort to transition from externally-imposed sexual sanction to internal control mechanisms: Moran's description is especially compelling for the way it at once echoes ancient uses of sexuality as a marker for the stability of external controls and at the same time points to the peculiar emergence of "adolescence" as a confluence of shifting social, political, and market norms. Much like the backlash to women's reproductive freedom that emerged in response to changing gender norms and the emergence of the "modern woman" after the Industrial Revolution (especially among white middle classes, whose sexual behaviors and habits have been used as a normative standard for sexual morality ever since the postindustrial emergence of the class itself), the response to the modern adolescent tended to pair the lifting of constraints to both sexual intercourse and literal social mobility with a perceived dangerous turn in the integrity of the American moral fabric (the evocation of "family values" is appropriate here).

For Moran, this is most effectively narrated in public programs of sexuality education, which he also notes parallel a further social transition from rampant and public fascination with sexuality to an equally virulent resistance in the rise of the Religious Right. Sexual behaviors and attitudes were shifting across generations, Moran points out, and the corresponding sense of destabilization felt especially by the growing American middle classes resulted in a need to find a specific site upon which to lay general but increasing anxiety about the country's social foundations. Be it in the interest of "social

hygiene" or "teen abstinence," Moran argues that the modern practice of "sex education" has always been a responsive practice that echoed cultural anxieties.

Adolescence and the American Century

The unique American tendency towards a mutually reinforcing categorization of both adolescence and sexuality in terms of danger has yielded a praxis of sexual education almost universally directed towards the regulation of behavior. Such a framework suggests that adolescence, properly managed, might serve to redeem a society threatening to unravel under the weight of widespread sexual laxity. Reformers actually argued that parents, church were actually becoming insufficient in the moral safeguarding of the young.³ They favored the rise of the cult of "expertise" expressed as direct public health education efforts by university-trained experts.⁴

However, Moran puts an important spin on this endorsement of good citizenship through the proper observation of sexual norms. The insights of "sex-positive" experts relied upon by reformers to help redeem sexuality in the American century also challenged existing rhetorical tropes for traditional sexual morality and practice:

Even when they accepted that American youth were not bent on recreating Sodom and Gomorrah, experts concerned about adolescent development were reluctant to accept a social code that granted young people the right to premarital sexual experimentation. The common basis of adult behavior and youthful misbehavior therefore presented sex educators and other social reformers with a problem. How could they reconcile what they considered to be society's new and generally laudable emphasis on sexual fulfillment with their continuing refusal to endorse premarital pleasure seeking? Before the war, sex educators had based their moral lessons for adolescents largely on the argument that chastity was best because everyone agreed that it was so, and in the days when ministers and moralists

³ Ibid., 32-33.

⁴ Ibid., 34.

warned seriously against sexual overindulgence even within marriage, adults could condemn adolescent sexuality with consistency. But now middle-class adult sexual norms seemed to be diverging more strongly from the behavior expected of adolescents and young unmarried people. If reformers wanted to continue defending premarital chastity for young people without seeming hypocritical, they would have to develop a new vocabulary and a new rationale.⁵

Moran describes how shifts in attitudes towards sex during sexual revolution were actually much more contingent on the idea that love and affection justify sexual relationships, not sexual licentiousness. He contends that these ideals had much in common with the ideals of companionate marriage that had come to define the middle-class attitude to marriage, even as it meant a shifting view on premarital chastity, particularly among the young.⁶ As a result, educators shifted their focus to desire. It was right, these experts contended, for adolescents *and* adults to desire sexual fulfillment and companionship. However, pre-marital chastity would be presented as the way to get there.⁷

During this period, sexuality education moved away from a focus on the prevention of venereal disease. Educators sought to highlight "the manifold purposes of the sexual instinct--its role in creating and organizing society as well as its central part in fostering personal fulfillment and social adjustment." Holistic curricular revisions were advocated in order to encourage the "whole child" to embrace positive sexual attitudes while delaying sexual activity. Emphasis was placed on morality, "home-worthiness," and citizenship.

⁵ Ibid., 89.

⁶ Ibid., 158-161.

⁷ Ibid., 89.

While lasting concrete changes to nationwide educational practices during this time were relatively short-lived,⁸ Moran offers that this shift in perspective continued to shape links between adolescent sexuality, American citizenship, and the relationship between consumer markets and the celebration of middle-class American life. The 1950s cult of domesticity and popular celebration of middle class family life was also accompanied by the rise of Cold War. Concerns about juvenile delinquency were highlighted as signs of the precariousness of the American home. A failure of the nuclear family to inculcate democratic values could precipitate the fall of the nation to Communism. A host of curricula designed to encourage young people to look ahead to marriage and civic life emerged as a preventative solution.⁹

In Moran's account, adolescent sexuality education developed alongside not only the category of American adolescence, but of the American century itself. Modern notions of "adolescence" as a unique life stage characterized by a moratorium on responsibility and the establishment of personal identity coincided with an increasing body of psychological, psychoanalytic, and medical research that argued for the benefits of a heightened engagement with one's sexual needs and desires for fulfillment and well-being. When development theory and sexology joined forces, they still tended to hold a view towards family life markedly complimentary to this idealization of married American middle class life as a prophylactic against foreign incursion. "Without the demand for sexual repression and sublimation," Moran argues, the modern conception of adolescence made no sense at all."¹⁰ The successful accomplishment of both adolescence

⁸ Ibid., 101,103.

⁹ Ibid., 136-139.

¹⁰ Ibid., 15.

and sexual development could be identified in the comfortable transition to this lifestyle, with accompanying desires for married, heterosexual family life. Proper civic citizenship would follow.¹¹

Adolescent sexuality education as intervention

On the one hand, adolescence was characterized by increasing levels of moral and physical freedom. On the other hand, mutually reinforcing themes of danger and adolescent sexual development suggested that young people required intentional direction as an outgrowth of moral interventionism for the nation at large. Notably, Moran's thesis describes the historical period that would give way to the teen pregnancy crisis language prevalent in the latter half of the 20th century. "Adolescence" was erected as the penultimate site of intervention when the social fabric is threatened by unregulated sexuality. The rhetoric of health and self-moderation provided narration for the vague threats that characterized the Cold War era, able to inform a story of the ascendancy of American power and the contagious threats it faced from within and without. This rhetoric of sexuality had the capacity to capture a variety of societal ills, from the incursion of non-native peoples to the Communist threat.

¹¹ Moran recounts how "father of adolescence" G. Stanley Hall and fellow social psychologists promoted the ideas of childhood and adolescence as social recapitulation. Sexual control marked advanced social evolution. Hall wrote on page 1 of his seminal *Adolescence* that "'Reason, true morality, religion, sympathy, love, and esthetic enjoyment' were some of the later acquisitions entirely absent in primitive races and in all children, but gradually appearing in the civilized adolescent." A distinction was drawn between a "savage" and a "civilized" adolescent. Between puberty and marriage, Stanley wrote that the "civilized adolescent devoted his energies to developing those qualities, such as reason and true morality, that marked his race's advancement over the lesser peoples. As civilization advanced, so did the probationary period increase to allow the individual time to develop the newer, higher evolutionary traits. This interval of chastity husbanded vitality for physical and mental growth and was the crucible that formed a disciplined character." *ibid.*, 17.

At the same time, the classically liberal link between rational self-control, proper education, and moral character came to shape how the task of an adolescent's sexual education was to properly commence. In particular, and especially in American rhetoric, the "family" came to rest squarely at the center of the public interest as a sign of moral and national well-being. By the emergence of the post-war narrative of middle-class, wholesome nuclear family prosperity, questions of sex and sexuality in public discourse were almost exclusively confined to their relationship to the preservation of this ideal. This meant that the relationship of sexuality to Christian practice was meaningful only insofar as Christian approaches to sexuality effectively served the preservation of family life. As Mark Jordan points out below, a dialectic encompassing both a shining confidence in the positive effects of a healthy emerging adult sexuality and the conviction that adolescent sexuality was deeply perilous come to characterize American Christian speech about sexuality.

Settling Sexuality

Jordan describes in *Recruiting Young Love* how the dual emergence of sexology and human development theory yielded the notion that adolescence is the place where sexuality is to be "settled." Properly directed, adolescent sexuality gives way to a fulfilling life of mature romantic partnership and vocation. Jordan contends that it was no coincidence that the sciences of human development and human sexuality emerged in tandem. The new field of sexology, popular fiction, church rhetoric, and even memoirs published during that time all tended to converge at the newly-defined liminal stage of human development known as "adolescence" and the accompanying social changes the life of the American teen seemed to represent.

While the new social sciences deemed same-sex affection and desire a “normal” part of childhood experience, they asserted the importance of institutional guidance in assisting young people with the proper channeling of those desires into a settled accomplishment of heteronormativity and acceptable gender expression. The gay adult has effectively succumbed to a pattern of desires and objects that he was expected to outgrow. Homosexuals are to be considered “deviant” because they have quite literally deviated from the path of “normal” human development. Adolescence is considered a crucial space in the success or failure of this endeavor. “Whenever same-sex desire is defined as a delayed development or a deviation in puberty,” Jordan writes, “whenever it is conceived as requiring a story for coming out or repenting, it is conceived in relation to adolescence.”¹² However, couched within his observation is the implication that there is nothing universally “natural” about heteronormativity outside of an institutional regime of discipline and surveillance. “Adolescence is the possibility that desire could be different.”¹³

When popular rhetoric in the U.S. began to identify shifts in social habits, the "danger" of sexuality often lurked in the background. Adolescents were depicted as human beings caught in the turmoil of an emergent sexuality. This emergence occurred within a liminal space between childhood and adulthood—a “moratorium” that offered space for productive experimentation but nonetheless held great stakes for the future.

The "danger" of sexuality to provoke chaos is given a preview in the *sturm und drang* of

¹² Mark D. Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk About Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xiv.

¹³ *Ibid.*

adolescence.¹⁴ This approach generated the underlying, contingent sense that, without the guidance of proper authorities, "desire could be different," and that this was dangerous indeed.

Jordan tracks the sources for constructing and considering the adolescent in threads of secular rhetoric emerging from the new "science" of human sexuality, projects of national strength and purity, and the emergence of and response to the public portrayal of non-normative sexualities. The adolescent found at the intersection of these discourses is highly vulnerable to outside influence and internal desires. She is deeply in need of the moral guidance that will ensure the proper transition into heterosexual adulthood and middle class citizenship.

The adolescent is "naturally" a hot bed of unmediated, irrational desire. In contrast, the adult is the paradigm of ordered sexuality, observable in a properly accomplished heterosexuality signified by the pursuit of marriage and procreation. Both scientists and laypeople, Jordan reminds us, have regarded this perspective as normative for much of the last century. Hence, this paradigm of vulnerable, disordered adolescent sexual desire also serves as a boundary marker between developmental stages.

Jordan further observes that until fairly recently, non-normative sexuality has been almost exclusively examined by the science of developmental psychology and social science in relation to the emergence of wayward sexual desire in adolescence. Homosexuality itself came to be regarded as a regression into the tumultuous desires of adolescence or a failure to successfully emerge from that stage and into heterosexual

¹⁴ Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech* makes for another helpful conversation partner on this point. Butler describes the rhetorical connection between a fear of proliferation and a fear of chaos that often shapes prohibitive speech about sexuality. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

adulthood. The settling of desire into patterns of properly directed heterosexuality marks a movement into adult maturity. This is not, however, simply heterosexuality for its own sake. Rather, this particular project of heterosexuality produces the ideal American citizen—married, committed to the nuclear family, and loyal to national identity.¹⁵ Rightly ordered sexual desire *is* the desire for this form of lived adulthood.¹⁶

Implications for Theological Speech

In Chapter 1, I noted the tandem rise of human development theory and sexology in the first half of the twentieth century. To this discourse, I suggested we must also attend to rhetorical practices that linked descriptions of bodily integrity, sexual purity, and continence to the successful preservation of ecclesial authority. As the power to arbitrate moral life shifted more squarely into the hands of the state and, arguably, now further into the regimes of market and health, it was accompanied by the deployment of these rhetorical cues.

American Protestantism had an important role to play within this program of healthy human development.¹⁷ In Chapter 2, I suggested that Christianity's long

¹⁵ To this character, I would add white and middle class. Evidence for this can be found in the implicit assumptions of many popular sex education curriculums, which presume such markers of middle class success as the expectation of college attendance, stable employment, post-collegiate selection of a spouse, and child-bearing and rearing at will. These curricula have also been largely developed by and for white audiences, often going so far as to associate "ethnic" names with poor sexual choices in case studies and role playing scenarios within the instructional literature.

¹⁶ This form of adulthood, not surprisingly, also forms the basis for good Christian citizenship the contemporary American culture.

¹⁷ "[Adolescents] align themselves with divine purposes through sex...Only religion can assure safe fixation on appropriate objects...Hence the enormous opportunity for religious education during adolescence--and the great peril: both religion and sex can go irremediably astray. They usually stay together." G. Stanley Hall, as quoted in Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk About Homosexuality*, 4.

rhetorical history had already laid much of the groundwork for this complementary relationship. I suggested that framing sexuality education within this milieu provides insight into the prevailing operation of dual historical Christian discourses on sexuality as they are manifested in modern American Christianity. The first discourse, by far more frequently interrogated by feminist theologians and others, establishes a firm suspicion of the body and its desires. The carnality of the sexual appetite finds associations with the disordered will and chaotic nature of fallen creation. Hence the ascetic disciplines of the body improve the discipline of the soul in its pursuit of communion with the Divine.

Jordan and Moran likewise demonstrate that sexuality as it is contemporarily understood in the U.S. cannot be engaged without considering the narratives of adolescence as the period of "settling" sexuality. Such narratives carried the exceptional confidence that this settling--especially in terms of the management of desire--could be effectively defined and regulated by an allied relationship between social structures and adult intervention. Both authors make the case for the construction of adolescence in the context of broader psychosocial and nationalistic developments in the United States over the past century. They rightly argue that adolescence cannot be examined apart from shifting perspectives on the connections between bodies, pleasures, and powers emerging in the development of modernity and particularly in relation to the religion of health.

Further, Jordan illuminates how ecclesial efforts to 'protect' adolescents from this danger have led to a discourse about adolescent sex dominated by a rhetoric of fear and emptied of significant theological content outside of appeals to God's plan for a very specific model of family life. Jordan observes that the tie between secular and church

representations of adolescence frequently reflect an abiding desire to “fix” sexual behaviors and desires, both in terms of their objects and of their acceptable limits.

Theological Rhetoric

In modern American vernacular, the commonly accepted version of adolescence has come to be understood as a discrete and natural part of human development, characterized by a heightened and often less than rational experience of sexual impulse. Theology then enters through a relatively correlative process, with snippets of biblical interpretation and theological vocabularies elected based upon their usefulness for conveying the regulation (and containment) of adolescent sexual behavior. In particular, when God appears, it is as a regulatory authority, a guarantor of these preapprehended values and conceptual arrangements provided by medical, scientific, and political discourses designed to address shifting sexual values. In terms of sexual education, the Church's own well-intentioned collaboration has produced a curriculum too often signified by a failure to "remember that its rituals are more than the belated ratification or affirmation of civic identities."¹⁸ What has happened to the power of desire that works through the Spirit to bind humans to God and to creation? How can we make sense of the inherent queerness of bodies, gender, and the Godhead already found in biblical, mystical, and liturgical tradition? Is it possible, under an epidemic regime, to allow new ways of conceiving sexuality (and to appreciate divine mystery) to emerge out of theology and Christian practice? What is the role of love, divine and otherwise?

¹⁸ Ibid., 213.

The development of Protestant sexuality curricula within this context thus reflects a competing set of concerns. In all three curricula examined in this project, we can witness an effort to deem at least certain forms of sexual practice (generally married, heterosexual, and adult) as not only morally upright, but immensely pleasurable—a characteristic of the broader shift towards proliferative speech about sexuality in the culture.

Significant evidence for this ethos appears throughout the rationale and content of this project's curricular materials. Though the familiar ghosts of "repressive" Christian morality can be found in each, rattling about in the attic (or being invoked only to be slain), these curricula do not identify in their task the need to develop new ideas about the relationship between theology, sexuality, and Christian practice. They barely acknowledge, if at all, the utility of theology as a practice or resource for examining the relationship between bodies, desire, pleasure and even power. Instead, the curricula present as "sexuality education" a set of methods intended to regulate adolescent sexual behavior. The curricula are not designed to assist youth in developing a Christian theology of human sexuality. Instead, they convey a particular set of behavioral habits designed to keep them free from heartache, disease, and unwanted pregnancy. It is because God does not want them to experience these things, students are told, that "God's plan" for human sexuality corresponds directly to the injunctions of science, medicine, and the pursuit of the American marriage and family.

Adolescent sexuality, in this way, has much in common with critiques already leveled at cultural constructions of women's sexuality, which tend to circle around two dialectical poles—the exploitation of female sexuality and the denial of women's control

over their own sexual bodies. The narrative is much the same for adolescence, which as it emerged as a category for investigation was quickly coopted by market and political forces who realized the potential capital available in deploying adolescent sexuality as both an object of fear and desire. The construction of youth as sexual has funded a variety of questionable projects, as I noted on Chapters 1 and 2.¹⁹ And in fact, all three of these curricula have in their own way made a concentrated attempt to deal with what they perceive to be a radically deformed sexual culture that places young people, their bodies, their hearts, and their souls at risk.

Transitions in moral authority and theology

Elsewhere, Jordan argues that the Christian church has largely ceded over the theological content of speech about sex to national and secular bureaucracies. The bureaucratic rhetoric of choice (in this case, health and wellness) then replaces what had been at one point influential theo-ethical injunction. These bureaucracies “have become ever more efficiently involved in the regulation of citizen-sexuality—in population control, healthy reproduction, or eugenics.”²⁰ Meanwhile, the church has attempted to advance a theology of sexuality and a corresponding sexual ethic through rhetorical engagement with the impact of the last century’s “Sexual Revolution.” Such rhetoric can

¹⁹ Of course, there is benefit to this construction as well. We have come a long way since Freud raised the possibility of infant sexuality, and both Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Kate Ott have noted that acknowledging the moral, and contingently sexual, agency of young people must be necessarily (though responsibly) undertaken. See Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*, Families and Faith Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003). and Kate Ott, "Beyond 'Just Say No!': Sex Ed and Youth Ministry," *Patheos* (2010). <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Beyond-Just-say-No?offset=0&max=1> (accessed January 18, 2010).

²⁰ Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex*, 133.

run the gamut from liberal affirmations of authenticity and happier sexual living to conservative condemnations of the “increase in human disorder and degradation.”²¹

Jordan’s diagnosis, the ceding of church authority for speech about sexuality to the secular bureaucracy, therefore supplies my working hypothesis. Namely, that theological reliance upon these norms for speech about sex and Christian instruction have failed to offer a genuinely Christian theological engagement with the question of bodies, pleasures, desire, and human relating. It has succeeded, however, in advancing the practices of surveillance and control upon which biopower depends. Notably, the practices of instructional speech about sex in churches are largely limited to classes and programs for youth.

However, the sexual discipline and surveillance of adolescence does afford the church an opportunity to make a grab at the authority it has largely ceded, ironically by joining in the larger project of heteronormativity legitimated by the founding *scientia sexualis*. Affirming the idea that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the whims of their own hormonal drives becomes a claim that adolescents are “unable to know themselves, precisely because they cannot give a settled account of themselves as sexual subjects. They are liable to corruption, and so liable to corrupt.”²² The fear of both corruption and corruptibility then shores up claims to a moral responsibility to defend adolescents from the dangers of an unsettled adolescent sexuality. Further, “corruption” undermines any conviction that adolescents might have the capacity to speak the “truth”

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., xiii

of their own sexual subjectivity. The church can therefore claim the authority to speak on their behalf.

The entrenchment of scientific and medical discourse as a source of final authority had lent the vocabularies of health and unhealth the credence of ultimate concern, with church serving as a handmaiden equipped with a useful theological vocabulary. These shifts suggest that any interrogation of Protestant sexuality education under this influence cannot simply begin with the effort to identify, once again, the influence of Christian suspicions regarding the body. Language of the relationship of bodies and desires to the pursuit of communion with God at the expense of human relationships or bodily satisfactions for their own sakes had largely disappeared from popular religious discourse in the U.S.

American Protestantism, at its mid-twentieth century height, was the primary guarantor of discourses generated in deep relationship with burgeoning scientific, medical, commercial, and political trends. In exchange, the church was able to maintain a perceived level of moral authority, even as its theological vocabulary had been re-coded with an alternative set of meanings. It is into this rhetorical environment that the specific concern for adolescent sexuality described in the first chapter emerged. This dominant paradigm likewise canonizes medical and scientific discourses as resources for divine insight, with a primary concern for the framing of "sexual ethics" in terms of right behavior. Despite the expected differentiations in emphasis and level of permissiveness that reflect the differences in theological tradition of their respective authors and publishing houses, all three curricula are essentially reacting to the perceived "crises" in adolescent sexuality raised in the preceding 25 years of political and popular American

rhetoric, while taking for granted as "natural" the category of adolescence itself, despite its relatively recent enumeration by the 20th century medical, scientific, and psychological communities.

Within this shift, it is also crucial to note that sexuality became an increasingly positive instrument in the establishment of these various authorities. Bodies and desires came to be regarded as necessary vehicles for the full engagement with vocations of Christian and worldly citizenship, rather than impediments to spiritual purity. The right kind of sex—married, heterosexual, and, later especially, emotionally fulfilling and physically gratifying—had the capacity to draw persons into compliance with visions of stable earthly political, social, and market relations.

Still, these curricula trade upon the dueling sensibilities that churches rely upon sexual silencing even as they grapple to assert moral force in the public sphere, drawing controversies over adolescent sexuality and its management into media and political spotlights. The very fact that talk about sex is occurring in a church is treated as laudatory in the curricula, as the texts and activities offer a sly nod to a transgressivism presumed appealing to the adolescent. And yet, these same curricula give far more explicit attention to the language of "health" and "responsibility" and the authorizing capacity of ecclesial and parental authorities under the aegis of "God's plan," the *imago dei*, to reflect an overall curricular *telos* that tends almost exclusively to the behavioristic, than to any theological reflection on desire, pleasure, eros, even the mysteries of divine communion that permeate both classical theology and fund contemporary explorations into theologies of sex and gender. They seem to presume that behavioralism and appropriate theological correlates are the proper counterpoint to the forms of meaning

made of sexuality by the cultural forces of scientific, medical, psychological, market, and political regimes.

Biopower

Still, Jordan argues that both perspectives blatantly ignore the rise of “biopower” and the presence of its corresponding national regulation and surveillance of sexuality in church speech about sex. As control has shifted to this new regime of bodily discipline and population control, church speech about sexuality has been voided of its authority. Further, ecclesial preoccupation with sexual “decadence” in fact belies complicity with this shift in power by refusing to examine the role of churches in “trying to accommodate themselves tacitly to the new power over sex.” Church members, leaders, and their theologians have largely become “docile subjects of the secular bureaucracies for sexual regulation.”²³

Jordan has argued that, in the regime of biopower, adolescence has become a trope for speech about sexuality in general: “In our debates, the figure of the adolescent embodies an adult preoccupation--an uncomfortable recollection that sexual desire has at least once in a life *to be* settled. The adolescent figures the need for sexual persuasion--for a sexual resolution. Adolescence is a scene in which an unformed character must be instructed to fix sexual choice reliably on the right gender. It is the episode for mastering the story of desire, for practicing and then putting on a sexual character.”²⁴ Ironically, as Jordan describes it in *Ethics of Sex*, the very idea that sexuality is akin to “practicing and then putting on a sexual character” is deeply rooted in the transition of the church’s from

²³ Ibid., 134.

²⁴ Ibid.

practices of surveillance and bureaucratic control of marriage and reproduction to an emphasis on confession and the truths of sexuality. The current content of church speech about sex is therefore at once contingent on its own confessional past and that past's cooptation in secular discourse.²⁵

The twentieth century rise of commercial, medical, and scientific discourses promised salvation through sexual knowledge and claiming authority over the nation's moral and physical hygiene. Simultaneously, the independent moral authority of Christian institutions was rapidly waning. Much of this period was hence characterized by Christian rhetoric about sexuality in the United States that came to sound far more like a parroting of these other discourses than genuinely theological pronouncements drawn from reflection upon Christian wisdom on the nature of bodies and desires.

However, to locate adolescent sexuality education, and particularly the forms of sexuality education undertaken by Protestant churches beginning in the mid-1990s, as simply another stage in this continuum of regulation and stabilization is to leave the account incomplete. As described in the introduction to this project, these curricula emerged within a larger political discourse that was inciting a variety of sexual panics that intersected with concerns about adolescent sexuality, from teen pregnancy to the spread of AIDS. These are rightly concerns that should arouse a protective impulse among anyone who cares about the well-being of the young. However, as with any panic, caution must be taken not to let containment overtake our reflection on the relationship between our fragile lives and the love of God. We must therefore also look at

²⁵ Ibid., 133-134.

what influence these shifts in discourse have wrought upon the rhetoric of Christian speech about sex itself.

