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Sexual Ethics

Dr. Hartman

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Embracing Sexuality and the Church

For centuries now, people have struggled with the idea of embracing their individual sexuality while still being able to be considered a ‘good Christian’. Even in secular society, people struggle to embrace different kinds of sexual relationships because of outside judgment that inevitably comes with different sexual choices. Not only this, but the gender differences and inequalities exemplified through Christianity’s view on premarital sex are highly controversial and unhealthy. Society teaches from a young age that sex is a negative thing, which is hard to shake after one is in the confines of a serious relationship or marriage. Many scholars and other intellectuals have strong opinions on the subject. Men and women alike should be able to make their own decisions regarding sexuality both in the context of Christianity and in the social world regardless of the societal preconceptions of virginity, gender roles, resulting in judgment associated with religious or social ideals.

In recent years, men and women alike, have begun to fight against the labeling and judgment of women if they decide to embrace their own right to their sexuality. The social dichotomy expected from women is not far from the ideas of Christianity and other religions, where women are told to be chaste until they are committed to a heterosexual marriage, upon which they are then immediately expected to become an object of sexual pleasure for their husbands. This idea of “women [being] sexually desirable and chaste at the same time” (Sharma 136) is oppressive to women everywhere who should have the right to choose whether or not

they want to be sexually active and with whom, whether inside the confines of marriage or not.

The choice of female sexuality should be individualized to each woman's life, and she should not have to suffer societal or religious condemnation because of her choices. Both men and women are hurt by these overwhelming stereotypes and judgments associated with sex.

One struggle for many women is the societal coexistence of Christianity and sexuality. The concepts embrace completely different ideologies: Christianity largely preaches abstinence until marriage, and sex before marriage directly conflicts with that. Sonya Sharma conducted a study involving many women who struggle with this conflict and how they each resolved to solve their personal conflict. It was clear through the study that religious views shaped many participant's actions involving their own sexual choices. Because of the sinful and negative way the church brought up issues of "masturbation, sexual exploration and intercourse outside of marriage... many participants found it difficult to embody their sexuality" (Sharma 140). This illustrates the deeper issue of forbidding sexual exploration. Sexuality is defined as not only sexual intercourse in a traditional sense, but everything from one's individual sexual identity to sexual experiences and feelings as well (Sharma 137). One can embrace their sexuality without necessarily being sexually active with a partner or masturbating, yet religious teachings hinder even the experience of sexuality under this definition. Experiencing sexuality promotes autonomy and self-awareness, and obstructing that can have a great negative effect on a person. However, it should be possible for sexuality and religion to coexist peacefully. One participant in Sharma's study illustrates this by making the choice to embody her sexuality while still participating in church services argued that it made for a dynamically different contribution because she was sexually embodied. A "sexuality based in spiritual meaning, love, and connection can open up possibilities for empowering sexual selves and experiences" in and out

of the church atmosphere (Sharma 142). Her experience with deepening her religious identity through embracing her sexuality directly illustrates how sexuality can have a positive effect in one's life in many ways.

Accepting one's individual sexuality helps to promote many healthy habits in life that restrict women's choices regarding their sexuality limits. Responsibility is one major idea that is promoted by the right to sexuality. Not only is abstinence only sex education largely ineffective – generally only delaying sex for a number of months compared to young people who had not participated in abstinence only programs – but it has been shown to be connected to less responsible choices as well (Siecus). Young people who took a pledge of abstinence were shown to be “one-third less likely to use contraception when they did become sexually active” (Siecus). They were also found to participate more in oral or anal sex even if they were not having vaginal intercourse. Their participation in these sexual acts is not necessarily a bad thing, but they do it in less responsible ways because of the absence of safe sex teachings. Research has indicated that safe sex education benefits a large majority of young people because it provides education on the many ways to make smart decisions regarding sex, but it can also still help people who are planning on staying abstinent until marriage. Safe sex educates about all different kinds of protection and gives information on Sexually Transmitted Diseases and Infections, which anyone who ever plans on having sex can benefit from learning about. Overall, safe sex teachings, as opposed to abstinence only teachings, are well rounded and beneficial to a wide variety of people.

