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# Regarding Sex: Beyond Hedonic Ambivalence<sup>1</sup>

RICHARD BECK

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We don't talk much about human sexuality at church. And we don't spend a great deal of time thinking theologically about sex. As a result, most churchgoing folk have difficulty articulating a comprehensive theology of sexuality. In this vacuum we instead find people juggling a hodgepodge of ideas that struggle to find coherence. Obviously, this situation is worrisome in that sexuality and sexual behavior is a prime mover in the human psyche. For better or worse, we are sexual creatures, seeking and craving sexual outlets. Thus, in the face of one of the greatest forces of human psychology, our corporate theological impoverishment regarding the sexual side of life impedes spiritual formation efforts.

Although we can lament this theological situation we should not be surprised. As noted, sexually-focused theological conversation is not common fare in our churches. When sexuality is discussed, the theological contribution is too often the simple deployment of a single metaphor: purity. But a moment's reflection on this metaphor quickly reveals it to be problematic in its clarity, comprehensiveness and psychological correlates.<sup>2</sup> Purity categories will play a role in conversations about sexuality, but too often the conversation both begins and ends with the deployment of this single ambiguous metaphor. In sum, given the conversational vacuum in most churches regarding the topic of sexuality, it comes as no surprise that congregants cobble together a patchwork of ideas, metaphors and maxims to guide their sexual behavior across their lifespan.

Perhaps an example of this theological muddle might be helpful. Implicitly,<sup>3</sup> many people believe that sexuality exists on an erotic continuum (e.g., from kissing to sexual intercourse). Many people also implicitly assume that "sin" is a binary category (an act or mental state is a sin, or it isn't). Obviously, these two implicit theological assumptions create a disjoint when the binary category is applied to the continuum. Thus, the ubiquitous youth group conversations about where "the line" is to be drawn in sexual activity. Church leaders and parents are often frustrated by these questions, but they can also be at a loss about to how to proceed in a coherent fashion. One of two responses typically manifests. One option is to attempt to force the erotic continuum into a binary category, where more and more sexual activities are labeled as "sex." For example, it might be declared "oral sex is still sex." We can see the rejection of the erotic continuum here in favor of a sex/non-sex binary category with an associated expansion of the "sex" category. The difficulty with this move is that it is often hard to provide warrant in a consistent, case-by-case fashion for the expanded classification (e.g., is phone sex considered to be sex?). An alternative route around the continuum/binary disjoint is to reject the binary notion of sin. Typically, this is done, as discussed above,

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1. I would like to thank Andrea Haugen for her keen editorial eye. Also, many thanks to the Sojourners class at the Highland Church of Christ for providing the first hearing and response concerning the ideas in this paper.

2. For a discussion concerning the theological and ethical problems regarding the purity metaphor, see Richard Beck, "Spiritual Pollution: The dilemma of sociomoral disgust and the ethic of love," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 43 (2006): 53-65.

3. That is to say, the conversation has already been framed by some unspoken assumptions of which the person may or may not be aware. By contrast, a systematic theological approach would be to identify those implicit assumptions, make them overt, and then critically examine their usefulness.

by changing the conversation from “right versus wrong” to issues of purity and holiness. The difficulty with this theological move is that purity categories function, psychologically, as binary categories.<sup>4</sup> Many if not most attributions of “contamination” or “pollution” in the real world are instantaneous and global. That is, if you find a hair in your soup you don’t make the attribution that the soup is “a little bit” contaminated. No, the soup is ruined. The attribution swings from “pure” to “polluted” in a functional binary classification.

The point of the preceding example is to suggest that despite the inability of many congregants or church leaders to articulate an overt and systematic theology of sexuality, there are many implicit theological assumptions rumbling underneath the surface.<sup>5</sup> Further, as we observed with the implicit binary/continuum assumptions, these implicit theological assumptions may be creating problems for us.

I am not a theologian. But as a psychologist I do have the tools to look for patterns in behavior to discern the underlying dynamics at play. In this article I would like to undertake just such an analysis, the goal of which is to locate and describe many of the implicit theological assumptions that manifest themselves in conversations about sexuality within the church. By making these assumptions overt, it is hoped that we might be better able to untangle the theological knots we have created for ourselves regarding human sexuality.

Let me spell out my thesis for this article. First, I suggest that an analysis of the implicit theological assumptions regarding sexuality in most churches reveals that we are theologically preoccupied with the hedonic aspects of sex. More specifically, these assumptions reveal that we are ambivalent about sex due to its hedonic content. We find the hedonic aspects of sex spiritually worrisome, and thus attempt to manage its pleasures. Second, I will argue that in most churches this hedonic ambivalence is setting up the conversation regarding sex in problematic ways. Finally, I’ll conclude with a suggestion as to how these conversations might be reconfigured to facilitate more fruitful theological conversation and reflection.