For this, the final section of this chapter will turn to the work of Laura Singer. Singer's Foucauldian narrative of an "epidemic logic" offers insight into American sexual rhetoric. Applying her theory helps to circumscribe the particular situation of adolescence as it has emerged out of decades of fear over AIDS and a host of moral panics.

Adolescent Sexuality as Epidemic

The opening chapter of this dissertation recalled the intellectual and political setting in America that gave birth to modern adolescent sexuality education. Panics around "epidemics" of teen pregnancy, a perceived rise in the number of "sexually active" teens, and the emergence of the AIDS crisis permeated the field of political discourse and made their way into denominational strategies for Christian education. Further, these "panics" reflected a larger sense that fundamental social institutions traditionally buttressed by heteronormativity and middle class American Protestant values were under attack. At the same time, the United States had undergone a radical transition in the frankness and pervasiveness of sexuality in American culture, popular media, and discourse.

A relatively unknown book, Linda Singer's *Erotic Welfare: Sexual Theory and Politics in the Age of Epidemic*, was edited by Judith Butler and published posthumously in 1993. In it, Singer observed, that amidst the AIDS epidemic, the language of epidemic that had characterized the spread of the disease was now being effectively deployed to describe a variety of socially undesirable phenomenon. Singer writes that "epidemic

logic" often seeks to condense and displace anxieties by identifying sites of regulation and relative safety. Epidemics are rhetorically constructed by panic at the same time that the invocation of "epidemic" incites panic around what might otherwise be disparate phenomena.

Epidemic logic "depends on certain structuring conditions" and "works through a strategy of regulated production," inciting and proliferating what it seeks to contain and justifying the regulatory apparatus it imposes through the continual heightening of anxiety in expanding circles of social and cultural life.²⁶ And so we have a confluence of influences--health and disease, educational structures and state regulatory apparatuses for the management and discipline of young people, and perhaps most predominantly the rise of modern consumer capitalism. If Jordan and Moran are right, then the dominant influence of these forces on adolescence necessitate examination as dominant influences in modern sexuality itself.

Beginning with AIDS, but quickly shifting to broader social issues, the application of the language of epidemic became a way to characterize the "socially undesirable" in terms of "contagion and communicability." Discrete social "problems"--teen pregnancy, divorce, single motherhood--now called epidemics, incite panics about sexual proliferation:

[S]exual theory and politics are being yet again transfigured by their mediation through the construct of epidemic. The impetus for the emergence of such a signifier is of course the condition that has come to be known as AIDS, but it seems equally obvious that AIDS is not the site of anxiety, not the only form of unregulated proliferation which has been represented as epidemic. Indeed, as metaphors of sickness and health come to dominate the representation of the social, we are confronted by an every increasing number of cancers, viruses infecting the body politic through mechanisms of contagion and communicability.

²⁶ Singer, Butler, and MacGrogan, 29.

In order to represent a phenomenon as socially undesirable, be it divorce, drug use, single motherhood, teenage pregnancy, one need only call it an epidemic. In doing so, one not only engages in a kind of rhetorical inflation, but also mobilizes a certain apparatus and logic, a particular way of producing and organizing bodies politically. An epidemic is a phenomenon that in its very representation calls for, indeed, seems to demand some form of managerial response, some mobilized effort of control. TO the extent that epidemics come to function as a ground for the mobilization of social resources, they operate as more than metaphors of the social. They also function as political logics, forms of social rationality.²⁷

Singer's description translates effectively to the rhetoric that dominates these curricula. Constructed as something other than the sexually and maturely "settled," the stormy, potentially chaotic multitudes of desire in the adolescent body likewise present a challenge to confidence in the idea that simple segregation of male and female bodies until such time as the young may be properly channeled into the adult vocation of married heterosexuality is sufficient to prevent the contagion of unregulated sexuality from escaping into the larger culture.

The epidemic logic Singer describes contains several implications for understanding sexuality as it functions in modern Christian sexuality curricula. The result is a dually-reinforcing commodification of both sexuality *and* its containment, coupled with a renegotiation of the capitalist need for the promise of perpetual gratification. The bridge Singer builds between epidemic, capitalism, and human sexuality provides a compelling link to the work of Jordan and Moran. Each suggest that their own allusions to what is essentially the rise of biopower as a regulatory apparatus in adolescent sexuality might perhaps be at least partially expanded upon by attending to the "epidemic logic" that Singer sets forth.

²⁷ Ibid., 27.

(Adolescent) bodies in/as crisis

Singer has noted that the rhetoric of the AIDS epidemic was unique for its emergence out of an already marginalized population and amidst a period of prolific sexual rhetoric across American culture. She argues that this distinguished it from previous cycles of prudish, Victorian reactions to sex that evinced simple confidence in maintaining a separation of bodies outside of well-regulated (married, heterosexual) social sanctions in order to prevent the flourishing of disease. In the case of AIDS, epidemic disease was constructed as borne from already outcast bodies, already morally suspect and outside the regularized terms of reproductive sexuality. The crisis of the disease lay in a fear that its communicability exposed the limits of regulation through social and moral norms.

We can consider Singer's assertion from the angle of adolescence. As noted in the accounts developed by Jordan and Moran, adolescent bodies are themselves considered dangerously liminal, neither child nor adult and thus destabilizing to firm sexual norms. Moran notes that concern about adolescent sexual license increased as teen mobility and freedom expanded in modernity. That freedom set youth somewhat at odds with the Victorian-era social structures presumed capable of guarding against disaster through stable forms of courtship, marriage and reproduction.

Further, these "panics" reflected a larger sense that fundamental social institutions traditionally buttressed by heteronormativity and middle class American Protestant values were under attack. At the same time, the United States had undergone a radical transition in the frankness and pervasiveness of sexuality in American culture, popular

media, and discourse. Politicians and alarmists borrowed freely from the Protestant vocabulary of moral uprightness and self-control.

The sexual waywardness of the young was being increasingly held up (though certainly not for the first time) as a sign of general social degeneration. This time, however, there were two key differences. First, "the adolescent" had become firmly entrenched as a stage of human development. The "teenager" had been effectively absorbed as a natural phenomenon, and was treated as such in popular discourse. The association of the adolescent with sexual possibility and proliferation was by now firmly entrenched. Moran articulates how adolescence was itself constructed *as* crisis, a *sturm und drang*.

This can often work to the advantage of particular political and economic interests. Vis-a-vis AIDS, broader cultural anxieties produced in the "sexual revolution" were channeled into a "regulation of sexual reproduction and the promotion of the family as the supposedly exclusive site of safe sex."²⁸ This can likewise be observed in the contemporary development of sexual education in schools. Rather than a general recommitment to contraceptive education and the dissemination of information about sexually transmitted diseases, politicians seized upon the opportunity to present abstinence and the elimination of teen sex altogether as the only meaningful solution, conveniently in line with efforts to inject the "family values" of conservative Christianity into public life.²⁹

²⁸ Ibid., 29.

²⁹ See Pillow.

The curricula I examine each begin by suggesting that we live in a period of unmitigated sexual excess. Youth are bombarded, in particular, by a prolific amount of sexual messages. The curricula are portrayed as a source of alternative messages that will lead youth into safe, regulated forms of sexuality, in contrast to the chaos of sexual indulgence portrayed in media and culture. However, each also attempts a relevance to its cultural milieu.

Singer's logic illuminates the frequent paradoxes of sexuality characterized at once by the constraint of danger and the potential profit of sexual excess. One needs the danger of raging adolescent hormones and unsettled desire to properly construct the stability of marital sex. And yet, one needs to promise unbridled passion within the order of God's plan to make it an aspirational lifestyle worth marketing to teens. Because they were created at the close of a century-long unshackling of sexual intercourse from reproduction, the curricula deviate from "traditional" emphases on chastity and procreation to instead describe a life of "healthy sexuality" found, nonetheless, in the traditional commitments to adult marriage and the creation of a family. Here, the risks of sexual epidemic are mitigated by redirecting sexual excess into the pleasures of romantic fulfillment through monogamy.

Consumerism and epidemic

The historical transition of households from sites of production to sites of consumption echoes in the treatment of the adolescent as a sexual consumer, electing an appropriate set of behavioral and ethical expressions from among a veritable buffet of secular influences and Christian offerings. A corresponding logic of epidemic suggests

that God's plan for human sexuality is a safe, "healthy" body engaged in a highly controlled set of predetermined social institutions and vocations.

Singer reminds us that capitalism thrives on the production of scarcity, and the marketplace of modern sexualities afforded these students is no different.³⁰ In the curricula, love and sexual comfort are construed as finite. Poor early sexual experiences will invariably tarnish later ones. Too much intimacy given away too soon leaves less down the line. The threat of epidemic, both in terms of pregnancy and disease, have further led, as Singer puts it, to a sense that "sex costs."³¹ Sex is not construed as bad, per se. In fact, sexual pleasure is celebrated as uniquely powerful, capable of transforming the social fabric of a culture.

The potential benefits of managing such a force have not escaped the church. By establishing itself as an expert on the risks of sexual love and its satisfactions, even its superfluous pleasures, the church successfully mobilizes sexuality--both its containment and its excesses--towards its own ecclesial interests. In other words, the church has expanded its market reach through its discourses on modern sexual crisis. These include a reinforcement of Christianity as a credible authority capable of guarding the line between order and chaos. The sexual education of adolescents under these conditions draws and guards the boundary line that separates the liminal excess of adolescent sexuality from settled adult desire. Jordan has described this shift in Christian speech about sex from the prohibitive to the proliferative.³² Over the past century the church has

³⁰ Singer, Butler, and MacGrogan, 35-36.

³¹ Ibid., 40.

³² See Mark D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex*, New Dimensions to Religious Ethics ; (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 133-134.

steadily increased the volume of its commentary while seeking to join the scientific and medical communities as an "expert" voice on sex and marriage. Christian educational efforts offer recommendations not just for marital harmony (hardly a new thing, as Tertullian can attest), but also the finer points of sexual stimulation and satisfaction.

This is not a Christian repression of sex, but a Christian reimagining of the sexual marketplace. Sex costs. However, those costs can be minimized, and returns maximized, by preserving sex within particular boundaries. Sexual identities, bodily development, and social institutions are all taken as divine givens in need of control lest desire goes awry. Sexuality may be discovered and explored, by the will of God, but it and its related institutions, meanings, and ethics are to be considered preexistent goods that, like capital, require management for maximum return. Godly bodies should be unmarred by the incursion of deviant desires or chaotic passions if such desires and passions fail to align with a specific set of economic and ideological interests.

After AIDS

Singer's work is notable for this project's purposes because she offers a particular set of insights into the logic behind shifts in sexual rhetoric occurring just before the emergence of church sexual education. These shifts likely shaped the cultural and ideological resources which colonized such projects. Singer argues that epidemic logic has further implications, relying on a pattern of incitement and discipline that both renews previously latent but persistent forms of patriarchal hegemony.

Unfortunately, as Singer has pointed out, because that which has been prohibited "works to sustain hegemonic social structures," we can witness, for instance, that an emphasis in CBG and GS2.0 on premarital chastity leaves uninterrogated the institution

of marriage as an exclusively "safe" site for sex, even as it has been a demonstrable location for the abuse of women, children, and adolescents under patriarchy.³³ Likewise, certain components of sexuality within epidemic condition are fetishized, held up as sacred totems signifying the regulatory power of their guarantors. In the case of these curricula, this includes the constant circling back to the imago dei in the context of sexual health and responsibility. These curricula also rely on a particular signification of gender binaries functioning to characterize intrahuman desire as paradigmatic evidence for the role of marriage in God's own plan for human flourishing. Honor the imago dei with your bodies, these curricula affirm, and your health shall be preserved. Recognize the inherent gender of those bodies, and you are well underway to gaining the knowledge necessary for sexual health.

Despite the ways in which intervention into sexual contact between persons might appear to strike at the heart of liberal sexual values, such efforts in the name of "damage control and prophylactic protectionism" can justify, Singer writes, the incursion of patriarchy and a reinscription of "family values" as a primary site of social safety.³⁴ Epidemics effectively perform an authorizing function in social discourse, justifying interventions "into the lives of bodies and the forms of exchange in which they move as well as to provide an occasion around which to mobilize social assets and resources."³⁵ Regulation can itself be contagious, insinuating itself into wider spheres even as it interferes with fundamental liberal freedoms of choice and expression. An effort to

³³ See also Marie M. Fortune, *Sexual Violence : The Sin Revisited* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005); Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*; Nancy M. Victorin-Vangerud, *The Raging Hearth : Spirit in the Household of God* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000).

³⁴ Singer, Butler, and MacGrogan, 30.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

increase teen abstinence quickly expands into instruction on courtship, friendship, evangelism, vocation, and family relationships. And, finally, into the nuts and bolts of running a modern consumer household.³⁶ Thus, as described in Moran, public sexuality education efforts rapidly expanded into “family life education,” offering instruction in everything from dating and courtship to household budgets and appliance purchasing.

Consider how, for instance, a documented general uptick in the number of out-of-wedlock births across all age groups, when reconstructed as an epidemic of teen pregnancy, becomes a site of necessary intervention and specified anxiety. This resulted in an incitement of political discourse that served to establish "the teen pregnancy epidemic" as a discrete phenomenon and dangerous social contagion. The response, however, is framed not as sex-negative, per se, but as an outgrowth of the construction of “healthy” sexuality as “adult” sexuality. Abstinence, no sex, becomes presented as the most sexually healthy choice for teens. This means that Christian sexuality education under this regime, as a product of adults seeking to intervene out of genuine care for young people, is nonetheless caught up in a very specific paradigm of intervention motivated by containment rather than theological engagement.

³⁶ Mid-century “family life education” included sex avoidance techniques, basic biology and reproduction, and marriage and courtship in many schools. Moran writes that the curricula also envisioned "preparation for marriage" as "essentially an introduction to consumerism. A family living class in the mid-1950s at Council Grove High School in Council Grove, Kansas, exemplified this approach. After examining dating, courtship, and divorce, the class traveled to local stores for lessons in buying engagement and wedding rings and choosing china and crystal for the home. They planned and budgeted a mock wedding, and listened intently as local bankers explained home buying. Students worked out family budgets after repeated trips to grocery stores for pricing." The curricula also included lessons on buying furniture, home appliances, and insurance. Moran argues that such a "program in family living seemed to have crossed over into an invitation for guided consumption." Moran, 142.

Sexuality education as patriarchy?

Singer explains that containment means a retrenchment of boundaries, affirmation of levels of regulation that would be perceived as untenably invasive under "normal" circumstances, shaping of moral language in terms of health, unhealthy, and contagion. She contends that the rhetorical classification of some aspect of sexuality as "epidemic" corresponds to an anxious call for management and mobilization of efforts to regulate bodies both social and real in the interest of both purgation and inoculation, rhetorically binding bodily health to the health of the social body at large. The rhetoric of epidemic, with its intonations of threat to bodily survival, both justify and persist through surveillance and intervention. In such periods, Singer notes, "hegemonic lines of authority and control" are perceived to be especially necessary, and in turn are strengthened through the broadening of the epidemic threat.³⁷

Singer further notes that epidemic logic has yielded a nostalgia linked to the "regulation of sexual reproduction and the promotion of the family as the supposedly exclusive site of safe sex."³⁸ *GS2.0* is a clear purveyor of the prophylactic value of the family for the advancement of health and wholeness. However, are progressive curricula any less interested in the "regulation of sexual reproduction" through the deployment of utopic ideals? *GS2.0* takes sexual health and locates it within the proper construction of the (heterosexual, married) family in order to call it a reflection of "wholeness." For this, a reconstructed narrative of the early Church forms the basis for "sexual wholeness." At

³⁷ Singer, Butler, and MacGrogan, 31.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

the same time, the curricula deploy a paternalistic understanding of God, to whom one's "sexual responsibility" is practiced through the pursuit of "sexual health."

For Singer, epidemic logic can generate "a radical and totalizing form of explanatory closure." It is not simply that epidemic logic offers diagnosis and treatment. Epidemic logic also serves to provide underlying meaning, constructing past, present, and future in a narrative which also serves to separate the faithful, the fallen, and the collateral damage of the sins of the latter. The power of such rhetoric thus extends beyond the simple signification of certain bodies and behaviors as "bad." Attention to the health of bodies can therefore be construed as an entrance into a larger narrative of the social response to the threat of destabilizing contagion. Attending to the regulation of adolescent sex serves to localize larger anxieties, affirm the narrative of a youthful "settling" of sexuality, and join the diagnosis of health or unhealth to the direction of that sexuality towards authorized ends. Within this narrative, theology serves to provide the characters that sit most comfortably in the role of regulatory authority.

As demonstrated in the first chapter, these curricula, for the most part, rely upon the *imago dei* to communicate this vision. In particular, they gravitate towards the scriptural pairing of sexual difference and divine image in the book of Genesis, suggesting that learning to embrace one's sexual identity and gender is best understood as *learning about God* and the expression of God's divinity in human bodies and institutions. Practicing a corresponding set of sexual ethics is then a way of reflecting that image to the world, one's "Christian witness."

Despite the chaos of adolescent bodies and the challenges of containment presented by modern sexuality, within these curricula the *imago dei* emerges as a

consistent touchpoint capable of providing valuable knowledge on everything from monogamous commitments to proper practices of health and hygiene. The given fact that we are made in God's image is presumed sufficient for the discernment necessary for discerning not only right practices of relational intimacy and egalitarian gender relations, but also "God's plan" for Western nuclear household arrangements and romantic pairings that incidentally undergird popular notions of American middle class stability while serving the purpose of containing the various sexual crises and epidemics that plague modern American social, political, and economic life.

All three curricula, despite their variations, thus hold this particular tendency in common. These shared characteristics can be traced through three movements, all adding up to an establishment of the primacy of regulation as the primary goal of sexual education. This is correlated with the use of theology to authorize the regulatory authority of scientific and medical discourse while transmitting the values of what Singer calls "epidemic logic" and the corresponding hegemonies it supports.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Moran, Jordan, and Singer illuminate an additional dimension crucial to considering adolescent sexuality. They expand engagement with the question of bodies and desires beyond accounts of Christian dualisms, demonstrating the diffuse interplay of cultural, political, medical, and scientific rhetoric with the religious. These thinkers further demonstrate how crippling perceptions of sexual crisis can be to efforts to think creatively and theologically about human sexuality.

This is, of course, not to discount the need for deep concern over the inchoate inner and relational lives of adolescents and the impact early experiences will have on their capacities for flourishing into adulthood. However, sexual education conceived of exclusively in terms of the negative—sexuality education that achieves containment through strategies for delay and denial—desperately needs correctives that invite adolescents and adults together into reflection on the positive.

When Jenny began to work through her sexual experience, she reached out to me, a church youthworker. As Jenny and I texted back and forth that day, a variety of concerns bubbled to the surface. There was, for instance, her very basic fear of getting “caught” by her parents. Jenny’s sexual encounter that afternoon was inherently transgressive, and she knew it. And, ostensibly, such transgression extended to the implicit disapproval of traditional Christian norms. However, at the same time, Jenny’s desire to sort through her conflicting feelings about the afternoon’s events somehow led her to view me, a representative of the church, as a safe person to approach. And I should have been, as someone who could provide guidance in considering crucial questions about how the fundamental nature of who we are, human creatures loved by God, shapes even our sexual lives. Together, Jenny and I should have been free to ask questions like,

- What is the relationship between physical sexual engagement with others and my place in Christian community?
- What is God’s relationship to desire? How is God shaping me and my response to desire? What does it mean to discern what I want sexually and relationally?

- How do my experiences, feelings, and desires contribute to the church's engagement with this question?

And yet, these curricula continually steer such questioning away from the reflective and towards the didactic. They push instead towards behavioral inquiry:

- What does it mean to be sexually responsible? (How can I navigate the moratorium of sexuality towards mature adult sexuality?) Why does God want me to make certain sexual choices, and what are those choices?
- How does the nature of God reinforce the need for premarital abstinence?
- Why can/should the church tell me about sexual health?

What kind of languages and tools are necessary for thinking about what we actually desire? How do we reflect on the relationship between our desires and the shaping influences of God in our personal and relational lives *outside of strictly protectionist concerns*? Does engaging sexuality from the perspective of divine possibility destabilize forms of sexuality conceived within regimes of biopower or crisis?

This chapter's exposition on Singer concluded with her own observations on the links between sexual regulation and the entrenchment of patriarchal hegemonies. Both Moran and Jordan likewise point to what has essentially been the reinforcement of compulsory heterosexuality through the construction of a particular paradigm of adolescent sexuality deeply contingent upon the perceived stability of the American middle class way of life. Can we push back against hegemonic forms of sexuality which often lead to situations like Jenny's in ways that don't really rely on proscription and prohibition? What if sexuality education was conceived of as an outgrowth of Christian formation, rather than regulation?

As Singer puts it,

In such a way of reinventing our collective erotic imaginaries and rhetoric may very well lie the possibility of producing forms of pleasure that empower us not by liberating sex from power and pleasure from social invention, but rather by facilitating forms of empowerment that resist and undermine the debilitating effects of the hegemonic forms of dominance. But to do this, we must think of ourselves as capable of recreating our pleasures, as well as the institutions that arouse or frustrate them. The hope is that we will be in a position to both recognize and take the pleasure produced from such an undertaking.³⁹

In the following chapter, I will turn to one possible resource that asks about the relationship of God to sexuality in terms of possibility rather than prohibition. Feminist theologies of eros have taken this question of the link between sexual regulation and oppression quite seriously. In response, theologians like Carter Heyward, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Anne Bathurst Gilson have offered up theologies which invite reflections on desire and bodies in terms of new forms of human-divine relationship. “Eros breaking free” represents the unsettling, destabilizing power of loving desire as a fundamental human good. Could eros draw us closer to asking those questions that will help Jenny and other young people make meaning of their experiences, lives, bodies and relationships?

³⁹ Ibid., 82.

CHAPTER IV

FROM *IMAGO* TO EROS: FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

In the Beginning

The previous chapter describes crucial shifts in the conceptual building blocks that inform the sexual rhetoric of late-modern American Protestant rhetoric and its implications for sexuality education. Terms like marriage or health should not be assumed to operate as neutral universals. Curricular authors rely on particular paradigms of marriage, hygiene, and idyllic family life that have deep and unacknowledged roots. Each of these concepts is charged with deep political and ideological significance that in turn shape their relationship to theological claims about sexuality and its purposes. Correspondingly, adolescent sexuality is frequently coded as a touchstone for national stability. The threat of proliferative sexual chaos also hovers above each, entrenching control as a primary facet of church-based responses to the challenges of theologically accounting for bodies, desires, and pleasures in the lives of youth.

I used the work of Jordan, Moran, and Singer to demonstrate the conflicting rhetorical paradigms that also persist within the explicit theology offered in the curricula. Each of these sexuality curricula ground their content in plural theological anthropologies that blur lines between ideology and theology. The *imago dei* serves as a powerful framing device for descriptions of the good and holy sexuality to which adolescents are called to aspire. However, the criteria of goodness and holiness tend to act as referents to the ideologies described above. Curricula alternately find within the divine image a rubric for rational behavioralism, ethical absolutes, and relational ideals. This chapter

will focus, albeit critically, on the function of the *imago dei* as a founding theological principle for considering human sexuality. I demonstrate that reframing the *imago* in light of eschatological anticipation can provide a more robust theological resource which resist modern the manifestations of biopower identified in the previous chapter.

Corresponding themes of health and sexual wholeness with foundations in modernity weave through this anthropological touchpoint of the divine image. If these curricula and their appeals to an original divine plan are correct, the God of Genesis is remarkably like the God of late-modern American Protestantism. We can find little attention to the deeper theological challenges of the *imago* presented in historical theology. This includes the proleptic nature of the *imago* as an eschatological revelation of human being redeemed by God in Christ.

The use of the *imago dei* as a curricular starting point is no surprise. The *imago dei* has long been a key category for exploring precisely what relates human beings and the divine by nature and likeness. Historical investigations into the divine image, as well as modern treatments of the concept, have done nothing if not caution us against any static or singular meaning we can derive from the *imago* of Scripture. Still, the curricula are similar in that the *imago* is nonetheless presented as a historically unchanging, scripturally sound and rhetorically reliable device for communicating the sexual values of Christian life.

Imago dei as social blueprint?