These same scientific findings have been linked to pledges who participated in purity balls. A purity ball is an event in which fathers and daughters get dressed up as if to go to the prom, and they pledge the daughter's virginity until marriage together. While the symbolic idea

of virginity being a bond between a father and daughter that is eventually passed to a future husband may be age old, it is not a positive coming-of-age ritual. The father in this situation is responsible for his daughter's virginity until she is married. Essentially, he is taking away his daughter's right to her own body until she finds a husband, who will then be responsible for her sexuality instead of her taking responsibility for herself. In this model, a woman would never have her own right to her body and her choices with it. In her article on the Taboo of purity balls in the Christian church as a rite of passage, Christina Reimer studies the negative consequences of "essentialist gender dichotomies in the discourse of the Christian chastity movement" (Reimer 216). Taking away this right diminishes the self-responsibility a woman has to grow and learn in her future life. If she never has time to learn and explore sexuality in her own way, any sexual decisions will be made by others, not the woman herself. The regressive idea of having a father pass his daughter's sexuality to a husband oppresses women's rights to their bodies and promotes a negative societal view of sexuality and women.

Not only do purity balls take away rights from women, but they disregard male purity almost completely. When males are included in purity balls, they are "encouraged to build up their will power so that they have good self-control and can develop a strong moral character" (Reimer 216). Males are told to find the strength and responsibility within themselves to stay pure for their future wives, while women simply have their responsibility taken away from them and given to their fathers. Women are not expected to develop any kind of moral agency for their actions. These ideas are degrading to both males and females. The Christian church in general portrays men and women in very different lights. Women are seen to be naturally "passive and to submit to male advances" while boys naturally have "an overwhelming sexual drive which makes self-control nearly impossible" (Reimer 216). No one should be subject to a belief that

their natural urges, whether passive or aggressive, cannot be controlled. This idea is not only present in many religious teachings, but society as well. It is no secret that society sees males as aggressive, and women as submissive. This idea leads to a lack of responsibility for actions in both males and females – aggressive males do not take responsibility because that is their “natural” urge, and passive females do not know how to speak up for themselves because they are being taught that they should be submissive – and this leads to much bigger problems in society.

A lack of self-responsibility can lead to many other more dramatic issues later in life. One major flaw with Christian teachings of abstinence until marriage is trying to change years of ideals overnight. Christian teachings often portray sex as a sinful, dirty practice before marriage. Abstinence programs very regularly preach that embracing abstinence will lead to blessings physically, emotionally, and spiritually. However, disobeying God’s ways and having premarital sex will lead to “a future of bitter memories, emotional turmoil, disease, unwanted pregnancy, and separation from God” (Moslener 204). These horrible consequences can be hard to forget, even after becoming married and technically being able to have a sexual relationship. If someone is taught for 25 years that sex is dirty, evil, and bad, placing a ring on a finger is not going to erase those guilty feelings of sexuality being a negative thing. This can be a dramatic struggle in many people’s lives.

Samantha Pugsley writes in her blog that even after being in a healthy, committed relationship with her husband for six years before they got married, “anytime we did anything remotely sexual, guilt overwhelmed me”; it was hard for her to draw boundaries that did not make her feel bad because of being brought up in the Christian church. When she and her husband did get married, she ended up on the bathroom of her hotel room on her wedding night

crying because “sex felt dirty and wrong and sinful even though [she] was married and it was supposed to be okay now” (Pugsley). This statement is especially alarming because Christian women everywhere are likely plagued with these same feelings not only on their wedding night but throughout their marriages. Pugsley then spent years obliging to her husband sexually even though it felt wrong to her because she had been taught for so many years that it was. She did not even realize that she had the right to make the choice to not be sexual with her husband if she did not want to be until years after she was married, because Christian teachings always seemed to take away this right. They preach how sex is bad before marriage, but after marriage it is a duty to consummate the relationship continuing to have a sexual relationship. Christian doctrines never teach young people how to stand up and voice their concerns in a sexual relationship if things are not going the way they want. When Samantha Pugsley finally started speaking up for herself, she had to work through countless hours of therapy to finally shake the Christian ideals that her body was not her own, and teach herself that whether or not she wanted to make the choice to have sex was her decision. At the end of her post, she makes a disclaimer that likely touches many other women in similar situations, saying, “It’s your body; it belongs to you, not your church. Your sexuality is nobody’s business but yours”. Though the church undoubtedly has good intentions in their teachings to keep young people pure and focused, they miss major intricacies of a sexual relationship that are important in maintaining a healthy sexual lifestyle with someone else. Teaching that sex is shameful implies to girls that they should not talk about it, which can be a harmful experience for a relationship and for girls’ images of themselves.