### **SYMPTOMS OF HEDONIC AMBIVALENCE**

What follows is a piece of psycho-theological descriptive work. I will deploy a variety of observations as evidence for pervasive, but largely implicit, hedonic ambivalence in churches regarding sexuality. Most people would not overtly claim that their spiritual conversations regarding sex indicate a dominant concern about managing the hedonic allures of sex. But if we look closely, carefully and systematically we find evidence for just such a theological preoccupation. And this may be a preoccupation that is confusing matters, theologically speaking, in the church. A complete defense of this position would require more space than I have here, so a few illustrations will have to suffice.

#### *An ancient observation*

Much of our biblical teaching regarding sexuality comes from 1 Corinthians 6.12—7.16. One of the striking features of this passage is how the Corinthian believers represent two poles of a continuum regarding hedonic attitudes toward sex. On the one hand, some believers manifest hedonic indulgence, leading Paul to condemn their sexual immorality (6.12–20). Then, in a very rapid transition, we see another

4. The attributions behind this “functional binary” are called dose insensitivity and negativity dominance. See Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, and Clark R. McCauley, “Disgust,” *Handbook of Emotions, Second Edition*, eds. Michael Lewis and Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 637-653.

5. By “implicit” psychologists are speaking of largely tacit assumptions that guide behavior and attitudes. These tacit assumptions can be more or less easily articulated. Regardless, implicit attitudes or beliefs are powerful guides to behavior. For a modern treatment of implicit psychology see Timothy D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004). The relevant point for this conversation is that implicit attitudes and associations are associative and heuristic in nature rather than propositional and logical. That is, implicit attitudes need not, and usually do not, demonstrate logical consistency. Further, implicit attitudes can clash sharply with explicit/overt attitudes and beliefs. For example, theologically we might claim overtly that a category is “good” while at the implicit level we associate the category as “bad.” Conversations about sex in churches are good examples of this implicit/explicit clash.

group attempting to distance themselves from the hedonic pleasures of sex (7.1). The point I wish to illustrate is that, given that sex is one of the most pleasurable of human experiences, its hedonic allure can lead to overindulgence. This facet of sex prompts many spiritually minded persons to think it wise to ban or marginalize the pleasures of sex. This approach/avoidance conflict is the fingerprint of psychological ambivalence. Given that we find psychological ambivalence and cognitive dissonance uncomfortable, we often swing to one pole or the other to resolve the tension.<sup>6</sup> We see this manifested in the Corinthian church as well as in our own churches.

### *Displacing pleasure*

Another symptom of hedonic ambivalence is to note the way that sexual pleasure (associated with orgasm) is marginalized in many theological formulations describing “holy sex.” More specifically, many theological recommendations regarding sex attempt to displace sexual pleasure as the terminal goal of the sex act. This marginalization of the pleasure of orgasm is symptomatic of hedonic ambivalence. Sex is considered to be problematic when its goal is straightforwardly hedonic. A few examples will illustrate this point.

In the Catholic tradition the purpose of intercourse is procreation. Hence, bans and concerns about the use of birth control. It should be obvious that these worries are concerned with displacing pleasure as the goal of sex. Sex for the sake of pleasure (intercourse with birth control) is considered suspect. Sexual pleasure is allowed but it is displaced by a different terminal goal: procreation. Pleasure should be incidental to the sex act.

Protestant traditions have fewer restrictions regarding birth control, but even in these traditions pleasure is marginalized and made incidental. For Protestants, the terminal goal of sex is considered to be relationship or intimacy. Similar to the Catholic formulation, holy sex for Protestants must be only incidentally hedonic. As evidence for this analysis, witness the need for counselors to encourage soon-to-be married Christian couples to “enjoy sex,” a directive that must appear bizarre to secular couples. The encouragement to “enjoy sex” presupposes a background assumption that godly sex should seek to downplay or marginalize its hedonic content.

### *Terminal pleasure and autoeroticism*

Hedonic ambivalence is also observed in mixed feelings regarding autoeroticism, or masturbation. Some Christian traditions prohibit the behavior. Other traditions don't know what to do with the behavior, and thus pass over the topic in silence. This silence is troublesome in that autoeroticism is the most frequent sexual activity we humans engage in.<sup>7</sup> My point here is not to render a moral verdict on autoerotic activity, but to examine the assumptions behind the warrants for prohibiting the activity. A common warrant is to cite the “pointlessness” of autoeroticism. The assumption here is that we wish to see sexual climax as having a “point,” a goal. Masturbation clearly has a goal—the achievement of pleasure—but this is deemed unsatisfactory and spiritually problematic. As noted above, pleasure should not be the terminal goal of the sex act.