An *imago dei* populated with the type of concerns Moran, Jordan, and Singer lay out—for containment, control, and retrenchment—generates corresponding understandings of desire that have implications for broader social structures. Far from

provoking reflection on the possibilities for the divine image in humanity revealed in Christ and hoped for in the eschaton, the *imago dei* essentially becomes a blueprint for sexual ethics rooted in visions of health, homeland, and market. When employed in sexuality curricula, this *imago dei* sanctifies a vision for human life and a vocation for adolescents that can fall short of eschatological Christian ideals of communalism, unity in diversity, and kenotic expressions of grace. Moreover, curricula dealing largely in strategies for the control of sexuality generally leave little room for discernment, reflection, and the mutual production of new forms of knowledge.

Beyond social structures, such a use of the *imago* also has implications for how Jenny can theologically engage her own narrative of sexual experience as a young person. With an *imago* linked implicitly to a divine plan for marital adult heterosexuality, Jenny's own sense of personhood is theologically diminished. The only way she can identify with "godly" sexuality is from the outside—from failure. The relationship of this *imago dei* and God in Godself reiterates hierarchical approaches to considering the social and personal needs of adolescents in relation to their lives as sexual persons. Sexuality education under such a rhetorical regime will be unilaterally prescriptive, a set of admonitions and knowledges deemed important according to their utility in maintaining the values of late modern family and social life. Young people are primarily responsible for apprehending these knowledges and modifying their behavior accordingly. While ostensibly geared towards the health and safety of adolescent bodies, sexual containment strategies miss the opportunity to reflect upon the relationship between sexuality, discipleship, and the crafting of life engaged with the experience of sanctification.¹

¹ Singer herself would go so far as to suggest that a curricula dealing in these mitigating ideals actively resists such pedagogy.

However, one particular theological tradition has paid special attention to the effect of the *imago dei* on unjust social structures and perceptions of human subjectivity. Can feminist critiques of classical portrayals of the *imago dei* prove helpful in an effort to redirect our sexual rhetoric and youth alike back towards a more open engagement with the transformative effects of divine love?

Feminists confront the imago

Feminist theologians have long observed that sexual ethics tied to the *imago dei* are often predicated upon structures proven oppressive, rather than liberative, to the Christian theological imagination. Below, I will describe several ways that feminists have observed how invoking the *imago dei*'s rhetorical force has marked consequences for interpersonal and ecclesial relationships alike. The critiques lobbied by Jordan, Moran, and Singer have pointed to connections between adolescent sexuality programs and shifting perceptions of social stability and moral authority. Feminist theologians push this in a new direction, explicitly suggesting that the role of gender remains a powerful but implicit source for much of the divine image's rhetorical force. Making explicit gendered assumptions about the divine image can help to dismantle many of the troubling systems funded by problematic framings of the *imago dei*. Additionally, feminist theologians suggest that reimagining the nature and role of sexuality itself can serve to draw us closer to that eschatological vision of a redeemed humanity.

Hence, this chapter will argue that feminist theological perspectives are well-positioned to contribute a helpful intervention to the theological bind of present curricular projects in adolescent sexuality. First, I explore the impact of the *imago dei* on early feminist insights regarding gender inclusivity and the need to attend to women's

experiences in theology. The work of theologians including Rosemary Radford Ruether and Phyllis Trible directly connected the rhetoric of the *imago dei* to social structures which facilitated sexual regulation and social inequalities. Following this, I trace the emergence of feminist theologies of eros, which suggest that human sexuality can be a source of wisdom and power for resisting these injustices. Finally, I suggest advancing these feminist approaches. While both feminist destabilizations of the *imago* and a liberative erotic imagination are crucial to a more helpful theology of adolescent sexuality, I anticipate that resituating feminist eros within narratives of sanctification and discipleship yields new possibilities for considering sexuality in light of ongoing Christian practice.

Imago Dei: From Personal to Social

Feminist theologies conversant with the *imago dei* describe a correlative relationship between constructions of the divine image, gender, and present-day social arrangements. Early work in this area was especially concerned with characteristics attributed to God and mirrored in human beings. “Given that the image of God [in classical theology] becomes more closely linked to those attributes that are connected to men, women are seen as reflecting the image of God in a deficient or defective manner. Their bodies, in particular, come to be linked to that which impedes the fullness of the image within them.”² Many efforts to control or exploit such “deficient” bodies, feminists argue, are implicitly approved by the male deity whose masculinity funds patriarchal authority. Likewise, experiences characteristic to women’s lives were

² Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image : An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2007), 86.

rendered irrelevant to theological conversation about God. Landmark arguments by Rosemary Radford Ruether and Phyllis Trible problematized divine ontologies in order to argue for more liberative social arrangements, even as feminists questioned the contribution of classical forms of the *imago* to patriarchal institutions that extended from the intimate and domestic to the economic and political.

Imago Dei and the divine Other

Emerging on the first wave of feminist theological exploration, in *Sexism and God-Talk*, Rosemary Radford Ruether argued that the "critical principle" of feminist theology is best understood as inclusivity informed by a hermeneutic of women's experience.³ Feminist theology should affirm the full humanity of women, alongside men, in terms of their "original, authentic human nature."

Ruether rejects gender binaries which negatively frame female characteristics in relation to masculine traits. Men are independent, strong, rational, and even-tempered. Women are relational, nurturing, irrational, and emotional. Affirming characteristics inherent to gender create oppositional taxonomies for men and women. They produce social roles which alienate men and women from one another and often privilege one set of capacities above another. There is no greater example of this than in the privileged theological expression of a male God.

The ascription of prized masculine traits to a male deity has reciprocal and compounding consequences. If God's image reflects gendered categories, than humans likewise possess inherently gendered characteristics. Such logic, Ruether argued, deeply

³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk : Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 19,198.

entrenches patriarchal structures. Sexist gender hierarchies align favored characteristics with the masculine divine, less favorable ones with the worldly feminine. Women have not only been alienated from men and one another. They have been alienated from God and God's community. The psychic damage from this alienation must be healed as a component of a redemption that anticipates human conformation to the *imago dei*.⁴

Ruether pushed for a church committed to liberation from sexism and the full inclusion of all.⁵

Ruether showed that gendered assumptions about the *imago dei* have implications that extend beyond anthropology. Attending to redemption or eschatological community cannot occur without directly confronting the psychic fragmentation produced by alienated gender relations. Female redemption is often wrongly signified as a turn towards the higher, disciplined, ethical, masculine self as a return to God. Such redemption is predicated on maintaining untenable, patriarchal dualisms. Ruether suggests that redemption is better understood as a process of "recovering aspects of our full psychic potential that have been repressed by cultural gender stereotypes" and "transforming the way these capacities have been made to function socially."⁶ This is a redemption which will heal both men and women.

Phyllis Trible's work in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* focused a similar argument on Scripture as a theological resource for descriptions of human personhood. Trible follows "God male and female" across the pages of the Hebrew bible to reveal the often forgotten context of gender and sexuality as a mark of God's good creation.

⁴ Ibid., 113.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Evidence for "female imagery and motifs" in the pages of scripture is presented as justification for both a different kind of God and a correspondingly more inclusive liturgical community.⁷

It would seem, at first glance, that all three of the curricula examined here have admirably heeded the call of these early feminists. The *imago* in all three curricula offers a gender-inclusive vision of the *imago dei*, what Janet Martin Soskice has called a "sexual monoculture."⁸ Each suggests that both male and female genders reflect the divine image. They also assert that gender relations in God (and, as each curricula later affirms in references to Ephesians, in Christ) are egalitarian. In this way the curricula owe much to early feminist theological insights shaped by Ruether and Tribble. The curricula embody the values of these feminist critiques of the *imago dei*, which seek egalitarian relationship and full gender inclusivity.

At the same time, the curricula tie heterosexual marital intimacy closely to the egalitarian gender characteristics found in God. None of the curricula intentionally argue for a binarily gendered God (and some argue directly against). Still, the conflation of marriage, egalitarian values, and divine image often inadvertently produce an ontology of a God comprised of female and male united in a marital sexual relationship.

As I have already shown, such marital relations are infused with a host of problematic assumptions. Can God be understood as beyond gender, drawing us to eschatological possibility, if our primary referent point for that possibility remains the

⁷ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 200.

⁸ Janet Martin Soskice, "Imago Dei and Sexual Difference: Towards an Eschatological Anthropology," in *Rethinking Human Nature : A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Malcolm A. Jeeves(Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2011), 301.

marriage of two genders? Is there an aspect of intrahuman or human-divine relation that transcends comparisons to married life and remains relevant to youth and adults alike?

Phyllis Tribble gestures at this. She reminds readers that scriptural appeals to human being in the image of God maintained an important divine transcendence. God was ultimately always beyond that which could be grasped in human language, categories, or experience. Further, “the image of God” tells us something about gender. At its heart, Tribble offers, gender does not exist to reveal binary taxonomies. Instead, gender reveals an otherness connected to possibilities for appreciative coexistence. God’s exhibition of gendered characteristics should always be encountered as a revelation of profound, divine difference. This caveat “saves [the metaphor of the *imago dei*] from idolatry by witnessing to the transcendent Creator who is neither male nor female nor a combination of the two. Only in the context of this Otherness can we truly perceive the image of God male *and* female.”⁹

Tribble’s project resituates gender as a signifier of otherness without requiring a fixed binary definition of sexual difference. Further, this signification includes an ethical disposition towards the appreciation of difference. Hence, Christian theology rightly appropriates gender when it seeks to encounter it within the question of living (and loving) well together in difference, *not* when gender is tied to exploitative power or bound to oppressive social arrangements. God’s transcendent otherness perpetually exposes and challenges such schemes. Concurrently, the plurality of God’s Trinitarian relationship to God’s self and creative relationship to the world as Other means that paradigms of otherness and difference will always hold eschatologically new possibility.

⁹ Tribble, 201.

This position even destabilizes strict appeals to the feminine in response to patriarchy, resisting essentialized or static portraits of gender that can be strictly mapped onto social or institutional relationships. It is God, not gender, that has the power to creatively destabilize human attempts to fix the meaning of difference across bodies and persons.

Mary McClintock Fulkerson: A “subjective” imago?

Later, feminist challenges to the innateness of the subject emerged in the work of feminist theologians influenced by poststructuralism. These projects denied the existence of an “original” human subject that preceded regimes of power and language. Mary McClintock Fulkerson’s appropriation of this work questions whether an anthropology grounded in an originating *imago dei* would be as effective for liberative feminist aims.¹⁰ Fulkerson destabilizes feminist confidence in the recognition of a more inclusive human subject and thus a more inclusive divine ontology. Recognizing subjectivity, she asserts, is already fraught with sedimented layers of meaning. Ruether argued that we can find an innate, psychically integrated self within the eschatological and gender-inclusive *imago dei*. Instead, Fulkerson proposes that redemption first lies in pulling back the curtain on subjectivity itself. Many assumptions fund our constructions of gender and personhood. Confidence in a divinely-ordained, prelapsarian subjectivity may in fact be at the root of many of our most sinfully oppressive human relationships.

Fulkerson's approach maintains that any deployment of the *imago dei* risks narrating the construction of insiders and outsiders. Those engaging the relationship

¹⁰ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Contesting the Gendered Subject: A Feminist Account of the *Imago Dei*," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology : Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

between human social arrangements and the *imago dei* must be cautious. The deep entanglement of gender and subjectivity, at least within our discursive culture, provokes the need for a different feminist theological use of the *imago dei*. Theologians and laypersons alike should reject the universalizing narratives which reinforce exclusive visions of the divine image and its hegemonic correlates.

Fulkerson calls for a corresponding shift in feminist engagement with the *imago dei*. Feminists should no longer preoccupy themselves with the restoration of the feminine to the *imago dei* and the “reintegration” of the psychic subject. This will not adequately attend to the eschatological reflection of the divine in human beings. We should be announcing that the oppressions yielded by our gendered and raced arrangements reveal that neither men nor women as presently understood can be claimed as images of the divine. Fulkerson extends this argument to include the role of race, an oft-overlooked problem within white feminism. White maleness remains the “universal implicit referent” when we speak of a gendered subject. This specifically raced and gendered subject inevitably shapes the *imago dei* we conceive as we seek to derive characteristic correlates in the human person. Hence, the construction of masculinity and femininity are predicated upon the prior construction of white masculinity.

There is no universal feminine that can be recovered to balance our privileging of the masculine, for both are built upon shaky ground.¹¹ Feminist theological contributions, Fulkerson contends, would be better served by a primary focus on dismantling the referent of white maleness. Only in so doing can we revisit the *imago dei* as a meaningful resource for considering the nature and *telos* of humanity.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

Race, gender, and subjectivity remain deeply entangled in our Western theological anthropologies. Feminist theologians have an opportunity to push for a different use of the *imago dei* in theological discourse. For Fulkerson, this means offering “an incomplete story of a God-loved creation, a creation for which the only requisite features of imaging God are finitude and dependence.”¹² Fulkerson’s proposal should not be read as offering a different set of criteria for describing gender in relation to God. She instead signals a turn towards human vulnerability that foreshadows turns in the latter part of this chapter.

Marriage and sexual difference

Beyond this, we should note that these curricula collapse the *imago dei* and images of sexual difference into a celebration of marriage as the paramount human relationship most aligned with the eschatological communion of God with human beings. The claim upon sexual difference as a good is thus inductively derived from the idealization of heterosexual human marriage as reflective of God’s own relational nature. In other words, the goodness of gender and sexual difference is read backwards through an affirmation of the goodness of marriage. Within this paradigm, sexuality can *only* be affirmed as good when described in the context of (future) heterosexual marriage. Such “Christian” theology in this vein is left unable to affirm neither non-heterosexual human romantic relationships nor sexual difference as a symptom of humanity not necessarily tied to our modern understandings of marriage. Further, the most important aspect of the adolescent’s future as a human being, in this paradigm, is marriage.

¹² Ibid.

The problem with this approach is, from a classical perspective, the failure to attend to the role of incarnation—God’s covenanted communion with humanity in Christ that directly negates any effort to draw a pure correlate between any particular aspect of human being and knowledge of God. Christian theology affirms that the most important aspect of an adolescent’s future is not marriage. It is the realization of the *imago dei* anticipated in Christ. Feminists like Ruether and Tribble further offer that such a paradigm fails to consider the way that social institutions often perpetuate human inequalities funded by oppressive notions of God and power. Fulkerson’s critique is also especially helpful on this point, for she acknowledges the slippages already present in our own epistemic structures, even prior to the eschatological character of human being that must be recalled in Christ. Gender and marriage are both subsumed and resignified within the presence of incarnated deity.

In short, authentically Christian anthropologies are not predicated upon closed structures of human relationship or difference at all, but rather upon a more open-ended glimpse of human possibility offered in a description of incarnated divine love. Christ calls us to a realization that the *imago dei* in human beings can be *practiced* in Christian community, but it is ultimately an eschatological project. Sexual difference can and must be affirmed as a good, but only within such a context as this. Beginning here, in eschatological anticipation of a human community shaped by love, rather than with static and falsely universalized notions of gender and marriage, offers possibilities for joining young people in reflecting upon the role of sexuality in the kind of personhood realized in communion with God.

Retrieving Christological and Eschatological Concerns

Additionally, feminist approaches to gender and the Body of Christ illuminate the specific implications of claims about sexuality and the *imago dei* for questions of social justice. Ruether's engagement with the *imago dei* connects the traditional gendering of the *imago* to frequent theological failures to attend to the communitarian implications of human bodiliness interpreted through the Body of Christ. The *imago dei* culminates in a Christian community that moves far beyond the gender-specific God-man of Christ and any perceived connection of Christ to a male deity. Ruether revolutionizes this eschatological anticipation by demanding that human nature and experience must also encompass *women's experience*. Such a hermeneutical shift will rightly destabilize how one interrogates uses of the *imago dei* which serve to silence and oppress women across time and history. Resisting the privileging of an essentially male *imago* is an important step in resisting these oppressions.

Likewise, Fulkerson's essay closes with an acknowledgment that her vision is implicitly eschatological and communal. Still, she warns that even a collective vision of eschatology must be engaged with caution:

That story must allow the commitment to the particular situation to develop new sensibilities for the outside, defined as violations of the goodness of the partial, and for the possibility that all is redeemable. For the outside, as a place where the occlusions of a situation appear, is not a stable foundation. A theological story might name it as the lure of an eschatological future, but, by definition, it will require disruption of the present system. Therefore it will not look like God's eschatological future to many. Such stories will not, of course, escape hegemonies. Those who tell them must mark the occlusions when they appear, but know that they are already determined by others.¹³

We cannot disregard the way our images of God are frequently colonized by a host

¹³ Ibid., 114-115.

of oppressions and idolatries. Fulkerson's mandate should remind us that, deploying an *imago dei* so closely aligned with a gendered, romantic relationship (marriage) fails to not only invite adolescents to anticipate the eschatological nature of their own formation in the divine image, but also to generate broader possibilities for how they might be formed to live together as the eschatological beloved community.

These feminist insights note that speaking of gender and sexual difference in relation to Christian community should push us always to ask how our anthropological reflections on sexuality are funding the practice of upbuilding the community in love. Ruether reminds us that authentic human nature is located in the *imago dei* revealed in Christ and anticipated in redeemed Christian communities as one of just and loving egalitarian relation.¹⁴ How can our theological understanding of sexuality emerge out of our theology of a Body of Christ that anticipates the eschatological realization of God's love and justice in the world?

Divinely gendered?

Janet Martin Soskice offers one alternative approach to gender tied to the goodness of communion and community itself, pointing to the persistent tensions between gender difference and gender inclusion in the divine image. Her comments recall the particular tensions between Ruether and Tribble's emphasis on a more inclusive approach to sex and gender and Fulkerson's careful questioning of the criteria which ground our understanding of these subjective categories:

We find ourselves to this very day torn between two positions that are each compelling but seem at the same time incompatible. We must say that,

¹⁴ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk : Toward a Feminist Theology*, 19,198.

Christologically speaking, women and men cannot be different, for “all will bear the image of the man of heaven.” But we must also say that sexual difference is not, or should not be, a matter of theological indifference. Genesis I suggests that sexual difference has something to tell us, not just about human beings, but about God in whose image they are made, male and female. The unresolved question then is: Where, why, and how does sexual difference make a difference?¹⁵

Each of the curricula argue that the divine image is not strictly gendered. And yet, each suggests that the imago does imply a very specific kind of gendered relationship, namely a physically, spiritually, and emotionally intimate marital relationship between a man and a woman. The curricula make use of the concept of gender itself as a container for fixed anthropological and ontological meanings. Heterosexual marriage and family life (or committed monogamy modeled on historical Westerns notions of heterosexual marriage) are presented as a penultimate vision of human *telos*, the highest reflection of the imago dei to which humans may aspire.

Soskice’s survey of eschatological perspectives on sexual difference are especially helpful here. Reflecting on resources as varied as the Second Vatican Council’s *Gaudium et Spes* and Schleiermacher’s midrash on Genesis I in *On Religion*, she suggests that preserving the eschatological nature of the imago dei recalls the need of men and women for one another to reveal the image of God. This is not because a combination of complimentary characteristics together fully describes God, but because the Trinity’s unity-in-difference requires a similar unity among human beings.¹⁶

Soskice highlights the need to move beyond understanding the unified the sexual difference of the *imago dei* (“made male and female”) as an instrument for social engineering. Instead, she, like Tribble, offers sexual difference as a “good in itself,” a

¹⁵ Soskice, 302.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 305.

signal that those facets of human life that illuminate our profound differences from one another are holy. In brief but poignant passing, Soskice writes,

God is Love. We learn love through the reciprocity of our human condition, through being in relation to others who are different from ourselves—mothers, fathers, brothers, husbands, and wives. Sexual difference is a primordial difference, a template for the fruitfulness that can come not when two are the same, but when they are different. For human creatures, as for sea and dry land, light and dark, fecundity is in the interval. And this is why sexual difference is not just instrumental to marriage or even to the family. It is good in itself.¹⁷

For Soskice, the goodness of difference is derived from the relationship of plurality to our potential for love. As Tribble noted, gender provokes the appreciation of difference in itself, a reminder that divine love is always drawing us towards an Other.¹⁸ This perspective displaces the heteronormative gender binary that has been falsely equated with divine relationality. Instead, divine love refracted through difference provides the necessary criteria for assessing whether human expressions of gendered sexual relating appropriately aspire to the eschatological vision of human community anticipated in Christ.

Sexuality in the image of God(?)

The eschatological visions of Ruether, Tribble, Fulkerson and Soskice offer us a constructive theological critique of the way adolescent sexuality curricula rely on the *imago dei* for an ultimately insufficient vision of the human being in transformative relationship with God and others. They also effectively deploy the *imago dei* as a

¹⁷ Ibid., 306.

¹⁸ We must, of course, approach these visions with a measure of caution, as such similar rhetorical constructs too easily lead to heteronormative arguments for the “natural” roots of male-female romantic love. However, a refusal to conflate heteronormative romantic love with the bonds of human love across difference, perhaps far better described in theological engagements with the practice of friendship, might help yield new imaginative possibilities for speaking about the role of gender in thinking about loving human relationship and the plural nature of divine love.

warning against uncritically using the reflection of the divine in human beings as a descriptive tool for ethical sexual relationships. To do so risks justifying the potentially oppressive gendered social relations which emerge from gender binaries as inherently “of God.”

Questioning our assumptions about the *imago dei* and its subjective foundations has important implications for examining the social structures and regulatory norms that refer to the *imago dei* for their legitimacy and correspondingly assume an ethos of control and discipline when it comes to human sexuality. When we offer young people an authoritative definition of the *imago*, we indirectly sanction norms and structures which correspond to the particular vision offered. We also learn from these feminist perspectives that our eschatological future has implications for our subjectivity, sexual and otherwise. Recalling the eschatological nature of the *imago dei* resists any false “universal referent” that threatens to foreclose on the loving possibilities of a life in Christ.

These insights suggest the need for an approach to speaking about Christian sexuality with youth that responds to these important critical perspectives. Further, pushing back against static, oppressive, or limiting notions of the nature of God in relation to sexuality also raises questions about alternative theological resources that will prove practically useful. How can we speak of the presence of God in sexuality and simultaneously celebrate a reflective, imaginative engagement with the question of bodies, desire, and love in human community that also appreciates the unique needs and experiences of young people? In the following section, I will turn towards “feminist theologians of eros,” each of whom find an important relationship between love and

justice by linking the feminist celebration of women's experience to the discovery of divine wisdom within the erotic. The methodologies and theological propositions in the turn toward divine Eros contain a helpful set of criteria for constructing a corresponding theology of adolescent sexuality. They also demonstrate, in several turns, the ongoing challenge of remaining open to eschatological possibility.

New Uses of the Erotic

The early work of Ruether and Tribble transformed feminist hermeneutics, influencing the later projects of scholars including Fulkerson and Soskice and expanding the theological possibilities inherent in an engagement with the divine image. In so doing, they highlighted the theological binds inherent in adolescent sexuality curricula that rely upon sexual difference and marriage to describe what is properly a far more eschatological and Christological *imago dei*. Disregarding the open-ended nature of human being anticipated in the eschaton and the beloved community revealed in Christ results in reductionist descriptions of human relationship. Loving justice and human/divine communion, feminists have argued, are the proper criteria and rhetorical paradigm for considering sexual relationships and gender difference. These claims suggest that adolescent sexuality curricula have been mistaking heteronormative iterations of marriage, sex, and gender for an *imago dei* that is in fact always generating new and creative possibility for relational ethics and human personhood.

The changing American social landscape of "sexual liberation" yielded feminist ethical projects that sought to rethink the role of sexuality in social relationships. Further, feminists increasingly sought to make the deconstruction of sex and gender norms relevant to ethical practice. Many feminists sought to draw wisdom from a newfound

valuation of bodies, sexual desire, and relational experiences. These engagements with the erotic, from such luminaries as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, offered a new language of resistance and celebration. Eros became a way of talking about the profundity of relational experience that moved feminist critique beyond the rejection of patriarchal institutions to imagine new ways of relating. Feminist theology likewise reflected this trend, and scholars began to suggest that the erotic could serve as a source of divine power in the construction of new communal forms.

Since then, a diverse set of feminist theologians have appropriated these insights, developing "theologies of eros" that speak prophetically about both bodies and society. Three in particular, by Carter Heyward, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Anne Bathurst Gilson, exemplify the commitments of this theological movement. Each engage the Erotic as a divine source of wisdom and power for anticipating just the sort of eschatological transformation of sexuality in human community suggested by Ruether, Fulkerson and Soskice. The theologies of eros that I will describe below offer several alternative visions for sexuality, including a crucial claim that the divine image is intimately tied to vulnerability. They also expose several seemingly intractable challenges that remain in need of additional theological examination.