One of the main arguments of Dennis Hollinger, a distinguished Professor of Christian ethics, argues the idea of tradition over self. He believes that one cannot simply be trusted to make sound decisions regarding their own sexuality, saying “the falleness of our sexuality and

sexual drives mean that we cannot depend on what we feel within to determine our moral norms” (Hollinger 3). While this idea of trusting tradition over self is supported by many scholars, Samantha Pugsley’s experiences are evidence as to why trusting oneself over what scripture says is better in the end. Pugsley followed tradition by not participating in sexual acts until after she was married, and it ended up causing more psychological and emotional damage to her than good. While tradition is a good guideline for forming morals, in the end it is important to evaluate personal morals and what will be best for each individual regarding sexual decisions. When Pugsley finally made the decision to begin standing up and voicing what she wanted instead of relying on traditional values to shape her life, she began to rebuild her marriage and her sexual relationship with her husband into something that was much healthier for both of them. Self-reliance is much more reliable than tradition because it caters to each individual instead of making blanket statements for each and every person to follow.

Janie Gustafson is a strong believer in celibacy, saying that sex is lustful and innately selfish. However, she does believe that celibacy and passion can go hand-in-hand – that celibacy is not some negative, empty practice void of any kinds of emotional or even types of romantic passion. She admits that being intimate is natural to every person no matter their relationship choices, but also believes that intimacy is feared more than anything else by people. While intimacy may indeed be feared by a vast number of people, relationships of all kinds flourish with intimacy, whether friendships, family relationships or romantic relationships. Gustafson has many arguments against sexual intimacy because of its selfish nature, but she disregards how unselfish the act of pleasuring someone else. Lust may be a selfish idea, but not all sexual intimacy is based off of lust. Sex within a truly loving relationship should not be selfish at all. As First Corinthians preaches in the bible about God’s love for us, saying his “Love is not rude, it is

not selfish, and it cannot be made angry easily” (1 Corinthians 13: 5, ERV), sexual love ideally replicates these same ideals. If sex and love go together, then the lustful, selfish sex that Gustafson critiques is not in really replicative of how she frames it at all.

Gustafson believes that “erotic intimacy is never an easy thing to achieve nor is it ever safe” (Gustafson 278), but there are two well-educated authors who would strongly disagree with that assumption. Easton and Hardy have written multiple books on the idea of being “ethical sluts”, and why it has been a good thing in their lives. This is a highly debated idea, but they are certainly correct in arguing that they should be able to make their own sexual judgments in their personal lives, regardless of what society or any other people think. They go about this in a very ethical way, and take precautions to ensure to the best of their abilities that no one will be hurt by the choices they make. In their article, Easton and Hardy use ‘slut’ as a term to describe themselves, but in a good way. They see being a slut not as a bad thing, and not to say that they do whatever they want, but as an ethical life decision they have made from themselves. They claim that they “value sex, not as a way to set records, but for the pleasure it brings [them] and the good times [they] get to share with however many wonderful people” (Easton and Hardy 6). They focus on the pleasure-filled benefits of sex, and the relationships that can be built with people because of being sexual with many people. Both Hardy and Easton have had a wide variety of single, married, homosexual and heterosexual relationships throughout their lives, and they feel as if they have grown immensely because of the different experiences that come with those relationships.

One of the most convincing arguments that Easton and Hardy make with this article is when they say that “believing that God does not like sex, as many religions seem to, is like believing that God doesn’t like you” (Easton and Hardy 13). Sexuality is an innate human

experience. God would not make humans sexual beings if he was against sex like so many religions make their beliefs reflect. From a utilitarianism ethics perspective, if the good outweighs the bad, it is an ethical idea. When one goes about their sexuality and sexual choices in a respectful, thought out manner that accounts for consent and fully informing partners of sexual expectations, the good of the actions most likely outweigh the bad. Sex is meant for pleasure and fulfillment. Note that this does not to say that situations like rape or miscommunication of sexual expectations are ethical decisions. However, the sexual life that Easton and Hardy illustrate in their article is an ethical ideal that could work for a lot of people if so many negative judgments were not made regarding sexual promiscuity.

No matter if a person chooses abstinence until marriage, celibacy, casual sex, or being an ethical slut, sexual choices should be made based off of one's own personal feelings and wants for their life. Though many religions have beliefs about spiritual sexual practices, sex is a very complicated, fragile subject. Some Christian followers believe sex is dirty and evil for a lifetime can strongly change the way a sexual relationship is after marriage when it is supposed to be okay. By teaching young girls that sex is bad, the church does not teach the girls how to be safe and respect themselves and their responsibility to their bodies, or that no one else can make decisions about their bodies. Girls everywhere have trouble speaking up about their feelings about sex because of their unaccepting upbringing in a church. Churches and society need to work together to stop trying to teach young people to avoid sex, but how to make their own safe, responsible choices, and how to be non-judgmental of other people's decisions whether they are the same or different from their own. Living in a world without sexual judgment would be much more powerful and fulfilling than living in a world where sex is simply not talked about, where

people are being taken advantage of because of it, and where people are feeling guilty for their own natural urges.

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