Carter Heyward: Erotic power

Patristic and contemporary theologians alike have questioned the notion of an *imago dei* outside that which is revealed and redeemed in Christ. Much of this reluctance to root the divine image in anything distinctly human comes from a deep concern for the deformative power of sin. While troubling many classical definitions for "Christ" and "sin," feminist theologies of eros have nonetheless also essentially attempted a similar

project. They acknowledge that social oppressions have long divorced human beings from authentic relation to self, others, and, correspondingly, from relationship with God. They suggest that restorative potential lies in seeking the divine within the force that draws persons out of themselves and towards the Other. This pull, the erotic, is acutely but by no means exclusively located in human sexuality. As such, these feminists argue, healing our sexual relationships is key to restoring our relationship to the erotic, deepening our intimacy with the divine, and reflecting mutual love in our social institutions.

Carter Heyward begins her theological project with an admonition to read sexuality “historically.” She indicts Western Christianity as “a body-despising, woman-fearing, sexually repressive religious tradition.”¹⁹ Heyward especially attends to historic Christian dualisms between soul and body, sin and salvation, male and female, and desire and piety. She contends that the divinization of these binaries by much of the Western Christian tradition should be condemned for the self-hatred it produces in those whose bodies do not align with the privileged status afforded only some. Christianity’s fear of sexuality and hatred of the body has also contributed to the construction of structures of domination and hierarchy that fund oppressive social regimes and distorted sexual relationships that exploit the vulnerability of our inherent relationality as created beings.²⁰

In particular, Heyward notes that Christian natural law traditions ordain unequal relationships between genders and the oppression of non-heterosexual loving, masking the inherent privilege and injustice such ordination entails for all human beings and their

¹⁹ Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 47.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 25, 39.

relation to God and one another. As a “natural phenomenon,” heterosexual marriage reveals not only God’s will for human relationships, but also the only acceptable model for understanding the relationship between God and human beings. There is no room left for non-normative persons in this scheme. Moreover, human beings are left with little space to question or shape a sexual morality that does not conform to what is at once “natural” and divine:

Basing contemporary moral theory on medieval concepts of natural law necessitates projecting an image or fantasy of 'good order' onto human social relations--thereby denying altogether the role of human agency in determining moral good. We play no part in creating sexual morality...In this social praxis, historical and contemporary, the image of heterosexual marriage emerges as the prototype for the Right--that is, the Natural and the Moral--Relation not only between male and female, but also between Christ and his church. Compulsory heterosexuality safeguards this divinely willed Right Relation. To coerce heterosexual bonding is simply to affirm what is natural. And what is natural reflects the good order of the cosmos, thereby revealing the divine purpose. The Be-ing of God involves being heterosexual.²¹

The resonance with my central critique of the sexuality education curricula is helpful, for it is the same bind each curriculum finds itself in by appealing to married sexuality as the penultimate example of human relation to the divine, the performance of an ethical Christian life, the proper worship of God, and thus to the power of love itself. Within such a paradigm, moral agency is figured in relation to conforming to this given reality of social and gendered organization rather than crafting an engagement with sexual difference and social life that reflects to love and justice Heyward describes above.

Heyward’s critique shares much in common with her feminist contemporaries, but she draws particular attention to how Christian theologies of gender invariably feed characterizations of Christ and his Church. If what we are to know about being human is

²¹ Ibid., 62.

derived from our encounter with Christ, then what we know of being gendered, desiring bodies in relationship likewise derive from this penultimate “marriage.” Conversely, the social forms of gendered relating we take as “natural,” including compulsory heterosexuality, are invariably read back into our characterizations of Christ-in-relationship and thus finally into how we encounter God in Godself. Heyward identifies significant ethical implications for this epistemic cycle. In particular, she notes how contemporary moral and theological arguments against the acceptability of homosexuality conflate assumptions about the “natural” with assumptions about the essentially gendered nature of the social order.

Damaging theologies reproduce themselves in and across human relationships. In particular, they make it almost impossible to participate in mutually loving and just social arrangements. The injustice produced when certain bodies are despised and desires abhorred reveals fractured relationship to the eros that rightly draws us together. Paradigms like the “natural” expressions of divine heterosexuality limit our ability to think creatively and constructively about embodied, vulnerable life in community. We instead form institutions and regulations to preserve our alienation in an effort to avoid laying bare our own physical, spiritual, and emotional vulnerabilities. The potential for God’s love and justice becomes especially constrained by the strictures placed upon eros, exemplified in the binary demands for male/female sexual relationship and idealization of heterosexual marriage which pass for the Christian sexual imaginary in late modernity. Where God’s erotic power is repressed, domination and alienation reign. The preservation of heterosexual marriage in its present state is therefore a poor substitute for truly ethical and moral pronouncements about a Christian sexuality characterized by the

facilitation of divine love and the honoring of embodied vulnerability.

Our alienated Christian relationship to sexuality can be read as a sign of other forms of alienation and its exploitative consequences. These include racism, heterosexism, and the frequently destructive capacity of capitalism to abuse those on the margins of society. Human beings have tended to develop organizations that emphasize control, or what Heyward calls "power over." The priority of "power over" belies a deep fear that such power might be lost or abused. As a result, we tend to value self-possession and the affirmation of that self-possession in the possession and control of others.

The impulse of the powerful to control others replaces the impulse to be in a mutual relationship which tends to and preserves vulnerability. This has been especially true for women and children, and we are right to recognize the consequences in current sociopolitical relations:

We have not known or loved our bodyselves as our own, for we have no control over who or what passes into or out of us. One of the basic historical tenets of patriarchal social relations, sustained by demands of late capitalist economic conditions, is that women's bodies must be controlled in order for the society to function properly--that is, to maximize profit for the wealthy.²²

Heyward's approach contends that bodies set in opposition to one another in hierarchical power arrangements cannot be bodies which fully reflect the love of God. The distrust of bodies and the historic sexual dualisms which have funded many of our modern systems of domination should be properly condemned as a denial of God in Godself. Such constructions of power seek to resolve difference through hierarchy, a project exemplified in damaging gender relations and sexual arrangements. Erotic

²² Ibid., 25.

experiences likewise are often characterized by exploitative disempowerment rather than positive, justified mutual relation.

Heyward characterizes her emphasis on relational mutuality as a theology of justification rooted in the erotic. Alienated relations between human beings and their bodies, God, their neighbor, and the church at large are exemplified in sexual practices and values. Much wisdom can be drawn from the way this may occur in loving, physical expressions of sexual pleasure. Heyward writes, "our sexualities are our embodied yearning to express a relational mutuality in which the tensions are sustained, not broken."²³ However, Heyward identifies theological insights beyond those deemed conventionally "sexual." Healing the human relation to the erotic, Heyward argues, is essential to repairing the fraught relationships and social institutions plagued by patriarchy and heterosexist oppression.

A distorted, broken relationship to the erotic often constrains our abilities to conceive of other social and sexual relational possibilities.²⁴ Heyward warns us that repressed sexuality is repressed power. Instead of domination, Heyward suggests that we embrace the creative tension of difference. Liberating erotic power has the potential to liberate all forms of human relationship.²⁵ The erotic, power in right relation, has eschatologically transformative potential.

Heyward offers a vision in which erotic power fully realized is an incarnation of the divine. Read backwards into sexual relationships, this liberative vision affirms that there are forms of sexual experience capable of signifying the erotic wisdom of divine

²³ Ibid., 33.

²⁴ Ibid., 52-53.

²⁵ Ibid., 39.

justice. Though not framed explicitly in this way, Heyward's theology of eros essentially revolves around a dual axis of foundational claims. First, that the sensuality of the body and bodily experience is good and to be trusted as a source of wisdom for our relation to the world. And second, that "we are created for the purpose of friendship."²⁶ These claims meet in the assertion that "God is our relational power--our power in mutual relation."²⁷ Within these two claims, the "natural" component of sexual relationship reflected also in divine relation and refracted to Christ is the bend towards loving justice possible when human beings love rightly together. When engaged, that intimacy honors bodily vulnerability and can present itself in a variety of forms, provided they are characterized by an authentic mutuality of shared concern and just relation.

Heteronormativity as a divine mandate makes little sense with such foundations, and human sexual practices and arrangements are subjected to the criteria of love and justice rather than conformation to an ideal of heterosexual marriage. The erotic love of God thus exacts its own judgments upon sexist and homophobic social structures while facilitating alternatives and the healing necessary to pursue them in cooperation with divine eros.

For Heyward, such intimacy can rightly be called the fullest expression of incarnated divinity. This is a form of power that promotes loving mutuality rather than domineering hierarchy. As such, embodied human sexuality can be a resource for tapping the ongoing work of God in the world as a divinely incarnational reality. Heyward's description of justification opens up the *imago dei* into a diffuse and yet

²⁶ Ibid., 25.

²⁷ Ibid., 23.

active incarnational presence in the world. The nature of God is known in the liberating experience of an erotic power that restores relationships between self and body, self and others, and bodies-in-community. The *imago* reflects itself in persons who have come into relationship with eros, humanity restored to its full capacity for relationship.

Rita Nakashima Brock: Remembering vulnerability

Like Heyward, Rita Nakashima Brock taps the notion of divine Eros to describe power itself.²⁸ Because power is relational, Brock offers, it can be engaged through the lens of eros as the most primal form of human relationship. Eros calls human beings to respond to their "primal interrelatedness." In this, Brock's approach shares much in common with Heyward, though Brock extends her theological anthropology to explicitly affirm the "ontological relationality" of human beings as a reflection of their divine nature.²⁹

Because human beings are ontologically relational, other persons can impair or facilitate our access to the divine erotic power within us. The suffering which can result is a shared, fundamental part of human experience. At the same time, all human beings are capable of experiencing the shared, life-giving love of mutual relationship. These experiences are inevitably embodied, as it is within our bodies that we experience the highs and lows of our vulnerability as interrelated persons.³⁰ Sexuality's ability to heighten the intensity of this reality means that attentiveness to both suffering and life

²⁸ Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart : A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

lived in community must take sex and gender relations seriously.³¹ At the "heart" of this, Brock contends, is power. Eros is a power rooted in human vulnerability, but it is often subverted and exploited as we attempt to militate against or exploit the vulnerability we share. In so doing, as we deny the goodness of our interrelationality, we deny the divine erotic power of God.³²

Human interrelationality rightly provokes the need to protect and care for those in whom we recognize our shared vulnerability. In the same way, encountering the vulnerability of adolescence and the many perils that surround young people should arouse our desire to protect. However, Brock illuminates the way that protection, of us and others, too often gives way to control. Brock draws an important connection between the forms of power which rely on the denial of our interconnection and the systems of gender inequality that often seem to emerge in their wake. Brock focuses particularly on the way these structures have manifested themselves in systems that privilege men while exploiting and endangering women and children.³³ When sexual control and power through sex are dominant cultural paradigms, abusive sexuality is likely the accompanying norm. Brock recounts the brutalities of domestic abuse and sexual violence, which understandings of dependence and power to privilege violence and authoritarian family systems.

Sexuality figured as control and expressed in abuse and exploitation creates

³¹ Ibid., 6-7.

³² Ibid., 40.

³³ Brock suggests that sin's relationship with power has, among other things, constrained God into a patriarchal tyrant celebrated in ways not unlike the "Stockholm Syndrome" of chronic abuse sufferers. Under these false structures, sin has been described as wanton evil, culpability, or disobedience, with punishment as a logical correlate and redemption as a confounding, unwarranted event meted out from on high. Christ's centrality as the hero of this story serves to further consolidate a notion of power as unilateral and directed towards the dominating constraint and control of human life. Ibid., 21-22.

traumatic scars upon the human spirit. These traumas have far-reaching impact on the human sociality and theology. Trauma deeply corrupts our understandings of acceptable relationships. Deep-seated cycles of abuse further scar our collective ability to envision divine-human relationships outside of a coercive hierarchy. Brock's exploration of women's identities and experiences in the wake of domestic and sexual violence reveals the particularly acute ways that social constructions of sexualized relating advance negative forms of power and prize unilateral forms of relating. However, such warped understandings can also perpetuate themselves subtly, creating expectations for "perfect" heteronormative middle class marriages and accompanying sexual unions that are utterly impossible for anyone to attain.

Gender and sex remain tangled up at the very root of frustrated human interrelationality. Abusive family systems are often extrapolated to produce a patriarchal tyrant of a God. Still, the deep human craving for relation, and so like many long-term sufferers of abuse we are nonetheless drawn to identify and be in relationship with such a God. As a result, humans behave in similar patterns on a compounded scale, experiencing at once the deep pain of love lost and false comfort of reproducing familiar forms of harm and domination. "Brokenheartedness" describes the damage of oppression and maltreatment that then tends to manifest itself in amplified forms of harm and domination. This is sin, and it is profoundly damaging precisely due to the inherent fragility of our "primal relatedness." Being interconnected and interdependent means being vulnerable to sin. Brock's lament takes the form of an indictment of Agape. The kenotic aspects of Christian agape call for disempowerment, making the practitioners of agapic love vulnerable to exploitation by the powerful. Moreover, the primacy of agape

calls for the eschewing of erotic binds. Passionate, intimate human relationship has long been stigmatized. Eros has been falsely reduced to sexuality, and historic Christian denigration of the body practically renders Eros sinful.³⁴ The rhetorical pairing of eros and physical desire rendered eros presumptively gratuitous, unable to fulfill the criteria of sacrificial neighbor love. This has often contributed to the stunting Christianity's struggle to overcome brokenheartedness and restore appropriately vulnerable and mutual human relationships. Intimate, passionate love—Eros--can empower vulnerable people for radical change.

Brock's turn towards Eros reflects an anger at the fundamental pervasiveness of brokenheartedness within a regime that has rendered just community, particularly for women, nearly impossible.³⁵ Divine Eros, she writes, also stirs a collective anger at the fundamental pervasiveness of brokenheartedness despite Christian appeals to the universal love of neighbor. For Brock, this points to the failing of Christian theology to adequately account for ongoing, gendered injustice despite the tradition's calls for self-sacrificial love. Patriarchy and traditional Christianity are inextricably linked, so that dismantling the first inevitably requires redeeming the other.

The role of memory figures prominently in Brock's account and contains Christological implications. Eros allows us to acknowledge past brokenness and recognize our true desire for the mutual relationship. However, "neither healing nor liberation of the whole self--body, mind, spirit, and feelings--is possible without memory, a memory that is comprehensive, honest, and discerning."³⁶ Just as the abuse sufferer

³⁴ Ibid., 40.

³⁵ Ibid., 21.

³⁶ Ibid., 21-22.

often experiences cathartic breakthroughs in therapeutic community, so too may humans find ways to reconnect with Eros as they enact *anamnesis*. At this moment, Divine Eros is rendered incarnate and powerful. Brock's erotic Christology describes power derived from human connection. For Brock, the community created around the Jesus of the gospels serves the model for this erotic *anamnesis* most authentically realized and practiced. The Jesus narrative should be understood as a model of "saving community," a site where power emerged to foster intimacy, what Brock describes as the fullest form of divine love. Erotic power fosters and holds the process of healing, drawing it forward while binding together the loving community that will aid in healing and reconstruction. The incarnation of an erotic Christ/Christ emerges as just, relational community.

Anne Bathurst Gilson: Erotic theoethics

Early feminist theologians of eros were seeking to describe the capacity of erotic, mutual, sexual loving to spark larger turns towards justice and beloved community. The invocation of Eros transcended genital sexuality. Feminists envisioned new patterns of human relationality that reflected an alternative understanding of the *imago dei*. Gilson's later work builds directly upon the insights of Heyward and Brock, testing the efficacy of their theological proposals for applied sexual theoethics. Gilson's corresponding approach offers a liberative Eros for a church scarred by heterosexism and abuse. Calling her work a "proclamation of erotic faith," Gilson asserts that "love and justice are fundamentally interconnected."³⁷ The sexual liberation movement of the previous 30 years is clearly evident in Gilson's thinking (writing in 1995), as she compares the

³⁷ Anne Bathurst Gilson, *Eros Breaking Free : Interpreting Sexual Theo-Ethics* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1995), 111-113.

increasing sexual freedom of women to an event of "eros breaking free," a sign of God's work that begs reflection.

Gilson asks how the values that Heyward, Brock, and others set forth might be arranged to govern human sexual relationships. Gilson's relational model frames sexuality, eros, and pleasure always in terms of a yearning that draws one into connection with others. "Disconnected" forms of erotic and sexual life sever interhuman connection or draw one only inward. A distorted eros is likewise a sign of a broken relationship between human beings and the divine. The erotic "love marked by yearning," if unbound, can restore truly loving sexual relationships. Further, expressions of embodied sexuality that emerge from the love of self and the other are a participation in the eros of God.³⁸

Gilson's approach combines psychological insights with a critique of the Christian preoccupation with Agape. Like Brock, Gilson also argues that the historic Christian preference for self-giving agape and corresponding disdain for the erotic has hindered our ability to seek just mutual relationships. Further, Christianity's commitment to an impartial agape over the more viscerally and particularly experienced eros mirrors the gendering of relational virtues. The control and suppression of eros by the church, Gilson argues, has long been connected to the control of women's sexuality and reproduction.³⁹ Agape has 'eclipsed' eros, and the denigration of the erotic has been accompanied by a denigration of the body that Gilson links to compulsory heterosexuality and corresponding gender norms that continue to privilege men. The

³⁸ Ibid., 118.

³⁹ Ibid., 66.

corresponding devaluation of women and women's experiences has enabled historic commodification of female bodies and a denial of the goodness of women's sexual agency. It has also produced a church that traffics in sexual control.⁴⁰ Agape as conceived by Christianity has often done as much to divide as it has to unify human communities. This division extends to the fragmented relationship between humans and God. Sexuality acutely exposes this pathology.

Gilson believes that Eros, not agape, should be regarded as the primary force that binds humans together in solidarity. When mutually pleasurable and just, sexual relationships are sites of God's presence as well as glimpses of the broader possibilities of creative human relationship. Eros is "defined as a body-centered love marked by a yearning, a pushing and pulling toward erotic mutuality, a movement toward embodied justice."⁴¹ By imparting holiness into women's sexual lives, the eros Gilson imagines empowers claims of personal agency and self-regard. However, this has implications for men and women alike. Human sexual relationships must be liberated from the constraints of Christian suspicion as part of a larger movement towards loving community. Liberating Eros is a crucial component for the dismantling of compulsory heterosexuality, the oppression of women, and larger social structures of injustice in the world.

Put simply, for Gilson sexuality is necessarily at the heart of God's incarnating work in the world. Sex cannot be separated from the presence of God, and this has implications for just human relationships. Human beings may begin to recognize this in

⁴⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁴¹ Ibid., 110, 131.

the goodness of pleasure, sensuality, and erotic interpersonal experiences. Like Heyward, Gilson suggests that sexual acts can and do serve as the catalyst for movements toward embodied justice and "erotic mutuality."⁴²

Gilson exhorts Christians to celebrate God's presence in human sexual experiences. God should be understood as a participant in our love-making, rendered incarnate in moments which typify the just mutuality she describes. Gilson suggests that we can know divine presence in our shared experiences of pleasure. Moreover, humans have an ethical obligation to embrace Eros as the incarnated love of God. This transcends the Jesus event and has ethical implications: "If God's incarnation is ongoing, and if eros is connected with God, then God is fully present to us in every way. Made in God's image, we not only bear a responsibility to incarnate God through the cultivation of mutual love and justice in our sexual relationships; we also bear a responsibility to see ourselves reflected in God."⁴³ Sexuality is therefore framed as a special site of knowing and liberative empowerment for one's relationship to self just as much as her relation to others.

Embracing the Erotic

Adjusting the use of the *imago dei* via the feminist turn to eros offers entrance to several concepts helpful to an effort to convey a Christian approach to adolescent sexuality. In other words, it allows for an argument to be made that it is just as Christian to speak of the liberative potential of sexual lives well-lived as it is to suggest that Christianity should be primarily concerned with the constraints of sexuality among the young.

⁴² Ibid., 114, 116.

⁴³ Ibid., 113.

Theologies of eros especially help resist the conflation of Christian sexual regulation and the promotion of idealistic visions of marital sexuality and family life that rightly deserve interrogation and a more cautious and well-qualified deployment.

Sexuality, love, and justice

First, feminist theologies of eros draw an important connection between sexuality, love, and justice. The approaches of Heyward, Brock, and Gilson narrate a role for sexuality in Christian life that extends far beyond a simple list of “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” The curricula this project has explored have taken a largely reductionist and prophylactic stance towards sexuality. As a result, the majority of the content instructs teens on risk avoidance, with the primary difference among the curricula being what risks loom especially large. Deconstruction of sexual norms and reflection upon the particular risks they create for young people is largely neglected. Also, as sex is largely presented as risky, youth can find little confidence in the idea that theological reflection upon sexuality can be liberative, and that their participation in such reflection can in fact allow them to craft ways of relating to themselves and others that can be positively world-changing.

However, as Heyward writes, the justice of God can only be incarnated when all persons are invited into the process of constructive and creative--erotic--mutual relation:

The divine presence is incarnate--embodied--in our relational selves. Our power in relation is being shaped in the matrix of each relational self who is true to herself as relational. The justice of God, alive in us insofar as we are true to ourselves, is reflected by the mutuality in our relationships with one another, which in turn enable us to sustain creatively the tensions in which the Sacred is at home among us.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Heyward, 33.

Likewise, Gilson's interest in the erotic power of women learning to love the self reminds us that self-love requires recognizing the image of God in ourselves and others. However, that recognition of the divine is deeply linked to the recognition of God's solidarity with human beings and our own intrinsic interconnection. Such love then supplies the erotic power necessary for the overcoming of unjust relational and social structures in the world.⁴⁵ Theologians of eros remind us that this process of loving recognition and corresponding justice-seeking should not be understood apart from our experience of erotic passion in sexual loving. The loosing of eros should be understood as a celebration of the presence of God in sexuality and a tapping into God's work of creative re-connection between persons.⁴⁶ The empowerment of youth through sexuality education does not have to be represented purely as an empowerment to say "yes" or "no" to sexual activity. Rather, youth can begin to reflect upon how building a theology of sexuality and a corresponding set of cultivated practices might contribute to the larger work of incarnated God's love and justice in the world.

With these insights in mind, the question of adolescent sexuality can be reconfigured apart from the priority of discipline and containment. As McFarland interprets Paul's admonition against joining one's body to that which is unclean, "the opposite of fornication is not abstinence but chastity, understood as a matter of maintaining an appropriate vulnerability that is inconsistent with prostitution, rape, pedophilia, polygamy, and other forms of intimacy in which 'the vulnerability is not equal and therefore not appropriate.'" The logic is drawn directly from Paul's claim that

⁴⁵ Gilson, *Eros Breaking Free : Interpreting Sexual Theo-Ethics*, 111-113.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 119-120.

human beings represent the very “mode of Christ’s presence in the world,” and thus are called to be discerning in how they practice the vulnerability inherent in such communion.⁴⁷ This does not mean that anything goes, for anyone, and any time. Rather, what I am essentially describing is the form of chastity McFarland has described, which emerges out of an *imago dei* revealed in the communion of Christ with humanity and God while maintaining a deep regard for bodiliness:

For the status of chastity as a specifically Christian virtue lies not in any demand it makes for the renunciation of the body, but in its stress on the fact that neither the present state nor the ultimate destiny of the self can be abstracted from the body. In this context, chastity should not be understood as the demand to maintain some sort of distance from the other, but as a discipline that establishes the conditions necessary for genuine intimacy within the context of various types of interpersonal relationships. From this perspective, it is imperative from the church’s perspective that the love of two sisters for one another, of the monk and his brothers in community, and of all spouses be chaste; but it is no less important to recognize that the form of a chaste relationship will be different in each of these cases.⁴⁸

Is it any less possible that such chastity sufficient to these possibilities for genuine intimacy with others and God might be cultivated differently but concurrently across age groups? Can the particular vulnerabilities of adolescent bodies with one another and within Christian community provoke a discernment as to the best way chastity might be practiced both at present and as young people mature into adulthood, according to their own distinct differences?

When Heyward, Brock, and Gilson challenge the priority of Christian agape over eros in interpersonal relationships, they provide an alternative way to help adolescents consider their approach to a “sexually active” life. Whereas Agape prizes objective,

⁴⁷ Ian A. McFarland, *The Divine Image : Envisioning the Invisible God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 112.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

indiscriminate love, Eros affirms the passionate intimacy of close relationships. Eros does not ask students to be noble and self-sacrificial in the delay of sexual intercourse in order for a greater reward. Rather, a theology of eros invites youth to practice their sexuality in light of a discipleship that seems partnership in the present work of God.

Much of this will necessarily involve the cultivation of mutuality in relation as young people learn to negotiate the interplay of eros across self and others, recognizing God's role in drawing their relationships towards justice in community. Gilson deems these to be acts of "erotic incarnation," even if they are not "sexually active" by modern terms. This very well may mean the delay of physically intimate sexual relations, and it may not. The operant question offered by eros is whether, in either case, youth are being drawn into a deeper relationship with a God that doesn't just approve of sexuality, but in fact exists in and within the eros of the world.

Reimagining sexuality in community

Theologies of eros examine foundations of existing social structures often taken for granted in the curricula. Countervailing feminist perspectives bring attention to the ways practices like marriage, reproductive control, and bodily discipline are often used as a panacea to human vulnerability. Theologies of eros also highlight the correlation between hierarchical understandings of divine power and the regulation of sexuality. Social constructions which mediate power, exemplified in gender relations and sexual practices, illustrate human attempts to mitigate vulnerability by resisting the mutual interconnectedness that leave us open to brokenhearted exploitation. Brock focuses particularly on the way these structures have manifested themselves in systems which have tended to privilege men while exploiting women and children. That woman and

children are most vulnerable both in the home and in broader society is not a coincidence Brock takes lightly. Power itself has become something wielded as an instrument of sin through our constructions of sex and gender. Her theology offers a helpful way of describing the particular ways this vulnerability is exploited in adolescents, not only by the sinister forces of market capitalism, but also by a church concerned with its own moral authority.

However, feminist theologies of eros also recognize the dialectical nature of human vulnerability. Heyward affirms that eros renders *all* humans intrinsically vulnerable. Vulnerability is a necessary component of loving human relation. Those who desire to protect adolescents by emphasizing sexual regulation often risk denying the capacity of young people for exploring the graced goodness of sexuality without chaotic and tragic consequence. Brock's vision of eros reminds us that the fundamental relationality of human beings means that redemption will not eliminate human vulnerability or the potential for sin. God is most fully incarnated in just, loving human relationships, and from here emerges the power of "primal interrelatedness"--Eros. As such, the fullest incarnation of God will involve the appreciation of human relatedness to self, others, bodies, and the earth.⁴⁹ Instead of risk avoidance, the Christian approach to sexuality can therefore be one of proactive, theologically constructive practices of reflection and care that advance this mission. Healing will be found in community and then safeguarded through the construction of more just relations.⁵⁰

Practically, this extends to broader concerns for the vulnerabilities of young

⁴⁹ Brock, 82.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 47-49.

bodies literally and within the institutions that will mediate their sexualities (including their immediate family, personal relationships). Christian institutions are obligated to ensure that young people receive developmentally appropriate comprehensive information about sexual health and contraception. However, Eros calls us to pair this with theological reflection and faith practices that draw sexuality into positive relation with God's incarnation in human community. Hence, the centrality of vulnerability should also shape the appropriate *telos* of corresponding acts of care. Much of the curricular rhetoric currently suggests that young bodies should be cared for by the mitigation of sexual consequences. Disease and unplanned pregnancy risk derailing relatively healthy adult lives that will allow youth access to fulfilling marriages and plural options for education and career. These are not necessarily bad aims in themselves. However, in this paradigm church and adults are bound only to help direct youth on the proper path. Theology works only in service to this aim.

In an alternative influenced by theologies of eros, youth and adults alike recognize that they are in partnership, engaging the developmental stages of their sexualities in relation to the sanctifying presence of God in every aspect of life while refusing to reject the vulnerability that manifests their connectedness to God and one another. In short, when it comes to sex, theologies of eros call for us to transcend fear and act in love.

Eros redeeming imago

The incarnational nature of vulnerability-in-relation can open up new possibilities for the function of the *imago dei* for adolescent sexuality in a much more coherent way. Brock especially highlights the Christological implications of connecting eros to divine

incarnation. The primary difference, of course, lies in how theologians of eros describe incarnation. Feminist theologies of eros largely push beyond the particularity of Jesus, a sticking point for feminists uneasy about the tenability of a first-century Palestinian man as divine exemplar. Brock's Christological revision makes us look at how *Christ* qualifies human characteristics, but she qualifies this approach by examining how the community surrounding Christ became one which nurtured vulnerability in loving care. Humans share vulnerability with the divine, but Christ gives us the vision for its full consummation in beloved community. There is no room in this theology for a patriarchal God primarily concerned with sexual regulation achieved through worldly correlates.

Hence, the *imago* can be read as calling forth a vision of sexual life expanded beyond simple prophylactic expectations for marriage and family. The historical and contemporary critiques of locating the *imago* in some tacit characteristic of human beings finds a counterpart in the feminist suggestion of an *imago* which comes to be known in and through relationship.⁵¹ The *imago dei* cannot simply set an aspirational pattern for human living, as it does in the curriculum. Loving human relationships in participation with Divine Eros bring forth God's incarnation, and thus the *imago*, as relations of sex and gender come into a close alignment with divine justice. Inviting adolescents to theologically reflect upon sexuality does not just anticipate the *imago dei*. Instead, adolescent sexuality education is an incarnational event of God's erotic call on our lives. We find the power of God at work as eros among human beings, shaping practices of mutual care and nurture. Eros opens up the eschatological possibility of a sexuality

⁵¹ See Molly Haslam's argument for a relational *imago dei* (vis-à-vis Martin Buber), from the perspective of disability theology. Molly Claire Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response*, 1st ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

which can remain vulnerable while being held and celebrated by God in fellowship with all else.

(Re)membering sexuality in the Body of Christ

Feminist theologies push us to recall that *all* bodies are vulnerable. That vulnerability is only rendered more acute by an inbreaking God who is forever drawing us outside our selves and into relationship with others. Feminist theologies of eros also effectively point to social conditions that should make us continue to handle our considerations of young sexuality with care. For example, Brock's theology is particularly sensitive to the real-life experience of those seeking a place in Christianity despite real experiences of abuse. The redemption of eros from a history of Christian exploitation (also found in Heyward) could also be useful to young people learning to give voice to their sense that all is not right in their culture's treatment of their youth, their bodies, or their sexualities.

Critiques of the moment contemporary youth find themselves in require a work of anamnesis that is likewise willing to confront the collusion of church, market, politics, and ideology to produce their present milieu. Brock also speaks of "anger that frees us to claim ourselves." False selves yield ambivalence towards the body often coupled with exploitation or abuse. One who has become "brokenhearted" in her sexuality can turn away from the body altogether. Sensuality and flesh become objects of scorn or danger.⁵² Erotic anger enables the possibility of judging what is in fact harmful, what fosters a "false" self, in sexual practice.

⁵² Brock, 21.

However, Brock's approach offers an important qualification to the role of memory in sexuality, especially its potential for insight into love and justice. She does so by juxtaposing nostalgia with anamnesis. This pairing suggests that indulgence in the former has little to do with the empowerment of the latter.⁵³ Brock's choice to juxtapose anamnesis and nostalgia heightens the contrast between the two. Nostalgia constructs an idealized past that tends to serve a particular set of present prescriptions. This is nowhere more evident than in *GS2*'s narrative of an idyllic early Christian society that offered an important corrective to a state gone amok.⁵⁴ However, the other curricula offer their own nostalgic narratives, constructing alternative worlds in which sex is always safe and institutions always sound. Nostalgia echoes in through pre-epidemic narrative or even the construction of pre-puberty as a time of settled sexual yearnings and a less complicated relationship to the body.

Brock places anamnesis in contrast with what she identifies as a dangerous tendency towards nostalgia in both the Christian tradition and in broader society. She compares this to the ways in which a psychology of abuse tends towards the nostalgic, erecting a false but glowing image of the abuser that makes his presence tenable, even desirable, in the life of the abused despite ongoing suffering. This nostalgia, Brock notes, permeates Christianity. The faith's patriarchal hegemony often calls for a return to a past in which social roles were clear and people knew their place. Likewise, it can be tempting to respond to fears about adolescent sexuality by convincing youth that submission to a set of externally-imposed and potentially oppressive norms will

⁵³ Ibid., 68-70.

⁵⁴ Hancock and Powell, *Good Sex 2.0 : A Whole-Person Approach to Teenage Sexuality and God: Leader's Guide*, 32.

satisfactorily address their need for making theological meaning of their desires, experiences, and questions.

However, by beginning with those for whom memory itself is largely traumatic, Brock suggests that the dangers of nostalgia can become deeply embedded in personal identity, warping even how one knows oneself in relation to God. Those who experienced sexual violence face a unique set of challenges often unaddressed in educational approaches to sex. Untangling the complex relationship to bodies, to others, to touch, and to pleasure requires deep healing and resources all too absent from classical Christian treatments of power and sensuality. At the same time, even those who have escaped violence bear the scars of social engagements with sexuality that marginalize, shame, and terrify.

Along with Brock, Carter Heyward has shown that it is possible to move beyond such a paradigm to a different engagement with memory. Heyward writes that her theology is inspired by those who have already found their own sexual experiences and senses of self to be a "liberating resource" that has left them "strengthened in the struggle for justice for all."⁵⁵ The work therefore carries a confidence that, counter to the presumptions of the curricula examined in this project, the sensual and sexually pleasurable experiences of the body are fundamentally trustworthy and good. Rather than steeping theological reactions to human sexuality in fear, she seeks their potential to contribute to a fuller experience of self-in-relation.

A turn to the erotic pairing of love and justice reveals longstanding silences and "brokenhearted" and distorted understandings of embodied sexuality that often permeate

⁵⁵ Brock, 3.

even well-meaning Christian rhetoric in churches and curricular materials. Brock's extended metaphor of abuse and therapeutic catharsis seeks a corollary in the anamnestic purge of such a framework from the Christian theological system. She couples this with a collective acknowledgement of the damage a suppression of Eros has done to our ability to be in human relationship. Sexuality is bound up within this by the nature of our bodies and desires, but sexuality and eros are not interchangeable concepts.⁵⁶ Brock offers a broader vision. Redeeming eros is certainly about redeeming sexuality, but it is also about recognizing and redeeming the "primal relatedness" of human being. Likewise, Heyward helps us see that engaging sexuality might also help youth identify liberating resources for addressing the stranglehold of cultural expectations for their lives and bodies.

Lingering Questions

Still, the confidence evinced in the intrinsic goodness of the embodied erotic does leave these feminist theologians open to several critiques. The turn to eros in a theological approach to sexuality education still requires a qualified approach to the function of eros, desire, and embodied sexuality in the lives of youth. We must take care not to collapse bodies, desires, pleasures, and power into eros as if they each existed as uncontested terms of an uncontested understanding of sexuality. Further, the rise of

⁵⁶ Brock has also been critiqued by Blodgett for often allowing slippages between her descriptions of the erotic and her descriptions of the sensual, likely a result of her use of an extended metaphor of female reclamation of sexual self after abuse to describe her understanding of the process of redemption. I do not agree that this is necessarily an appropriate critique (though I remain suspicious of her uncritical deployment of the therapeutic as an uninterrogated theological correlate). Such a critique of Brock misses her larger project, namely an effort to articulate the problems with a redemption model characterized by withdrawal from self, denigration of the body, and most importantly the consolidation of power in the hands of a single hero figure.

liberalism brought with it a confidence in behavioral/ethical rationalism that links a rise in knowledge to an assured increase in ethical action. Such voluntarism, when injected into a sexuality education curriculum, presumes that simply talking more directly about the links between bodies, pleasure, power, and desire will lead to transformation. How can we talk about more incarnated, just community in a way that does not fall back into values that line up neatly with sexual public health initiatives without providing the unique perspective on divine interrelationality that Christianity has the potential to offer to young persons of faith? Helpful criticisms from Kathleen Sands and Barbara Blodgett, described below, offer a challenge to both the theoretical and practical implications of theologies of eros.

Kathleen Sands: Feminist overreach?

Sands maintains that theologies of eros tend towards what she calls an almost “eschatological” convergence of goods and powers that places the “weight of the world” on eros as a moral ideal. Existing rhetorical slippages between sex, pleasure, intimacy, eros, and power are magnified by this ontological burden. Sands identifies a tendency towards reductionism within feminist theologies of eros, which establishes the singular goodness of sexual eros and ties it to the ideals of goodness and beauty. Conflating eros with the good and the true requires theologians of the erotic to also be defenders of eros. The problem, Sands argues, is that such reduction draws feminist theologians of eros into the same theodical binds that persist in affirmations of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God. Feminists become charged with denying any inherent tragedy or sin within eros itself. As in a proof in favor of the mysterious justice of God, theologies

of eros must often “prove against all appearances that tragedy is an illusion.”⁵⁷ The good is found in the body, the carnal, the female, the experiential, the sexual, desiring erotic. Evil lives where these ideals are repressed. However, eros is not purely the “power” of God, and God is not purely “power” or only manifested in just community. Is there any rhetorical room left to confront “eros” with the very ideals of love and justice that eros demands? Are injustice and broken relationship only present in the absence of Eros?⁵⁸

Because for Brock sin emerges from “brokenheartedness” and extends to the unjust exercise of power, Sands suggests that Brock is left no choice but to assert that “bad power is false power, and bad selves false selves. And that is why, having identified specific aesthetic and relational goods with eros, she has to assume that other goods (e.g., positive political changes) are derived from these aesthetic and relational goods.”⁵⁹ Sands points to the way Brock’s picture of the erotic of as the “immanent ground of all causality” is deeply linked to Brock’s expansion of a therapeutic model “into a theodicy through the assumed singularity of the good, and the assumed identity of goodness and power.”⁶⁰ Being bound to these commitments, the rhetoric of eros often begs its own defense, leaving little room to critique the notion itself. Is unfettered, embodied and wholly emotionally mutual sexual relating always a model for the good? Can eros prove damaging even when lifted to its loftier ideals?

Sands is concerned that such an approach neglects the way the experience of

⁵⁷ Kathleen M. Sands, "Uses of the Thea(O)Logian : Sex and Theodicy in Religious Feminism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8, no. 1 (1992): 8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

finitude is in fact also continually shaped by overt domination and abuse as well as the simple day to day failures of human beings to consistently live well together. She suspects that the presumption of some sort of pure origin or eschatological end characterized by mutuality and justice is not nearly as “natural” or original as Heyward suggests. The experiences of love, power, and sexual pleasure in a tragic world produce experiences that are far less trustworthy than Heyward allows when it comes to determining what is good, right, and true.⁶¹ Further, the historical engagements of feminist theology with historical Christianity risk blurring the very lines between nostalgia and anamnesis that Brock carefully lays out:

Feminists have sought this vindication [of the good] by severing the link between mortality and sin established by patriarchal Christianity. Simultaneously, they have accentuated the link between mortality and sex, which patriarchal Christianity acknowledged but despised. But what if the conditions of mortal existence *do* bind us to sin and not just to death? What if the pathology of patriarchal Christianity is not just its inability to face death but also its inability to bear the experience of *fault* in which sociality and embodiment entangle us? For feminists, too, the effort to disengage absolutely from sin results in a tendency to disengage from the realities of life.⁶²

One could argue that Heyward’s own depiction of justified erotic relation answers this critique by describing Eros as a power capable of disentangling us from sin in order to live fuller lives in the face of death. Still, I would suggest that there is a certain strain of untroubled voluntarism present in the idea that both pleasure and desire can both simply be corrected and rightly sought. Our human tendencies toward desires and pleasures that inflict and celebrate eroticized violence, objectifying commodification, and

⁶¹ Ibid., 20.

⁶² Ibid., 27.

insatiable consumption may still require a reckoning beyond what erotic theology has offered as of yet.

Further, critical models available in other disciplines have long been pointing towards the powers which form our habits and rhetorical paradigms far beyond our immediate consciousness.⁶³ I do not think we can expect a truly justified eros to be so easily recognized or accurately described in the face of death-dealing social structures. The Christian theological tradition itself warns us of the limits of our own awareness of the desires and passions of the self, and more recent work has pointed especially to the sinister effects of race and class, among other markers, to shape the phenomenology of our experiences.⁶⁴ At very least, the social is constructing our understanding of eros. And yet, for all their celebration of the erotic and affirmations of pleasure, these feminist theologians generally fails to consider the potentially problematic nature of desire and pleasure itself outside of the theodically challenging descriptions of distorted or abused sexualities.

The implications for such a critique are paradoxically challenging. On the one hand, they help to illuminate the theological and critical limitations of the "progressive" approach taken in *OWL*, which repeatedly urges students to claim erotic pleasure without stopping to ask whether both the production and expression of that pleasure may reveal troubling aspects of our personal and social natures. This problem is also manifested in the other two curricula, which suggest that sex and desire are themselves, when they emerge from monogamous heterosexual marriage, are rendered good and trustworthy by

⁶³ See Butler, Bourdieu, Kristeva, Klein.

⁶⁴ See Anthony, Teresa, Augustine, Descartes, Pannenberg, Barth, Fulkerson, Armour, Douglas, Copeland.

virtue of their matrimonial context. At the same time, such a critique pushes us to ask how we might speak of desire and eros as components of the sociality that these theologies of the erotic rightly describe as in need of redemption. How can we in fact maintain a certain level of suspicion towards the role of eros, sex, and desire in the tragic aspects of life without falling into the dualisms of patriarchal Christianity?

In her own work on the use of feminist theologies of eros for an adolescent sexual ethic, Barbara Blodgett has noted that unexamined confidence in erotic mutuality and the trustworthiness of bodily experience may actually run at contrapurposes to the particular needs of adolescent girls.⁶⁵ Our cultural expectations for women and girls are often tainted with heightened expectations for self-giving. Girls are trained to believe that their sense of self is rightly derived from their romantic investment. As such, they often risk potentially damaging levels of relational enmeshment that threaten to destroy the self rather than liberate it. Because of this, adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to social forces that shape gender roles historically directed at compliance and relational obligation.⁶⁶ What is “good” and “true” may not necessarily run as a contingent to the erotic “natural” of unquestioned mutuality in relation.

In response, Blodgett has advocated for an ethic of qualified distrust. Her approach seeks to foster the development of boundaries and appropriate levels of relational openness. If successful in adolescence, they might better equip young women to pursue and sustain the very kind of adult relationships that Heyward treasures.

Blodgett’s approach demonstrates one possible way to draw the benefits of a feminist,

⁶⁵ Barbara J. Blodgett, *Constructing the Erotic : Sexual Ethics and Adolescent Girls* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002).

⁶⁶ At the same time, of course, our boys are being socialized against such messages, and so here Heyward’s approach might ring more true.

erotic approach to adolescent sexuality with a more cultivated sense of the limits of a theology of eros. Here she has much in common with Sands' own conclusions. As an alternative to describing eros as *the* manifestation of goodness, liberation, justice and unrepressed and unfettered sexual liberation, Sands instead suggests that we attend to the way elemental powers, including sexuality, can serve to both enrich and complicate lives. The transpersonal intensity generated by such powers should not direct us towards the pursuit of transcendent, ontological idealizations, but rather towards the constructions of "communities of accountability" that might better help us, much like a Greek chorus, mirror and attend to the complications and contradictions, as well as the potential and very real tragedies, that characterize our attempts to reconcile the individual and the social.⁶⁷ While not providing a single, normative vision, these communities could at very least develop minimum standards for morally acceptable "sexual integrity" that contribute to the perpetuation of communities of accountability which serve to perpetuate the good.⁶⁸

Sands' appeal to the priority of community of a unified erotic ideal also suggests that the goods and powers of human sexuality vary over time and within communities, challenging efforts to construct and demand adherence to a singular, eternal vision of the right locations of pleasure, relationship, desire, or mystical intensity within sexual practice. The interaction of these powers and goods change and shift, and they also must consistently be interrogated, as they are all too often shaped by the tragic nature of their 'shadow sides.' For instance, "to cherish pleasure in its relative autonomy, as distinct

⁶⁷ Sands: 14.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

from intensity (which can be purely painful), from beauty, and even from love and commitment is to say that none of these is a substitute for simple pleasure in sex. But to see pleasure in its tragic context is to understand that pleasure alone is not a sufficient norm for sex, since pleasure can arise even in situations of violence and exploitation and may take its lasting shape from such experiences.”⁶⁹ That is to say, there can be “true” pleasure that might not also be described as “good,” and it is just as real as that which is. It is that ‘dark side’ that makes the feminist celebration of the Erotic tick, Sands argues, and should not be denied as something illusory in the interest of defending the purity and unity of Eros.

Sexuality young and old?

Sands especially fears that in working out the ancient theological relationship between nature and sin via the question of eros, sexual pleasure risks becoming the moral standard by which the establishment of love and justice through sexual practice is judged. To this, we might add the danger present in conflating sexual attraction with the divine power of connection that manifests itself in relationality. We may need to further consider that the needs and experiences of people vary over time in relation to sex and sexuality. Feminists have frequently and rightly pointed to the great damage that has been done by the construction of sexual desire and bodily pleasure as dangerous and risky. They have likewise effectively described the impact this has had on the negative valuation of women's bodies.

However, feminists chiefly describe paradigms of redemption that narrate (as

⁶⁹ Ibid., 15.

similarly noted by Jordan vis-a-vis homosexuality) youthful experiences of negative sexuality followed by redemptive moments of adult catharsis. Adult acts of remembrance and healing are indeed so important, but strictly relying on this sort of narrative displaces the question of the formation of adolescent sexualities within a more transformative vision of eros. While adolescence and childhood are generally constructed as sites where the bulk of psychic, sex-repressing damage is done, adulthood is correspondingly essentialized as the future site of erotic remembrance and healing. Erotic justice-seeking presumably transcends the damage of young sexual life. Erotically proper sex becomes the safe alternative to the frequently colonized and exploited sexual experience of childhood and adolescence.

Though their respective commitments vary greatly, both the sexual education curriculum authors and feminist theologians of eros seem to acknowledge a shared sense that sexuality can either be morally good (safe/married/heterosexual or healthy/pleasurable/mutual) or morally bad (risky/unmarried/deviant or unhealthy/unpleasurable/unerotic). They have both also, perhaps unintentionally, added an unexamined adult/youth dichotomy to the mix, troublesome due to the fairly recent development of adolescence as a phenomenon in itself. Likewise, even though several of the feminist theologians examined here have appealed directly to the inherent and ongoing riskiness of relationship by nature of human vulnerability, that vulnerability only appears paired with moral agency in adulthood. Essentialized adult vulnerability is celebrated as a good, while the precarious vulnerability of youth is rendered as an unfortunate consequence of current patriarchal relations. Both may very well be so, but the paradox it creates for a coherent theology of adolescent sexuality will warrant much

more attention. In so doing, perhaps young and mature sexualities alike might be afforded a broader understanding of their role in the erotic movement of God.

If "erotic power is the power of our primal interrelatedness,"⁷⁰ is it available to all? Such a level of agency appears reserved, by feminist design, to certain persons, despite the foundational claim that the erotic is the experience most fundamental to all persons as they expression of their participation in the divine nature. It is a vision exclusive to those who are able to be "sexual" and "sensual" in ways described in these texts (and, if necessary, to arrive at that ability via therapeutic catharsis). Feminist theologies of eros anticipate the transformation of bodies, abilities, and psyches in such a way that all will eventually gain access to this fundamental good. In other words, they anticipate an eschaton in which all persons are adults possessing sexually erotic desires, the moral agency to pursue them with consenting others, the rational capacity for discernment of both desire and ethically right forms of expression, and bodies that can both act and respond in ways which facilitate the giving and receiving of pleasure. In that eschatological parousia, we are told, God is most incarnated.

It is noble and right to suggest that the work of adults seeking erotically right relations should indeed include the reimagining of social structures that do not facilitate the sexual exploitation of children and youth. However, the corresponding theologies also do not as yet seem to have a space for those in the process of forming agency, who lack a necessary vocabulary and set of rhetorical resources for integrating sexual desires and experiences into their conceptions of self and world. We must thus also take care that the invitation of young people into discipleship is not simply a unilateral invitation

⁷⁰ Brock, 26.

into cooperation with our adult version of "just" social relationships. Justice, further, may necessarily express itself in very different ways with, to, and among adolescents. Otherwise, adolescents are rendered inchoate moral agents at best.⁷¹

Other eschatons

In *History of Sexuality Volume I*, Foucault describes the investigation of pleasure and desire as a *scientia sexualis* that promises a sort of redemption through sexual knowledge. The confession and moral analysis of desire seem inevitably linked to the taxonomical classification of bodies, conscripting even the non-normative into the aims of regulation and discipline that secure particular forms of power. Feminists and theologians of sexuality therefore face the additional challenge of seeking ways of relating sexual desire and practice with broader Christian yearnings for love and justice without reducing either to something which can be objectified, assessed, and classified according to the norms of powers we would be wise to interrogate and resist.

The previous chapter noted the interplay of scientific discipline, market capitalism, and American civic idealism upon the discursive shaping of adolescent sexuality. When the desires of young people are framed only as a contingency to fully-realized versions of adult sexuality which line up with the aims of biopower, eschatological anticipation is no longer the hope for the reign of a loving and just God. Emphasizing unqualified visions of "healthy" or "settled" sexuality means that the moral and ontological weight of

⁷¹ Both Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Kate Ott have made compelling cases for the acknowledgement of even young children as moral agents, though the expression of that agency and the need for training in discernment is of course self-evident. Miller-McLemore and Ott's primary contributions reflect an important challenge to the Victorian notion of the child as morally pure. A notion, incidentally, which has contributed to contemporary constructions of adolescent sexual purity and impurity, particularly in American popular religion.

theological discourse shifts to these regimes, rather than divine love or the pursuit of faithful Christian discipleship.

However, Sands has also pointed to the amount of theological and ethical heavy lifting that desire and sex have been asked to do by the theologians of the erotic. As noted above, erecting entire ethical systems around a good like sex, or eros, inevitably places the bulk of moral and ontological weight onto sites that may be inaccessible to young people without tools of theological reflection which emerge from their own lived experiences and life in intergenerational Christian discipleship.⁷²

The attempt to safeguard adolescents by reframing Christian sexual practice in terms of a desire for a justified future reveals just how necessary feminist visions for justice and plurality continue to be. Theologians of the erotic tell us that oppressive should be resisted through the reclamation of an eros that tends towards justice and resists exploitation. Embracing eros unleashes a divine desire that is described as tending naturally towards liberation. However, the feminist tendency towards confidence in the purity of desire itself neglects the ambiguity and vulnerability of the concept itself to exploitation and cooptation. These theologians generally appeal to conventional notions of sexuality that recount experiences of genital pleasure and narratives of sexual

⁷² This is a significant problem for persons who do not share the physical resources or abilities, developmental readiness, or simply the inclination towards erotic engagement.⁷² Such a state of being may be especially common to young people still working out their acknowledged relationship to their own body and its rapid development. Recent work on intellectual and physical disabilities has already challenged this way of framing divine justice. Theorists in the field, including Sharon Betcher and Nancy Eisland, caution against materially restorative visions of eschatological futures which threaten to erase or indirectly mark "flawed" bodies and forms of intellectual capacity which deny access to certain goods. Moran and Jordan previously showed that the adolescent body itself has frequently been depicted as potentially flawed in its potential to drive young people astray with their own desires. Will the eschaton erase adolescence, or childhood? Are children and adolescents less than fully-realized persons if their expressions of sexual desire and experience vary in their capacities for erotic justice-making? Perhaps this is hyperbolic, but I believe this highlights the crucial disconnect between feminist responses to perceived sexual injustices in our culture and efforts to respond thoughtfully and theologically to the needs of young Christians.

discovery in order to describe liberative sexual arrangements. However, I suspect that we must approach these visions with a measure of caution, as they are just as influenced by contemporary constructs of heteronormative romanticism and sexual idealism.

A clear distinction between "good" and "bad" forms of sexuality and sexual expression is not as easy to come by as these curriculum writers and feminist theologians seem to expect, especially for young people. The experience of eros is continually shaped by subtle social forces even as it is deployed as an instrument of biopower. Presuming we can rightly discern and desire an eschatological end characterized by God's will for mutuality and justice, it may not be so clearly recognized as an experience of conventionally understood erotic pleasure and power.⁷³ Further, the complications of human development, which nuance questions of vulnerability and care, require a deeper reflection if eros is to be a resource for considering the interplay of sexuality and youth.

Beneath this particular economy of salvation invariably lies that old tension of grace and works. Those of us formed in liberal traditions of education and ethics assume that a presumed knowledge of right sexual action will be accompanied by changes in heart. For these theologians, eros itself signifies the working out of our own salvation, with justice and mutuality as its fruits. But, as Paul so aptly pointed out and Augustine enumerated in detail, the world would be a much easier place to inhabit if good sex and good ethics naturally followed from one another. Experience, prized highly by this feminist and most, appears to show otherwise. Moreover, recent critiques of Western Feminism have effectively questioned the concept of freedom in relation to sexuality and gender, destabilizing the ethical presumptions surrounding the liberated performance of

sexual agency.

This is precisely where I think a further exploration of the tensions of justice, joy, and the presence of God expressed in adolescent relationships might bear much fruit. A refusal to conflate heteronormative romantic love with the bonds of human love across difference, perhaps far better described in theological engagements with the practice of friendship, might help yield new imaginative possibilities for speaking about the role of gender in thinking about loving human relationship and the plural nature of divine love.

Additionally, there is a certain form of eschatological tension between the now and the not yet (both in terms of human development and the apocalyptic) when it comes to sex, desire, bodies, and pleasures. Through theological reflection, adolescents in partnership with concerned adults might be invited to discern how this is refracted through the structures which mediate our bodies, pleasures, and desires. Across these experiences, standards for sexual “knowledge” should be continually challenged by what we come to know about being human through Christian discipleship across the stages of life. The church, as an intergenerational community, is therefore a necessary site for the development of such practices and understandings that can mutually inform theological reflection upon sex and eros across time. In such a framework, Christian sexuality education is not “Christian” because it happens to occur in a church. Instead, it is Christian because it is intimately tied to the Church’s theological traditions invested in developing ways to live in community together in light of tragedy and in anticipation of an eschatologically redemptive future. And perhaps most thrillingly, such sexuality education might provide at least one avenue for beginning to resist regimes of biopower that have threatened the true humanity of so many bodies both young and old.

CHAPTER V

"BUT WHAT DO I DO WHEN I LOVE YOU?": A PNEUMATOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY

"But what do I do when I love you? Not the beauty of and body or the rhythm of time in its movement; not the radiance of light, so dear to our eyes; not the sweet melodies in the world of manifold sounds; not the perfume of flowers, ointments and spices; not the limbs so delightful to the body's embrace: it is none of these things I love when I love my God. And yet when I love my God I do indeed love a light and a sound and a perfume and a food and an embrace--a light and sound and perfume and food and embrace in my inward self. There my soul is flooded with a radiance which no space can contain; there a music sounds which time never bears away; there I smell a perfume which no wind disperses; there I taste a food that no surfeit embitters; there is an embrace which no satiety severs. It is this that I love when I love my God." (Augustine, Confessions, X.6, 8)

In the preceding chapters, I have essentially offered a lament. I described a church that has not traditionally conceived of itself as a place where sexual vulnerabilities are tended or cultivated. Rather, the church has frequently used human sexuality to upbuild its ecclesial defenses, as a barometer for state and ecclesial moral authority, and too often as a site for the sexual exploitation of the young.

In Chapter 2, we witnessed how the control of young sexuality has often served the strengthening of the church and an expanding number of institutions, rather than softening the church's resistance to human vulnerability. The Post-Reformation developments of state and civic theological authority reinterpreted as orders of creation and Christian vocation further disseminated the types of sexual surveillance that carried the moral heft of Christian pronouncement. In the United States, sexuality began to infuse popular visions of morality that came to be synonymous with the titillations of the

consumer market. Along the way, gendered norms and classed heterosexual mores became increasingly tied to narratives of national purity and strength.

In Chapter 3, I further lamented that, while crucial to opening up Christian understandings of sexuality, feminist criticisms of classical theological approaches to gender and sexuality often presume that an affirmation of the goodness of sexuality in opposition to a perceived historic suspicion of the body and its carnal pleasures will be sufficient to liberate the repressed sexuality of women and sexual minorities. I questioned the foundation of this claim, suggesting that it must be contextualized within this broader genealogy and further noting that the matter of sexual repression functions somewhat differently in the matter of the American adolescent. Attending to political and market rhetorics dependent upon notions of "epidemic logic" is crucial for more thoroughly understanding how concepts of adolescence and sexuality are functioning in American Protestant Christianity.

This function, as we have seen in the curricular artifacts discussed in this project, include vaguely menacing threats of bodies out of control and at risk of disappointing God. In other curricula, we witness efforts to derive a logic for abstinence based on an ontology of divine intimacy reflected in heterosexual marriage as "God's plan." We also see the use of Christianity as a framing device, rather than a foundation, for the presentation of a comprehensive sexuality curriculum. Throughout, theological problems emerge, and they are not limited to poorly rendered anthropologies.

These curricular approaches communicate understandings of God that often run counter even to orthodox Christian doctrine, let alone progressively liberating notions of intimacy and relationship. God is a binitarian, hierarchical deity. God's image is realized

most acutely in two-person intimate heterosexual relationships. God's relationship to sexuality is found in the ordering of human behavior via hierarchies of intimacy and according to "God's plan." God's "plans" govern appropriate sexuality according to modern scientific and psychological standards of human development. Grace is meted out unilaterally by a patriarchal deity. Goodness is defined according to an almost natural theology, with little account of mutual divine-human relation. Sex is good because God said so.

I closed this lament by suggesting that the question of human sexuality is theologically void without corresponding attention to shifting connections of humans, bodies, and relationships initiated in the engagement with God's sanctifying grace. For that, I turned to the question of *Eros*, exploring the liberating promises of feminist theologians. In those resources, I located great compassion for those hurt by the sexual expectations of the church. I found a heightened attention to vulnerability and a willingness to affirm the potential of eros to facilitate connections with divine. All excellent ideas for approaching sexual education. And still, I suggested that we needed an even greater attention to the God of eros, a framing of the concept in relation to Spirit as well as to a broader range of human experiences, that would help moderate our expectations for the role of sexuality in personal and social life.

Returning to Eschatology

Adolescents lack the life experience necessary for distinguishing fully between various forms of power, pleasure, and their implications for social relationships. However, they do not need to await some sort of mature erotic fruition before they can begin a formative process of discernment. Adolescents have a fundamental need for a

vocabulary and rhetorical framework for speaking of both their desires in relation to sex and to justice. The position of youth within competing rhetorical economies of sexual exploitation, shame, control, and heterosexism only makes this all the more urgent. The church would do well to consider how it might serve as a midwife in this regard.

The attempt to safeguard adolescents by reframing Christian sexual practice in terms of a desire for a justified future reveals just how necessary feminist visions for justice and plurality continue to be. Theologians of the erotic tell us that oppression should be resisted through the reclamation of an eros that enables resistance and empowers human beings for justice-seeking. Brock, Heyward, and Gilson offer us a vision of eros that unleashes a divine desire that provokes liberation.

However, the feminist tendency towards confidence in the purity of desire itself neglects the ambiguity and vulnerability of the concept itself to exploitation and cooptation. A clear distinction between "good" and "bad" forms of sexuality and sexual expression is not as easy to come by as either these curriculum writers nor these feminist theologians seem to represent, especially for young people. Subtle social forces continually shape the experience of eros. Presuming we can rightly discern and desire an eschatological end characterized by God's will for mutuality and justice may not be so easily recognized as an experience of erotic pleasure and power.¹

Beneath this particular economy of salvation invariably lies that old tension of grace and works. Such a framework assumes that education in right sexual action will be accompanied by changes in heart. For these theologians, Eros itself signifies the working out of our own salvation, with justice and mutuality as its fruits. But, as Paul so aptly

¹ Sands: 20.

pointed out and Augustine enumerated in detail, the world would be a much easier place to inhabit if these naturally followed from one another. Experience, prized highly by this feminist and most, appears to show otherwise.²

Eschatological eros, and hope for the erotic

Despite the constant pull of God's creative power, others can often disappoint and frustrate the seeking of mutual relationship. In sexual relationships, we can misdirect eros towards hurt and violence in our imperfect human state of affairs this side of glory. Sexual relationships that begin in love and joy can still atrophy under the strains of life or the unresolved burdens of sinful brokenheartedness. What then can preserve us from an utter desolation in the face of this troubling reality? How does a project of sexuality education attend to grace? I suspect that eros itself could use redemption, and that this entire project of Christian sexuality education works far better when set within the larger soteriological framework. We must recall that, as essential as such breakthroughs can be towards a fully-lived life, God continues to call us to full participation in God's consummated presence in creation.

The healing power of eros directly echoed both historical Christian language for the Holy Spirit and more contemporary pleas for its re-integration into Western Christian theology. The feminist theologians examined in the previous chapter gave extensive attention to the character of eros. They described the erotic as a source of empowerment and locus of ethical wisdom. Eros serves to heal broken selves, broken relationships, and

² Moreover, recent critiques of Western Feminism have effectively questioned the concept of freedom in relation to sexuality and gender, destabilizing the ethical presumptions surrounding the liberated performance of sexual agency. See Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

the "brokenheartedness" of sin.

Still, removing the "weight of the world" from sex and eros can resituate each in a broader working out of salvation. A true, embodied transformation of desire towards the true, good, and just in all human relationships, sexual and otherwise, is communicated in and through a plurality of Christian practices, from Eucharist to marriage. In each, Christian theology suggests that the Spirit works to shape us to be more loving in our relations to one another and to God. A renewed emphasis on the work of Spirit can and should transcend "the erotic" to address a lifetime of discipleship in community with others, in the fullness of their diversity.

In Christianity we affirm that the Spirit redeems us from sin, shaping us in the *imago dei* revealed in Christ and binding together the justified human relationships that reveal the erotic in our lives. I wish to suggest that a turn towards pneumatology might help bridge the gap between anthropological deficits and eschatological ideals in considering how this lure of the Spirit is calling adolescents. When described as a power of love and justice, Eros tends to take on the role of an independently divine agent or life force.³ When engaged in a Christological or incarnational vein, as Heyward and Brock offer, the primary concern is God's becoming through redeemed communal relationships. However, these feminist projects largely neglect the role of Eros in either the social relationships of the persons of God, the shaping of the human person for receptivity to God's love, or the ongoing binding of ecclesial ties as the Church seeks a redeemed theology of sexuality. Still, one cannot help but hear the echoes of the Spirit in these actions of binding and freeing divine love.

³ Elsewhere, Carter Heyward has moved towards terms like "Godding" to describe the activity of Eros in the world.

Not one of the theologians of eros examined in this project makes any real mention of the Spirit or the role of Eros in a genuinely Trinitarian context. However, the connections drawn between love, justice, and Spirit in response to sexuality offer crucial insights. Theologians like Jürgen Moltmann and Nancy Victorin-Vangerud have suggested that love and justice characterize the relations of the social trinity. The Spirit moves in and through these relations, drawing up human beings into beloved divine communion while calling for new expressions of human community. Within this context, sexuality and sexual relationships could be rethought as means for facilitating this grace rather than challenges to social stability. After all, the wildness of the Spirit rarely guarantees stability, but it does offer the preservation of creation held within loving divine community.

While it is the prerogative of feminist theologians to transcend Trinitarian concerns in an effort to dismantle traditionally-conceived patriarchal hierarchies (and, at times, such strategic dismantling appears necessary), it seems counterintuitive to neglect the rich resources available in the pneumatological tradition. The threads of mystical theology that often ran alongside and often counter to the development of problematic patriarchal and epistemological structures found deep wisdom in the forms of discernment and desire carried by the Spirit. Perhaps most importantly, they recognized the role of the Spirit in drawing human beings towards an *imago dei* as yet fully unrealized. Pneumatology pulls us into eschatological hope, even as it transforms our understandings of redeemed human relation and being.

The theological critiques described in the first section of this chapter portray the *imago dei* as an ultimately eschatological concept, rooted not only in scriptural image but

in the interpretation of theological anthropology anticipated in Christ. The *imago dei* has long provoked theological admonitions to prudence. As Ian McFarland and John Zizioulas have described, the patristic tradition was deeply suspicious of an immediately recognizable divine imprint in human beings.⁴ The role of Christ in revealing, shaping, and proleptically anticipating the *imago dei* means that no human characteristic, gender or otherwise, rightly precedes that found in the Incarnation that reveals God's communion with God's self and God's creation.⁵ Seeking to define the *imago dei* in relation to Christ required a means for describing both true humanity and *imago dei* by way of the mediator Christ.

The divine image has long been considered both a Christological and an eschatological concept, not a pure revelation of original creation or even necessarily original intent. A Christ in full communion with God and with humanity should, these theologians argue, precede anthropological reflections upon the body and its desires. Gender difference as an expression of personhood *derives* from the eschatological Christ; outside of this, the maleness of Christ is contingent, tells us nothing of personhood or its relation to embodied sexual relationship. Zizioulas views human beings as inherently ecclesial, members of the Body of Christ which is ontologically in loving communion with God. "It is only in the light of our understanding of what communion is 'in truth' and what human being is 'in truth' that we can begin to interpret our bodiliness

⁴ See McFarland; Jean Zizioulas and Paul McPartlan, *Communion and Otherness : Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London ; New York: T & T Clark, 2006).

⁵ Of course, feminists have heeded and answered this claim by revising our definitions of Incarnation. See Rita Nakashima Brock's elaboration of this point in the following section.

theologically, and thus our biological sex.”⁶ Further, McFarland asserts that what we actually come to understand as authentically human erotic desire is not characterized by Christ’s concurrent maleness or (presumed) corresponding practice of sexual renunciation. Rather, Christ’s ontological “desire for neighbor” transcends marriage to encompass expressions in a plurality of social relationships which draw persons together in the practice of “discernment of Christ’s body in the other,” from friendship and alternative kinship structures to communities of disciples.⁷

Moreover, the *imago* emerges out of and through relationship with God in the Holy Spirit. Anthropologies have been presented time and again which ask whether it might be better to describe the ongoing process accomplished by the Holy Spirit that seeks to transform human beings into the *imago*. Spirit (as noted by sources as disparate as Augustine, Maximus, Aquinas, Mechthild, Wesley, and Congar) shapes us in the divine image revealed in Christ. This is a question of unfolding sanctification and practice, not simply of events of repression and liberation. In this way there can rightly be found a convergence of *imago dei* and divine eros, what Wendy Farley has described as "the wounding and healing of desire."

⁶ Alan J. Torrance describes Zizioulas’ approach this way: “Rather, persons are biological beings and constituted as ‘persons’ in and through a creative event of communion initiated by and grounded in the divine *ekstasis* [God’s self-giving love]. . . In emphasizing that a person is a *hypostasis*, he emphasizes the irreducible bodiliness of persons. At the same time, we are not simply to be identified with biological ‘natures’ statically conceived. Our biological hypostases project toward that fulfillment ecclesially as an event of communion. This suggests that a dichotomy between our biological sex and the form of our social relatedness (our gender) is no longer appropriate. Both require that they be reconstituted in ‘ecclesial’ terms—as integral to, and intrinsic to, God’s purposes of community. Consequently, our biological sexuality and complementarity are interpreted in precisely this light. This does *not* mean that we start with our sexual identities from which we go on to produce a natural theology of (sexual) communion. Precisely the reverse. It is only in the light of our understanding of what communion is ‘in truth’ and what human being is ‘in truth’ that we can begin to interpret our bodiliness theologically, and thus our biological sex.” Douglas A. Campbell and Alan J. Torrance, *Gospel and Gender : A Trinitarian Engagement with Being Male and Female in Christ*, Studies in Theology and Sexuality ; (London ; New York: T&T Clark International, 2003), 150-151.

⁷ McFarland, 109.

"Eros breaking free," as Gilson calls it, may in fact be a promising way to describe theological engagement with adolescent sexuality, if not precisely in the way Gilson intends. Christian theology remains interested in how the exercise of human freedom shapes the relationship of humans to God and (and through) others. These exercises likewise come with practices shaped by life in community over time, practices which have yielded a sense that such things must be carefully tended. This final chapter will make the case for a pneumatological turn that suggests promising alternative theological foundations for inviting youth into theological reflection on sexuality and desire. I will suggest that the contemporary Protestant American church should strongly consider setting aside its traditional curricular emphasis on the *imago dei* in favor of centralizing its approach on the work of the Spirit, as well as the cultivation of growth in practice within community. I will therefore both articulate a set of concerns for adolescent sexuality education drawn from the previous chapters and offer a brief set of constructive considerations that will be necessary for its theological reimagining as a congregational practice.

Towards the Spirit

An increasing number of theologians have produced work that seeks to assert a primary role for the Spirit in Christian God-talk. A reintroduction of pneumatology, many theologians have argued, gives a more robust account of the immanence of God. At the same time, invoking the Spirit can inspire a renewed conception of the divine economy that values egalitarian mutual relation and has implications for human structures that claim to be predicated upon divine mandate. Moltmann's *Spirit of Life* announces, "The experience of God's Spirit is not limited to the human subject's

experience of the self. It is also a constitutive element in the experience of the 'Thou', in the experience of sociality, and in the experience of nature.”⁸ Victorin-Vangerud contends that the Spirit simultaneously fights to dissolve exploitative or oppressive structures and draws humans together in a plurality of life-giving relation that reflects the wild love of God.

Further, Wendy Farley echoes Spirit language by transcending specifically sexual desire for a description of Divine Eros itself as formless longing and loving connection. Human beings tend to prioritize dualities of self and world, and idolatry and fear drive us to prize oneness and control in our conceptions of God.⁹ We see this in the affirmation of state, parental, and church hierarchical power in adolescent sexuality curricula. We likewise see this desire to root ideals in oneness emerge in the attention to a paradigm of binary human sexual intimacy glorified at once as the height of human relationship and of the *imago dei*. Just as Farley notes that a Christian community based on desire and longing for communion is lost when this takes center stage, we can also see how the ideals of biopower come to replace commitments to Christian practice in projects of sex education when adolescent sexuality is conceived primarily as 1) dangerous to the social order and 2) counter to a unified and unquestioned understanding of the *imago dei*. However, Spirit in Trinitarian community pushes us past such static thinking.

The Spirit offers a new context for describing God's concern for human sexuality. Sex is not a matter of rules and regulations, the violation of which is an affront to God the Father's authority. Rather, sexuality is part of a creation that God's Spirit dwells within.

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life : A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 34.

⁹ Wendy Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 54-55.

By locating sexuality first within the movement of the Holy Spirit, we might better be able to push back against the tendency to understand sexual experience in terms of coercion and control. We can also posit coherent connections between the cultivation of certain forms of sexual expression and graced Christian practices which reflect a loving, self-communicating God.

As an example of this approach Victorin-Vangerud's *The Raging Hearth* addresses the persistence of domestic violence and church sexual abuse by reflecting upon the workings of family units and corresponding ecclesial structures in relation to classical understandings of the Godhead. Victorin-Vangerud suggests that the theological subordination of the Holy Spirit likewise shapes ecclesiology, anthropology, and ethical norms. She argues that hierarchical concepts of the Trinity, with the Father placed in a superior position of Christ and the Holy Spirit relegated to the role of subservient helper, are invariably reproduced as patriarchal household structures and church hierarchies. This has had grave implications for Christians in particular and human families in general, especially women and children. As church and family reproduce each other in ways that often result in abuse, the capacity of Christianity to enact real transformative work in the world is severely limited.¹⁰ However, while families tend to reflect the theological shortcomings present iterations of the church, Victorin-Vangerud finds hope in Trinitarian theology through the restoration of the Spirit to an equal position within the Godhead.

Victorin-Vangerud looks to scriptural and theological accounts of the Holy Spirit, lifting out the egalitarian aspects of "mutual recognition" that she contends binds the

¹⁰ Victorin-Vangerud, 72.

members of the Trinity together. This loving movement of regard and care between members resists, or better yet renders illogical, the idea of hierarchically-ordered Trinity, in operation or ontological reality. The Spirit serves to resist a "unilateral order of Father over Son, and Father over Son over Spirit."¹¹ Re-membering "Trinitarian values of equal regard, shared authority, proper trust, and diversity-in-unity" reveals the economy of the divine household in ways that should call human institutions into account.¹² We should be avoiding theologies and ethical schemas which focus "only on the relation between the disobedient sinner and God." Instead, Victorin-Vangerud argues that Christians should seek out a "new fruit of the Spirit" which "inspires theologies of accountability, social justice, and recognition between members of the household."¹³

The Spirit enables us to recognize the failure of our human structures to drink deeply from the view of mutual regard and loving community located within the Trinitarian tradition. With the Spirit, we can lament the failure of our theologies to offer a vision of God that does not rely on the exploitative norms of patriarchy. Victorin-Vangerud demonstrates that a pneumatological approach which trades control for transformation also seeks alternatives to discourses that may inadvertently reify ecclesiological visions that maintain hierarchical or contractual visions of the relationship between young people and the church in regards to both their sexual personhood. She also appeals to the "wildness" of the Holy Spirit, a foundational resource for the energy necessary for resistance to unjust structures.¹⁴ This provides important grounds for a

¹¹ Ibid., 88.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 204.

¹⁴ Ibid., 203.

turn towards Spirit that prompts young people and their caregivers to push back against the link between the current curricular links between *imago dei* and marital sexuality insofar as they foreclose upon participation in practices of theological reflection and discernment on the role of sexuality and sexual desire in the life of a just, loving egalitarian community of diverse persons.

Drawing closer to a Trinitarian vision highlighted by a renewed attention to Spirit has the further effect of giving increased coherence to the claim, so central to feminist theologians of eros, that the pleasures of the body are inherently good, holy even, a product and instrument of loving creation. Still, feminist theologians of eros have done a marvelous job of arguing for a theology of God's self-communicating love that allows sexuality to be recontextualized as a sign of the human capacity of transcendent self-giving, deepening self-regard, and embodied just relationships. Such an approach resists a fixation on moral control and gestures towards, if not always fully successfully, a resistance to the instrumentalization and commodification of sexuality in projects of social control.

However, as noted in the previous chapter, we should be somewhat concerned by the ontological weight placed on human sexuality by the several perspectives I have taken up in this project. Erotic love often seems to stand in for divine power in such a way that it eclipses powerful and broader theological claims about the nature of God and corresponding nature of God's creation. The Spirit acts on, *in*, and *with* creation, including sexuality. That action has the power to challenge and surprise even our surest pictures of how the world *ought* to be.

Simply claiming that physical bodies and pleasures are good because of their created nature ironically continues to reify a unilateral vision of a God who works *upon* creation. This is a God whose unilateral sovereign power as God legitimates the claim of goodness and maintains the primary controlling interest in its distribution. This vision repeats itself in an *imago dei* that repeatedly succeeds in reifying patriarchal, authoritarian visions of parent, church, and state as it disciplines young people into accepting, uncritically and without mutual participation, definitions of appropriate sexuality. Even feminist erotic power in this vision seems to conscript the bodies it acts upon, drawing them to a particular vision of justice and relationship founded in preapprehended notions of sex and sexuality that we have already seen are in need of nuance if we are to be attentive to its implications for those across a lifetime of age spectrums. Hence, pleasures and bodies remain "good" and "holy" only insofar as they have God's sanction, most concretely evidenced in their permission to experience continued existence or pursue the forms of social life presumed to best reflect God's plan for the world. It is not far from this standpoint to claims that sexual consequences including disease, pregnancy, and heartache are evidences of God's disapproval rather than of the inherently vulnerable nature of bodies open to one another and the world.

Sexuality education as 'spirited' practice

Our love for our young people can and does break our hearts. Our desire for their safety is at its best a powerful expression of that love. And, like any love, it renders us vulnerable to the incursion of exploitative forces—of sin and of evil, certainly, but also of idolatrous distraction and the illusion of control over our own fates and boundaries. The Spirit reveals our vulnerability, and it inspires us to face our own

efforts to secure ourselves through the control of others. However, we must interrogate not only that need to control, but also the directions our controlling instincts push the sexuality of adolescents. Is desire for God and a life of embodied discipleship, or for a vision of adulthood that we have deemed most safe for adolescents, one that shares a suspicious amount in common with the vision of modern consumer life peddled by our markets and state projects?

The problem, as both Singer and Victorin-Vangerud have pointed out, is that the deeply entrenched rhetorical connection between sexuality and the desire for a heteronormative middle class American life does not yield much in the way of actual care or meaningful relationships between members of the Christian community. We are lacking in new theological insights that would help a young person integrate their sexual desires and experiences into their understanding of themselves in relationship to the Spirit of God. By laterally restructuring Trinitarian relations as egalitarian and replacing strategies of containment with strategies of nurture and celebration, sexual human vulnerability may be envisioned as a site of creative grace. Essentially, I am suggesting that those interested in doing a theological exploration of sexuality for and with adolescents should replace an anthropology founded on a static and heteronormative *imago dei* with a pneumatological approach that acknowledges the Spirit's nurture of human desire towards the *imago dei* we anticipate in Christ's beloved community. This approach would address the interplay of divine-human relations over time and the specific ways Christianity hones and engages this relationship through discipleship and communal practice.

Such an approach has 4 benefits:

- 1) Pneumatology changes the conversation. Rather than conceiving of sexuality in terms of right and wrong, licit, and illicit, we can ask instead about its relationship to the experience of the immediacy of God.
- 2) A pneumatological approach to adolescent sexuality resists centralizing "control" as the primary referent for developing a theological language with and for adolescents. At the same time, pneumatology tends to human vulnerability by engaging a vision of God that resists and transforms those structures which prefer exploitation to nurture.
- 3) A pneumatological approach seeks to customize a theology of sexuality that is attentive to the vulnerabilities of youth but also interested in cultivating their specific gifts. Pneumatology provides us with the language of *charism* to accompany the language of desire.
- 4) A pneumatological approach seeks the present working of God in the practices of the church. Pneumatology contextualizes a sexual education project as an extension of practices designed to help mold persons into the image of a loving Christ. Practices which emphasize Spirit and *charism* maintain an openness to the plurality of expressions such practice can take.

1) Pneumatology changes the conversation. Rather than conceiving of sexuality in terms of right and wrong, licit, and illicit, we can ask instead about its relationship to the experience of the immediacy of God.

Jenny's experience that after school afternoon produced in her a particular trepidation. Fearful of parental reprisal, she covertly reached out to me, a relatively neutral party, under cover cell phone text messaging. Being an adolescent, Jenny's sexual activity was automatically cloaked with a sense of the illicit. She had transgressed. How could she find a way to spiritually and emotionally process this moment in her life without "getting caught"?

On the one hand, many of us may instinctually think this fear of punishment to be an effective deterrent to adolescent sexual behavior. Many of us harbor a sense that attaching a level of disapproval to something is a good way to communicate its level of gravity. The more we demonstrate our disapproval of youthful sexual activity, the more we can show that sex is a "big deal." The syllogistic nature of such work, however, is often left unexamined. Peel back the layers, and becomes clear that disapproving of sexual desire does far more to maintain institutional moral authority than it does to provide young people with useful resources for theologically considering sex and sexuality.

If this feels familiar, that should be unsurprising. Much Christian moral theology, and especially post-Reformation Protestantism, has been built on the same premise,. The Reformation marked a theological departure. No longer did the relationship between nature and grace determine the capacities of created objects for moral good through the infusion of God's divine love. The turn to a belief in the fundamentally warped nature of creation and its incapacity for holiness made it virtually impossible to describe human life in terms outside of moral compliance or transgression.¹⁵ In the Christian religious

¹⁵ See Chapter 2 of this project.

tradition, as I demonstrated in Chapter 2, sexual morality has come to exemplify individual and social moral behavior. For Jenny, is there is no way to think about her embodied experience of sexuality beyond "did I do the right thing?"

There is a problem here. The primary message of the gospel is one of profound grace. Our human experience is read backwards and forwards as contained within a kenotic divine love. As such, we are met with the primary charge of discerning how, among other aspects of our lives, our bodies and social relationships are shaped by and shape the expansion of God's grace. God's incarnated self-communication, the erotic pull of God to God's creation and we to God's self, is available even in entirely regrettable sexual experiences. A church which busies itself with delineating lines of transgression and sanction is certainly keeping itself occupied, but it fails to attend to the primary truth that characterizes reality. As Protestant moralism and cultural discourses of panic converge, the church's insistence upon locating sexuality as the centerpiece of its project of moral arbitration pulls human bodies, desire, and the church itself farther and farther from the context of loving grace. When the church attends to the sexuality of young people on these terms, it is ensuring the reproduction of a profoundly limiting capacity for the full integration of human experience in the faith practices of Christian youth.

Conversely, feminist theologies of eros have done a marvelous job of arguing for a theology of God's self-communicating love. These theologies allow sexuality to be recontextualized as a sign of the human capacity of transcendent self-giving, deepening self-regard, and embodied just relationships. Such an approach resists a fixation on moral control. It gestures towards, if not always fully successfully, a resistance to the instrumentalization and commodification of sexuality in projects of social control.

Of course, as noted above, we should be somewhat concerned by the ontological weight placed on human sexuality. Human erotic love often seems to stand in for divine power in such a way that it eclipses powerful and broader theological claims about the nature of God and corresponding nature of God's creation. However, as Foucault has frequently reminded us, conflating sexual desires and pleasures with fixed, quantifiable sexual knowledge drastically limits our ability to imagine the different forms they could take. Youth should be invited to consider sexuality within the wider movement of the Holy Spirit, precisely because the open-ended nature of the eschaton resists frozen understandings of gender, desire, or human relationship. All are changing, for all are undergoing the sanctifying transformation enacted by God's incarnational love. The powers of eros and holiness are deeply related, but not because sex and God represent the highest ideals of human power. Through *divine* eros, the Spirit works to consummate the indwelling of God in creation. Divine eros seeks to shape human life and desire into an image of perfect love. This is not the *imago dei* granted us by a vision of American life and citizenship, but by sanctification in Christ. We can posit coherent connections between the cultivation of certain forms of sexual expression that correspond to graced Christian practices reflecting of a loving, self-communicating God.

I noted in the previous chapter, the approach generally taken by feminist theologies of *eros* is predominantly centered on the recovery of *eros* by adult women. This is certainly potentially liberative for this demographic. However, such a framework is largely centered on recovering memories of lost erotic passion and the deployment of that passion via the channels afforded by fully-formed adult agency. In this way, *eros* is figured as a gift in itself, granted especially, but not exclusively, to women in order to

drive both them and their communities to actualization in the world. It is, as it were, described more or less as a *charism*. Extrapolated as such, I am concerned that we miss a potentially larger application of *eros* that can both more deeply ground these feminist claims and expand to include the specific lives of young people. Let us consider the unique challenges, opportunities, and vulnerabilities of human *adolescent* sexuality as spaces where God's indwelling and human sanctification occur. Further, let us join in asking how the Spirit interacts with us, including our younger brothers and sisters in Christ, as it draws our sexualities into an integrated conformation to Christ.

2) A pneumatological approach to adolescent sexuality resists centralizing "control" as the primary referent for developing a theological language with and for adolescents. At the same time, pneumatology tends to human vulnerability by engaging a vision of God that resists and transforms those structures which prefer exploitation to nurture.

The Spirit thus stirs us to action, becoming a source for "mutual recognition and dignity." This can, if permitted, characterize our experiences of human relationality.¹⁶ Seeking the Spirit in human relationality will invariably expose the hierarchical structures in place that all too often turn us towards vocations of control rather than practiced, graced acts. Still, the impulse to protect the young is directly derived from a Spirit that infuses, creates, and sanctifies just and safe familial bonds. This includes both biological kinship and the broader adoptions of Christian identity. There is theological precedence

16. Victorin-Vangerud, 37.

for the centrality of the Spirit in efforts to resist patriarchal norms and corresponding structures which contribute to a fixation of sexuality and moral control.

What might this look like, practically speaking? Engaging God's Spirit in sexuality is not ethical or utilitarian--it is first and foremost an ontological affirmation. For those who suffer in their sexualities and sexual experiences, this means resisting portrayals of God's relationship to sexuality that model structures of domination. Such structures are not simply "bad" or undesirable because they prevent psychological self-actualization. Rather, they deny the indwelling presence of God's Spirit already in bodies and expressions of creaturely life. Exploitative or instrumentalized sexualities violate the *imago dei*. Moreover, they misrepresent the call of the Spirit on the lives of human beings, a call that goes fall beyond marital vocation or even liberated sexual license. This should rightly provoke a reevaluation of theological approaches to adolescent sexuality education.

The Spirit disrupts our confidence in the ability of a singular social structure to form the basis for thinking about the meaning, purpose, and practice of sexuality. Defining Christian adolescent sexual ethics solely as "waiting for marriage" utterly fails to attend to the fullness of the experience of God in human relationality and sexual life. We must find a way to create space for adolescents to theologically reflect upon bodies, pleasures, and desire—and the power which characterizes and subjects each within our social life. Our responsibility is not simply to help protect youth from the consequences of sexual harm, but to help enable them to encounter sex and sexuality as part of their Christian discipleship.

Vulnerability in divine relation

Truly, a more robust, honest, and ethically open theological engagement with adolescent sexuality offers no true guarantee of safety from the pains, or ecstasies, of our lives as creatures. However, we likewise cannot escape this truth through constructing a holistic vision of eros devoid of risk. Sexuality carries the tragic dimensions of human existence just as much as any other facet of who we are as persons rendered vulnerable by our desiring relationality. However, the Holy Spirit catches human beings up within the justice and loving relation of the Trinity. Sexuality engaged in these terms within Christian community creates a space where sexual violence, abuse, or even disappointment can be named as spaces for divine co-suffering and communal healing.

Speaking of the eros of Christian sexuality thus requires us to also seek of the erotic vulnerability of a God who has relinquished strict control in order to seek sanctifying relationship. The passion of eros is the passion of Spirit incarnated in the Body of Christ. The passion of the Spirit reminds us that the end of our lives as Christians is not simply benign middle class family life. "But the more we perceive the warp and weft of life, the more we sense the vulnerability and frailty of our own lives, and that also means their mortality... 'Sanctification today' does not merely include a healthful life. It also means accepting human life's natural frailty and mortality."¹⁷

Such an approach to sexuality emerges from and returns to a Christian vision of a relational God who is also divinely active, drawing creation to sanctified consummation. Embodied sexuality is rightly affirmed *not* as simply a mirror of intimate divine communion, but as a manifestation of embodied Spirit. The finitude of creation renders

an incarnated, seeking God vulnerable, but it also reflects God's own nature and thus ours as well. God's indwelling characterizes the finite vulnerability of creation as holy, a reflection of the consistent possibility of newness and communion with God enabled by the Spirit. This is the passion of God. This is a passion that Christ offers which can be cultivated in believers and contribute to the formation of bodied sexuality. In this sense, sexuality has much to do with the charismatic presence of God in human beings. At the same time, that presence is subject to the mitigating factors of both sin and the broader risks that accompany the encounters of bodies one with another. In other words, both sex and Spirit draw us near to the ecstasy, passion, and suffering of both God and created life.

For Moltmann, God suffers empathetically, and in so doing, becomes more God. "The Spirit is God's empathy, his feeling identification with what he loves."¹⁸ In learning of and being open to Spirit, we learn how to do the same. Hence, a theology of sexuality is essentially a theology of vulnerability, in that it is a reflection on the cultivation of "appropriate vulnerability" that permits the flow of sanctifying grace in and through human relationships that include components of physical intimacy. The presence of God in Spirit is intimately tied to suffering, so that the fullness of God's expression is tied to God's "self-deliverance." God is with us in the fullness of our lives as creatures, and no less so in our embodied lives at each stage of our development, because we are tied to the consummation OF a divinely vulnerable, loving desire for all creation.¹⁹

18. Moltmann, 51.

19. Ibid., 49-51.

3) A pneumatological approach seeks to customize a theology of sexuality that is attentive to the vulnerabilities of youth but also interested in cultivating their specific gifts. Pneumatology provides us with the language of *charism* to accompany the language of desire.

Feminist theologies of eros have rightly supported a turn back to vulnerability as a shaping component of human life. This includes sexuality as an inherently good and creative force in the lives of women and men. From this we can gain a theological vocabulary for young people that not only frames their sexualities as good, but also allows them to conceive of their sexual practices as contributive to the larger upbuilding of community not exclusive to nuclear family arrangements.

Traditionally, the Christian tradition has spoken of this interaction between Spirit and human beings partly in terms of *charisms*--a plurality of gifts afforded to all of us that contributes to God's work in the world, the building of the church, and our own development, to bring about the kingdom of God. If our sexualities are to be considered rightly part of our embodied lives as creatures and Christians, how might our *charisms* also interact with and reflect our sexuality? Because *charisms* vary across persons, they further demand that we attend to particularity. The *charisms* of youth are not necessarily the *charisms* of adults, and individual youths bear individual gifts.

Scholars especially attentive to the lived religious experiences of youth have already written extensively about what I would call the charisms of young people. Kenda Creasy Dean describes youth as "wired for passion."²⁰ They "seldom distinguish their desire for God from their desire for one another. As a result, falling in love at fifteen

20. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 6.

feels like being on holy ground, and church camps spawn romances as well as conversions every time."²¹ Rather than deride, belittle, or dismiss youth as unreliable bearers of the divine due to the capricious nature of young love, Dean zeroes in on this very characterization of youth to draw a larger connection to the nature of God. She describes the *pathos* of God that founds the Christian narrative, a "willing surrender of ego" that parallels "what teens do best--fall in love."²²

This is by no means exclusively sexual. For Dean, the youthful tendencies towards idealism, romanticism, and a desire to *feel* something offer the church a space for experiencing the overwhelming passion of God's love. As youth are "hardwired for passion," God is hardwired for communion. God is likewise predisposed to falling in love with God's creation, to being present in an immediately experiential way, and evoking a desire for transcendence. God's *pathos* is incarnational, and Dean argues that so too is the *pathos* of youth. Young people make especially capable "theologians of the body...whose bodies serve as sensitive compasses that point, invariably, in the direction of communion."²³ The hormonal tumult of puberty, the ambiguity of desire, the overwhelming need young people feel to be *known*, these all can also be seen as gifts reflecting the presence of a passionate God. What Dean calls *pathos*, I might extend to call *charism*. These embodied experiences and desires can be engaged as spiritual gifts. And like any other spiritual gift, they are in need of cultivation and interpretation within the community of the church. But to deny them is to deny the Spirit.

21. Ibid., 117.

22. Ibid., 51, 67.

23. Ibid., 124.

Dangerous desires

The portrait of young sexuality offered to us, especially in the last two decades, has been portrayed as dangerously world-changing. Popular cultural treatments of teens typically portray young people as impulsive, sex-crazed, consumerist, generally disinterested in larger events or preciously and naively engaged in hopeless causes. At the intersection of these various tendencies lies a perceived sense that youth are in the process of "settling" into identities that will determine their worth, health and manner of participation in adult society.²⁴ We can recall from the work of Moran and Jordan how dependent our modern conceptions of human development, social organization, and national identity have been on this particular vision of a liminal space where desires are fixed and primed for a very specific form of adult life. Deviation, especially the willful kind that adolescents specialize in, is especially dangerous. Namely, it has the potential to spread death, shatter economies, render the homeland pregnable to foreign invaders, and, in all, thwart the efforts of God to establish a social order predicated upon comfortably middle class nuclear, heterosexually-based family unit.

This is a vision well in keeping with developed Western, understandings of the role of sexuality in late modern life. It has proven especially profitable both politically, and the titillating erotic dangers such a vision of sexuality represents has also proven profitable indeed. Reviewing the curricula selected for this project, it has also become apparent that a capitulation to this way of understanding sexuality has also come to supply a theological *telos* for church sexuality education. Crisis management, an epidemic logic, and an overwhelming concern with control and prevention paint a

24. Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk About Homosexuality*, xiv.

specific portrait for the role of sexuality in human life. However, we find in God the Spirit an erotic destabilization. And if these institutions and false theologies are destabilized, then we can also say that the associated visions of adolescent sexuality have been destabilized as well.

Practical theologian and scholar of Christian education David F. White has pushed this notion even further, suggesting that these passionate, even holily impatient gifts have been crucial to moments of social and religious reform.²⁵ Youth have typically been on the forefront of major movements for social change, and until recently were regarded as capable and valuable voices in community leadership. The American and French Revolutions, abolition, Civil Rights Movement, and more recent anti-war efforts have all had youthful passion as their hallmark. The *charisms* of adolescent desire are certainly dangerous. They have the potential to make and re-make worlds. However, the Spirit is frequently acknowledged as the best kind of dangerous--an impatient, crashing, wild bird with little regard for entrenched systems, particularly when they have proven stagnant and oppressive.

Reframing the qualities of youth often deemed disruptive by adults and the church affirms them as places where the Spirit of God is working, rather than as sites of dangerous instability that need tamping down, containment, and control. The transition to a mature, adult sexuality should therefore be redescribed as contingent upon a cooperation with the Spirit in the movement of young people and young desire towards the *telos* of God's becoming in the world.

25. White.

Christians have a far more interesting story to tell with our young people. If we adhere to the vision set forth by Brock, Heyward, and Gilson, the precise space where eros can be most dangerous, hitting us in our most vulnerable spaces, is also where it can be most powerful. Brock, Heyward, and Gilson all described the way that women's eros, breaking free, could drive a revolution in life and love for both the sexes. What would it mean to help youth tell the story of how young eros likewise changes worlds? This truly takes sex far more seriously than any curriculum that seeks only to help youth enjoy mutually pleasurable and consensual sex at minimal risk to their bodies. Theologically, such a contention is truly only a baseline. Sexuality also prompts us to consider the radical vulnerabilities of bodies, the radical vulnerability of the Body of God, and the ways faith practices can help us see how each are held and transformed within a divinely loving eros that binds us together in relation.

Charismatic vulnerability

Attention to charisms carries with it the implicit understanding of plurality. Not all persons receive the same charisms, and by this are rendered necessary to one another. The old need the young, not in the least for reminders about the capacity to feel deeply, to delight in the newness of pleasure, to even find an exquisite pleasure in love unrequited or loss. They most certainly need the willingness of the young to speak truth to power, to name the confusions of our words and actions when it comes to sexuality, to describe the laughable willingness we seem to share when it comes to yielding to panic, and to expose our reliance on structures of normativity and deviance by happily thwarting our efforts to impose order at every turn. But we also need reminders of more quiet vulnerabilities--of the desire to be given affirmation through both trust and witness, of the ease with which

we conflate passing encounter with sustained and deepening relation, of the truth that "if I am close enough to kiss you, I am close enough to kill you."

I would suggest that the charisms of youth have in common a rootedness in more universal vulnerabilities, acute forms of a human experience shared by young and old alike. The ability of young people to feel deeply and passionately echoes what Pannenberg has called the human "openness" to the world. Youth are often especially able to imagine a redeemed future and can often trigger a deep anxiety that shakes us to our cores. It is this same anxiety that provokes the grasping at control. "Epidemic logics" paradoxically seems to mire us deeper and deeper in patterns of sin and wrong relation rather than ennobling a move towards the freedom offered in grace. Or, as Moltmann describes it, prevents us from actually existing within the experience of the Spirit due to our fevered attempt to construct "fixed" identities and standards to assuage the suffering that accompanies our freedom in the world.

White's discussion of the innate and unfettered sense of deep ethical truth, an instinct for justice, possessed by youth does, however, speak simultaneously to a yearning for order. I am not suggesting a subjective sexual anarchy. We can rightly affirm the need for stable foundations that will shape human behavior and decisions in ways that they can count on, in accordance with patterns of human well-being rather than selfishness or exploitation. This encompasses the youthful need to seek and speak truth, to gain a hearing from adults and caretakers. It also reflects an impatience and alienation that quickly creeps in when youth are invariably let down by the compromised or the pragmatic.

Still, youth yearn to be drawn into a larger narrative of great things. Moltmann's description of a Spirit which draws human beings into the work of God, and God into the life of God's creation, identifies what it is that the Church has to offer to adolescents as they develop as persons and as sexual beings in the world. They are part of a larger story, and we know this by Spirit. It is here where we can draw and qualify the intersection with feminist theologies of eros. An effective theology of adolescent sexuality locates itself within this story. It does not deploy sexuality as an object lesson or metaphor for some higher transcendence. Instead, sexuality education bound to eros notes that the infusion of life with God's Spirit means that sexuality is already caught up in God's movement towards us and our movement towards God. Recognizing the outward expression of this movement in youthful *charism* thus leads us to ask how cultivating and applying these gifts can characterize the sexual life.

Supplementing sexuality education with an account of the Spirit joins the eros of adolescents to an incarnated, seeking God. Young people should not be understood as agents of a divine patriarch's plan, but rather as signs of the divine *pathos*. The wildness of the Spirit echoes in the spirit of the young and the burgeoning sexuality that accompanies it. Divine eros can draw human beings into the just and liberating becoming of God, and the experience of bodily eros can be an incarnated metaphor for that participation. Hence, this Spirited approach to sexuality, which binds the *charisms* of young people to divine eros, yields a "sex positivity" far deeper than the necessary, but unintegrated, vision offered strictly by public health as exemplified in the *OWL* curriculum. Connecting adolescent sexuality to adolescent charism also refigures versions of "God's plan" by drawing the vision forward, towards embodied erotic justice,

rather than down, squarely upon unquestioned institutions and definitions of sexual knowledge. Put simply, adolescents can be asked to consider how their bodies, desires, and pleasures are being called into participation in the work of God.

I would suggest that it should begin by asking how youth may realize the lived experience of Christian life in the presence of God, *as it includes their lives as sexual beings*. In other words, how one practices a sexuality in the context of a broader discipleship, engaged in sanctification, that cultivates and is cultivated by the Spirit of God while maintaining care for the particular vulnerabilities of young, developing persons. As such, I turn finally to the question of practice, of spiritual discipline, as an alternative framework for constructing a more theologically sound project of adolescent sexuality education and the development of corresponding Christian adolescent sexual ethics.

4) A pneumatological approach seeks the present working of God in the practices of the church. Pneumatology contextualizes a sexual education project as an extension of practices designed to help mold persons into the image of a loving Christ.

Practices which emphasize Spirit and *charism* maintain an openness to the plurality of expressions such practice can take.

Christian theology at its best has endeavored to language the relationship between the power of divine love and the vulnerabilities of created nature. By tracing our way from vulnerability, through *charism*, and finally to practice, we can see the way the Spirit knits these together in Christian community. The process of Christian discipleship is essentially a "working out" of the event of salvation and the ongoing life of God coming

to dwell in God's creation. In Chapter 1, I described the vulnerabilities rendered especially acute in both a moment of pastoral care and the broader case of church attempts to address adolescent sexuality in light of a perceived "crisis moment" in the sexual health of the nation. I argued that the Church, as a Spirit-infused community of sanctification, possesses a unique and critical set of resources capable of both resisting the past injustices of approaches to adolescent sexuality education and envisioning a new role for youth and their caregivers in the process of discipleship that rightly includes sexuality.

Our tradition hosts a wealth of practices that already attend to vulnerability. Such practices might be enriched by their application to the question of adolescent sexuality. Simultaneously, the special vulnerabilities of creaturely sexuality at large might give way to new practices if conceived within the a broader paradigm of Christian praxis.

Practices are inherently intentional. Many Christian practices, from sacrament to food, open up the sanctifying possibilities of quotidian objects and activities through mindful attention. Intentionality, in turn, has the potential to uncover our deep vulnerabilities by exposing our deepest longings and often laying bare the stunted nature of the forms of desire we are afforded by market and culture.

Here I find Wendy Farley's efforts to connect practice to the question of erotic desire especially exciting. In particular, Farley has alerted us to the infection of Christian theology by a consumerism that has shaped sexual and religious practices alike in a vein of individual satisfaction through possession and consumption of preordained objects and habits. Though consumerism celebrates "free choice," it essentially destroys the freedom

of persons by tying agency only to mindless consumption.²⁶ We see this expressed in the way we even attempt to sell "Christian" sexuality to teens, as a package deal of divine plans that can be purchased via piety and redeemed for a space in civic American life.

Farley asks about human capacities for practices of deep love and attention to others. She offers that a host of practices, paradigmatically represented by contemplative prayer and habits of mindfulness, have the power to shape desire. Though Farley does not speak specifically of *charism*, her argument has resonance here. The cultivation of our spiritual gifts is essentially tied an intentional cultivation of desire--the practices that make use of our gifts to direct desire towards suitable objects. Desire ultimately draws us towards God and liberates the fixed expectations we place upon the objects for which we long. If the Christian practice of sexuality is no longer expected to suit the manufactured desires for consumer life or ensure an impossible invulnerably in the life of the human creature, then perhaps instead it can make space for youth to more deeply and intentionally engage the love of God and nurture its reflection in the love of others.

Perhaps most crucially for Farley, we are to recognize that living out our connection to Divine Eros is improperly conceived as necessarily teleological. We don't cultivate desire in order to render it more effective in acquiring some finite good. Nor, however, are we to accept consumerism's model of endless choice and limitless consumption. Rather, life lived intentionally within the infinite erotic love of God is a good in itself. Being rendered vulnerable before God, within the infinite mystery approximated but in no way matched by the church, has no singular or set purpose (though it certainly has consequences and a potential for world-shattering change). The

26. Our understanding of desire, as Singer also pointed out, is now shaped almost entirely by these terms.

church is thus free to be an event of communion rather than a juridical arbiter of orthodoxy.

Farley's *Gathering Those Driven Away*, while a generally broader treatment of the role of desire and incarnational love in the church, begins as an apology to those who have suffered alienation from a church that fails to welcome non-normative sexuality into the fold. Conformation to carefully regulated ideals has replaced cultivated participation in divine love incarnated in Christian community. Faith's centerpiece, the love of God, must be restored.²⁷ Still, the church remains the primary space where we collectively learn to participate in divine mystery:

Through the symbols, the sacred texts, the traditional writings, through liturgy and practice and community, Christians learn to participate in this beautiful and infinite mysterious reality. It is not when the church rejects us or we reject the church that we fall away from this truth. There is nowhere to fall but into the love of our beloved. If we find another language, another set of practices, that weave our divine eros into the great Divine Eros, we might move even deeper into this truth.²⁸

Let us conceive of the practice of sexual education in that light, and turn to find how a few of the particular vulnerabilities that sex renders heightened and acute are met by the charisms of youth and the attention of the Christian community that surrounds them. I have selected five practices as a gesture towards modeling a more broad vision of the incorporation of sexuality into adolescent discipleship: 1) Witness; 2) Contemplation; 3) Healing/Honoring the Body; 4) Sacrament; 5) Exorcism.

27. Farley, 31, 34.

28. Ibid.

Sexuality Education as Practice

Witness

From its origins, Christianity has been tied to story. The practices of testimony and witness answer the desire to narrate one's life, to construct a context for experiences, and to integrate those experiences into a broader understanding of life. The day Jenny texted me, her youth minister, she was offering me her witness. She had a need to be heard, recognized, and loved in the midst of an impossible and incredibly vulnerable situation.

There is vulnerability in the desire for recognition, and thus an inherent vulnerability in the practice of witness. We yearn to have our narratives heard, confirmed, and offered back by others. We likewise fear rejection. Rejection can come from a variety of directions from intimate confidence, the unintelligibility in the face of a lack of a theological vocabulary adequate to the task of describing our encounters with the holy, and oftentimes that which results from gender expectations for speech about sexuality and bodily experience. And for young people seeking a witness to their sexual experiences, have fears, desires, and questions. However, those are accompanied by a very real fear of punishment and rejection, especially from families and communities with strict expectations for sex, marriage, and gender roles. Young people, with their *charisms* of great passion and the ability to fall quickly and deeply in and out of love, can often mistake other forms of intercourse, sexual and otherwise, for the witness they crave.

And yet, we have seen that adolescents carry with them an acutely prophetic *charism* for truth-telling, the celebration of deeply passionate encounters with desire, love, and the thrill of the new. As they feel deeply, they are also capable of deep hurts,

and a need for those stories to also be heard and held by a community of care. And of course, while we have idealistic visions for Christian community as the place where this rightly occurs, recent events demonstrate that they can often be sites of secrecy and sexual exploitation. Adults are also vulnerable to desires to cover over their senses of inadequacy in these matters, their own personal wounds, or their deeply broken ways of engaging their own sexualities. All too often youth find rejection or exploitation where they should find witness.

Farley chastises both theology and church practice for being guilty of "shackling theology to the relentless assertion of authority."²⁹ Christian practice has often been misconstrued as the enforced assent to doctrine. Essentially, modern Christianity suffers from a severe case of idolatry. Where our desires fail to fall in line with doctrinal primacy, we suffer castigation. The relationship between humans and God enumerated in the curricula that this project examines—a God who serves as an authorizer of sanctified behavior and a judge when those authorizations are violated—leaves little room for learning. There are better ways for youth to make sense of sexual desires or encounters outside of a framework of yes/no, right/wrong. Shifting towards a congregational practice that begins with witnessing the lives of youth while witnessing to the divinely social love of God fosters an understanding of sexuality within a "culture of life." From there, ethics can be developed according to their suitability to a witnessed plurality of needs within the community and tested by their contribution to a life in the Spirit. This is, implicitly, no "one size fits all" model of education, youth ministry, or teleological ethics.

29. *Ibid.*, 8.

Farley's critique lays a foundation for exploring desire in light of an *imago dei* that reflects God's call for community and communion. The *imago* recognized here is a reflection of a divine relationality that honors the plurality of its members with dignity and the right to *be*. The *imago dei* offers a community that values difference, modeling a love that refuses to usurp, rush, hurry, oppress, or exploit. Returning to our discussion of Spirit and Trinity, we can recall how attention to the social nature of the Trinity helps us to recall the life of "mutual recognition" known in God. All members of the Trinity are present in witness and regard of the others. Victorin-Vangerud calls this "mutual recognition," and offers that this mutual recognition provides a model for honoring the dignity of others. It's essentially an alternative form of describing the *imago dei* which begins to address some of the challenges to the practices of witness and testimony in sexual education. Youth first come to learn to think theologically about the *imago dei* in relation to their sexualities.

Contemplation

When Farley looked towards practices particularly conducive to facilitating human connection to Divine Eros, she offered an extensive examination of contemplative prayer. Contemplation, Farley writes, is love itself. The *ethos* of ethical human community, and ethical sexuality, should not be construed as the regulatory expressions of divine authority. Ethics follow from the love experienced in encounter with the holy.³⁰ We rest in the divine, and we come to know ourselves as bearers of the *imago dei*.³¹ The recognition of our identities in God, coupled with a cultivated awareness of our inability

30. Ibid., 94.

31. Ibid., 103.

to fall anywhere but into the love of God, radically reorients and reorders how we attend to the *oughts* of our creaturely lives. Knowing ourselves as vulnerable before and with God shapes us to tend faithfully to the vulnerabilities of others.

Further, contemplation necessitates the relinquishment of images and idols of God. God cannot stand if conceived simply as a punitive or benevolent patriarch, meting out the orders of creation. Likewise, (sexual) ethics will not be our avenue to divine communion. However, with attentiveness to the love of God, ethics can become its outward sign

The practice of contemplation implies sitting in the presence of unconditional love, a meeting with the Spirit that bears the grace of God. It's a love impossible to wholly reproduce in intrahuman love. However, grace is capable of refining desire, making it capable of recognizing those things which masquerade for grace's proximate. Youth participating in contemplative practices are being granted access to training as reflexive theologians.³² They are receiving a sexual education that begins by incarnating the connections between bodies, intimate loving, and unconditional grace. They are learning that their charismatic gifts for passion and deep communion are in fact intrinsically tied to God and capable of enriching every aspect of their personal and communal lives. Perhaps more importantly, they are learning that incarnating this love also signifies the need to handle others with care and seek relationships qualified by others doing the same. And in all this, congregations are crafting sexuality education practices which emerge out of a faith that God's Spirit is vivifying their lives together, rather than a fear that "society must be defended." In the latter, we are left only with

32. See Edward Farley's excellent article on congregational practice as theological reflection. Edward Farley, "Four Pedagogical Mistakes: A Mea Culpa," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 8, no. 4 (2005).

pedagogies of control. In the former, we find new pathways to creative ways of accompanying young people in their lives as disciples.

Incorporating contemplation into youth sexuality education is, of course, a slightly dangerous endeavor. It will likely do a much better job of illustrating the "intimacy" our curricula keep trying to describe, curricula that rely on continuums that place handholding and intercourse at opposite ends, with stages of friendship and romance in between. Coming into practiced communion with the Divine likewise risks challenging our expectations for the *imago dei* to serve as a reliable guarantor of middle class, American visions of marriage and uncorrupted adult sexuality. The Spirit reveals such a construction as yet another fragile avatar, with sexuality easily conscripted to its service. Liberal visions of erotic progress may not, however, fare better. The Spirit met in contemplation resists claims on exclusive visions of "justice" or "healthy sexuality." The Divine Love met in contemplation always promises revelations of something deeper. Moreover, turning oneself to the Divine rejects control as a dominant paradigm for any aspect of human life, including sexuality. At the same time, the *imago dei* is refigured as something we are being seduced *towards*, a Christ-like love that moves in and through us.

Contemplation calls for a different form of education. Farley suggests that divine desire teaches us about the nature of desire itself.³³ In it, we come to realize that we occupy a "hinge between fathomless depths of the Divine Eros and the utter concreteness and uniqueness of a human body."³⁴ That Eros becomes known as the primal love of God out of which love and beauty emerge and return. It is ultimately incarnational, self-

33. Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation*, 92-93.

34. *Ibid.*, 116.

manifesting love.³⁵ However, we can know that only as embodied creatures.

Contemplation insists that we spend time with our bodies, recognize them as spaces capable of knowing great love, but also of exposing our deepest vulnerabilities.

Contemplation offers us discipline in the principles of attention and gentleness towards those bodies and, correspondingly, to the bodies of others.³⁶ At the same time, it suggests that the concreteness of our bodies and variations in our experience of the divine means that our practices may vary based on a number of factors. *Charisms* may be one appropriate place to start.

To the benefits offered by Farley, I might also add patience. Too often, as seen in the *OWL* program, progressive approaches to adolescent sexuality have prized "readiness," "mutual consent" and "mutual pleasure" as the touchstones of appropriate teen sexual activity. At the other end of the spectrum, the induction into a marital relationship somehow magically signifies the readiness of a person for sex. Both seem to think that their relative curricula mitigate against the vulnerability yielded by the implicit sexual chaos of adolescence. In each case, youth are portrayed as waiting upon sexual intercourse, or rather upon its sanction. This activity of waiting upon sanction is thus held up as the primary practice of adolescent sexuality. Abstinence, if you will.

However, contemplation reconfigures notions of time. Time becomes that which is held in the love of God. The urgency of even physical gratification isn't purged, but it is loved and restored to its proper place in life, something to be cared for, cultivated, and even fed on occasion, but never to be confused with absolute love. Adolescents are not waiting

35. Ibid., 38.

36. Ibid., 107-108.

upon the sanction of sexual behavior, but they are learning how to integrate their sexual practices into a larger practice of waiting upon God.

In practiced communion with young people and their communities, God endows the wisdom necessary for discernment. The question is not whether young people are ready for sex. Rather, it is whether Christian young people have developed the spiritual resources to integrate sexual desire and practice into their larger experience of communion with divine love in community, *and* whether they have developed the skills to attend to the fostering of the efforts of others.

Healing/honoring the body

The embodied nature of contemplative practice therefore gives way to an experience of the intrinsic value of bodies. Bodies are created and indwelt by the Spirit, and in contemplation we further learn that they are capable of participating in divine love. At the same time, the radical vulnerability of bodies and spirits exposed in contemplation further has the potential to yield deeper commitments to the care of self, others, and community.³⁷ In response, we can communicate through sexual education that we care for bodies by honoring their vulnerabilities and acknowledging their needs for healing--not *when* they have been rendered vulnerable (for as creatures in communion with a seeking God we are always vulnerable), but when their vulnerabilities have not been adequately tended or have been inadvertently or intentionally exploited.

As the curricula have demonstrated, the relationship between bodies and sexuality has tended to rely on a theological anthropology preoccupied with lustful concupiscence

37. See Marilyn Friedman, *What Are Friends For? : Feminist Perspectives on Personal Relationships and Moral Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

and errant desire. Curricula also point to fixed ethical continuums of physical contact and emotional intimacy. However, the form of erotic, Spirit-filled Christianity we have so far explored calls first and foremost for an affirmation of our status as creatures and our kinship with the rest of the created world. Our bodies are parts of interconnected webs, not singular continuums or troublesome threats to some sort of higher ethical life. We emerge from and are drawn back to love. We are being invited into the cultivation of bodies and desires which participate in, rather than resist, that love.

The very real vulnerabilities of bodies, hearts, and minds in sexual union require attention not simply because they are self-evidently "holy" as creations of God, or because they are racked with dangerous crazy-making adolescent hormones. Rather, the cultivation of holiness through Christian practices recontextualizes sexuality and the forms of physical and spiritual interaction entailed as mediums of love and holy communion. "Good" sex is thus not to be understood as sex that isn't illicit under the historical terms of Christian marital monogamy, though such a practice can certainly yield meaningful and effective result. Rather, "good" sex is sex and desire that participates holy, loving communion.

Corresponding care of human vulnerabilities rightly grows out of the care we give one another. Further, in considering the deep, incarnated experiences of vulnerable longing heightened in both burgeoning sexuality and the charismatic passion of youth, young people may also be shepherded into an awareness of the vulnerability of the Divine. The seeking love of creation that characterizes God renders God vulnerable, as

does the dependent, social nature of the Trinity and its relational binding to humanity in Christ.³⁸

Part of Christian practice should be understood as the fostering of connections between body and holiness that celebrate this form of divinized, incarnated vulnerability of the body. These connections extend out from theological conviction, as we see with eating, breath prayer, and other practices. God's "finding" of the human being in Christ does not absolve God's vulnerability. The incarnation completes divine vulnerability by the unfolding indwelling of God's spirit in creation. Likewise, the continued maturation of youth into adults will not be accompanied by the dissemblance of their primary vulnerabilities, but rather their potential recontextualization in relational communities as capacities for embodied human connection are shaped and reshaped by the Spirit.

Practically, this means addressing sexuality and bodies on a number of levels. It most certainly includes attention to reproductive processes, the management of those processes in life-giving ways for all involved, the prevention and testing methods for diseases and infections, and the technology involved in all. The power over life and death possessed by our bodies is not to be trifled with lightly.

In addition, this means providing a previously unattended space for young people to begin speaking about their desires and bodily experiences. This includes exploring ambiguities and developing a vocabulary that is not predicated simply on "saying no," but for saying *what* they want, *what* they are experiencing, and *how* they are experiencing it. Some curricula have used language of "skin hunger" to describe desires for tactile pleasures that often go unacknowledged or unarticulated in discussions with youth about

38. Moltmann, 299.

their experiences of sexuality.³⁹ This is certainly an excellent start. However, along with feminist theologians of eros, I would suggest that the process of honoring the body might further be accompanied by developing a language that describes the way that bodies of young and old, male and female, are coded and constructed. How, for instance, does the eroticized violence or exploitative commodification of young female bodies shape the way both young men and women come to know themselves? What do we do when these forms of embodiment are exposed to be in conflict with the gospel message of the *imago dei* found in a loving Christ? In addition, more explicit communication about the care of the boundaries and bodies of others would be helpful, as would attempts to find new language for taking pleasure in the pleasure of others without reductive objectification.

Sacrament

The practice of the sacraments, including baptism and Eucharist, should be considered of primary importance to a theologically grounded, Spirit-based program of adolescent sexuality education. I offer this for two reasons. One, sacramentality takes tangible, everyday components of human life and performs an impartation of divine grace in an event of heightened, *kairos* time. The sacraments draw their efficacy from the dialectic of incarnation. This dialectic holds in tension the fact that bread, wine, and water form the cornerstone of human sociality and the nourishment of the human body (in various iterations around the world). At the same time, in acts of remembrance and invocation, these everyday items are rendered something wholly other. Sacraments therefore have the capacity to illustrate the approach to sexuality that this chapter has

39. Janet Bartosch, Mary Lee Talbot, and David M. Dobson, *God's Gift of Sexuality: A Study for Young People in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Rev. ed., 4 vols. (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press, 1998).

undertaken. Sex is a material which holds the potential for great, often incendiary power, but is also often (as are the bread and wine of the table and the water of the bath) alternately reassuringly and unbearably quotidian. Sexuality is an intrinsic part of material human life, and yet carries the capacity to offer a paradoxically immanent transcendence. Sacraments teach us about making space for participation in the love which emerges from and returns to God.

Second, a vision of Christian theology which emphasizes the divine relationship vivified by the Spirit recognizes that all persons, and especially young persons, have an innate need to participate in ritual acts that crystallize God's love and grace. Sacraments are embodied human participations in Christian life that signify the desire for God and right relation with others. Sacraments are contemplative moments which run counter to social obsessions with the relationship between ecstatic pleasure, consumption, and control. The fact that sacraments are performed in community, at least within Protestant theologies, also suggests a contingent human need to participate in intergenerational rituals. Sharing in the sacraments across generations, both as witnesses and participants, can be a performative space. Sacramental participation offers an alternative to the need to own and direct young people as a sign of ecclesial and social moral authority. The community gathered at the table or the bath also, if so engaged, can provide a visually powerfully multiplication of elders available to young people as loving guides. It can also serve as a testament to the ongoing need for reconciliation and gentleness as we tend to the needs of one another.⁴⁰

40. I wish to take a moment here to clarify what may be an easily misinterpreted point made in this section on the potential of sacrament to illustrate the way the Spirit sanctifies everyday materials and events in order to make them vessels for grace. Kenda Creasy Dean, among a host of other theologians writing on the young, suggests that their charismatic passion is at heart a yearning for divine communion. As such,

Exorcism

Finally, attempting to move away from a paradigm of epidemic logic and crisis control towards a pneumatological view of sexuality, theology, and adolescence suggests that we might consider reviving the practice of exorcism. We have a need to replace dominant and destructive paradigms with ones that draw one closer to God. Youth can rightly be invited to accompany us in this pursuit. We have some work to do in dismantling the spirits which have laid claim to the sexualities and bodies of our youth, and likewise to the modern claim of fixed, sexual knowledge hidden deep in our bodies.

Hence, I briefly propose this final practice, exorcism, as a way of speaking towards an increased commitment to engaging youth in the exploration, dismantling, and remaking of dominant sexual paradigms as a component of adolescent sexual education. This means naming the spirits--identifying oppressive structures, expectations, and knowledge constructs--but it also means drawing them out and offering new spirits of

roaring hormones and careless sexual encounters come to symbolize a claim on a suspected human truth: that we yearn first for God, and thus our sexual desire, are a one-way mirror of that deeper yearning. Hence, this argument concludes, a cultivated sexual desire will most closely approximate the performance of divine-human intimacy:

"What youth seek in all this sexual activity is the attachment conveyed by intercourse: physical, visceral, spiritual communion and the security, sensation, release, and even relief that accompanies it. Postmodern youth may be dying because of their dates [a reference to increased levels of STIs among adolescents], but what they are dying for is someone who will be them, someone who can draw them beyond themselves into the mystery of 'we,' someone who is 'one' with them and therefore holds out the gift of 'becoming known.' And if the only route to this intimacy seems to be sex, then sex it will be." Dean, 129.

This feels backwards to me. I am more inclined to say that the intimacy with God made possible by our inclusion in Christ's body in turn enables us to experience intimacy in the sexual act. In other words, to theologize about sex is not to naturalize it as creation's version of intimacy with God. This would make it a natural analogue to the height of human intimacy. Instead, theologizing about sex allows us to recognize the transcendent power that communion with God can afford us in sexual practice. After all, God as lover is not the only image Scripture gives us. God is mother, father, wisdom, breath, friend. Here sacrament can also be helpful, as it pulls together, often in dialectically tense ways, these expressions of the holy as they act in, on, and with us in a *kairos* moment. In the Spirit, we become open to new possibility, renewed relationship, and the possibility to be something *more* than we are.

freedom, of embodied love, of egalitarian communion, and of patient loving--in their stead.

Conclusion

This movement through eros to a sexuality framed by Spirit and a transformed eschatological anticipation answers several of the concerns raised in this project. First, the expectation of beloved community replaces the falsely eschatological vision of heteronormative marriage as the fulfillment of human life and vocation. This roots sexuality within a creative theological context rather than a heteronormative ethic of market or citizenship. The sanctification afforded by the Spirit means that we are all being shaped in our plurality of gifts and differences to live and love well together as bodied selves—a reality anticipated in the community of Trinitarian persons and the incarnational revelation of Christ. It is within this context that our consideration of sexuality and sexually intimate relationships properly emerges.

Second, through Spirit, we can develop an approach to sexuality and sexual ethics that involves participating in the God who is sanctifying and shaping our desire. We seek a logic of sexual desire and practice (broadly understood) that illuminates and compliments the charisms of youth, making sexuality an aspect of discipleship because it is an aspect of embodied, relational life. We share our beloved community with other bodies—vulnerable bodies—and therefore must learn to handle each other with care. This is a helpful alternative to a juridical approach of control and containment. A Spirit-led project of adolescent sexuality education that anticipates an eschaton of erotically just beloved community leaves room for the development of embodied relation over time, as well as the changes that accompany human development. This approach invites young

people alongside adult disciples in theological reflection upon new understandings of eros, sexuality, and desire. To this, we can apply the best feminist reflections on love and erotic justice. At the same time, the openness of the eschaton and the redeeming work of Spirit constantly remind us to maintain an appropriate level of hermeneutical suspicion towards any concept of “sexual knowledge” or sense of the normative virtue of the erotic grounded purely in our human experience or institutions.

Final reflections

Young people need not limit their reflections upon marriage, and celibacy, and singleness, and friendship, as sequentially decreased levels of embodied relating. Instead, the Christian community can provide models and resources for reflection that recognize plural modes of practicing human desire accompanied by necessarily plural modes of engaging the body. Such reflections properly affirm Christian theological commitments to both open community and the unique specificity of embodied creaturely life.

Necessary conversations about care for the self and others in the navigation of sexual agency can accompany these considerations, prompting positive decision-making out of rather than in spite of creaturely sexual desire. Youth can be invited into a discipleship that includes their sexualities and engages creaturely human being in light of the gospel. In Christ the fullness of their bodies and generational particularities can call forth corollary currents of eros towards a variety of good ends. Among these currents can still run the goodness of monogamous married love, celibate vocation, the fecundity of friendships and service, and perhaps even explorations of a “holy singleness.” What is important is that they are acknowledged and engaged as practices reflective of the plurality of loving desire inherent to our lives as creaturely human beings.

This has been a theological inquiry which is inherently practical, speaking back to the competing claims on the eschatological body found in market culture, technological social networking, and even problematic operant conceptions of the body in Christian discourse. Adolescents know and feel the urgency of human relationship in their bones. Engaging the narrative lives of adolescents invites these young people into meaningful relationship with the Christian community. This relationship is likewise transformative for ministry practitioners and adult disciples. In conversation with their lived experiences church communities may find a far more fruitful and theologically sound starting point for speaking of and with sexual selves across the age spectrum. On an anthropological level, we can ask young people what it means to live embodied, communal lives on ‘this side’ of adulthood. On an eschatological level, we invite young people into the Christian practices that have come to signify living creaturely human lives on ‘this side’ of the eschaton.

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