### *Pleasure asymmetries as non-relational sex*

Another example of hedonic ambivalence, to speak much more candidly, regards Christian ambivalence toward anal or oral sex, even within the marital context. This ambivalence is by no means universal, but it does exist on a wide scale. It could be argued that the concerns over these forms of sex have mainly to do with issues of biological “naturalness.” I grant that this may be the dominant concern. But I also believe hedonic ambivalence is also implicated. Specifically, these forms of sex are often performed in a hedonically asymmetrical manner where only one person will achieve climax during the activity. This asymmetry clearly

6. For the classic account of this phenomenon see Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).

7. Mary B. Oliver and Janet S. Hyde, “Gender differences in sexuality: A meta-analysis,” *Psychological Bulletin* 114 (1993): 29-51.

situates hedonic pleasure (for one person) as the terminal goal of the activity. It is this asymmetry that is implicated when people tell adolescent girls that performing oral sex is demeaning to them. That is, oral sex is viewed as non-relational sex; it is something you “perform on” a person. Given that relationality is implicitly assumed to be the terminal goal of holy sex, anything that appears to undermine that relationality is spiritually dubious. Once again we see the pattern: concerns about hedonically focused forms of sex, even within the marital context.

Incidentally, these concerns over the asymmetry of oral or anal sex are what lead many persons to view homosexual sex as excessively hedonic and non-relational. Given that homosexual sex is largely limited to these activities, the hedonic aspects of sex are highlighted. I recall a conversation in which I was approached by a professor of sociology who asked me the following question, “You are a psychologist. Is it true that homosexual sex is just about the sex?” My response: “I don’t know. But it seems like most of the heterosexual sex in the world is just about the sex.” What was going on, at the implicit theological level, with the question from the sociology professor? The phrase “just about the sex” highlights a concern about hedonics as the terminal goal of the sex act. As noted, the frequently occurring pleasure asymmetries in homosexual sex highlight the hedonics, leading to the conclusion that homosexual sex is “just about the sex”: sex that is non-relational, non-intimate and aimed mainly at physical gratification. In short, homosexual sex is perceived as carnal rather than as spiritual due to its perceived emphasis on hedonic gratification. Note the implicit theology at work here: pleasurable sex is carnal and non-spiritual sex.

(Please note that I offer these observations not to comment on moral issues but to illuminate theological assumptions. However, beyond the purposes of this paper, this analysis is worth paying attention to for other, more important, reasons. Specifically, if the Christian community, wittingly or unwittingly, communicates to the homosexual population that their sexual lives are perceived as non-relational and excessively hedonic, we are communicating a message that is inherently dehumanizing. And this communication, wittingly or unwittingly, is contrary to the Christian witness.)

To conclude and return to the point of this section, moral issues aside, there exists in some quarters of the Christian community lingering ambivalence about certain sexual practices such as oral or anal sex, even within the marital bond. The pleasure asymmetries involved in these sexual activities again suggest that hedonic ambivalence (sex for the sake of pleasure) is driving concerns about the relative “spirituality” and acceptability of various sex acts.

### *A hedonic oddity*

When people discuss sex in church setting, particularly with young people, they are often at pains to declare that human sexuality is a gift from God. That is, sex is not a bad thing, it’s a good thing. The reason this message is often stressed is to counterbalance the strong taboos erected around premarital sex. The fear is that if these taboos are left unmitigated, God (and the church by association) will appear to be anti-hedonic and puritanical (as H.L. Mencken quipped, the definition of Puritanism is “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy”). To avoid this association—God is against us enjoying ourselves—in the face of strong prohibitions, the formulation that “sex is a good thing, a gift” is deployed as counterweight.

The difficulty with overtly deploying this formulation—that sex is indeed a hedonic good—is that sex is clearly not treated as a typical hedonic good. Generally, we assume that moderation is the universal panacea for potential hedonic pitfalls. All hedonic outlets, except sexuality, can be spiritually managed via Aristotle’s golden mean: All things in moderation. Sexuality is different. We don’t speak of or teach “sexual moderation.” This is a striking exception to a moral rule governing all other hedonic categories. For example, food, drink and shopping can be indulged, but in moderation. But not sex. In sum, sex is touted as a hedonic good but then treated differently from all other hedonic gifts. Sex may be declared a gift, but it is a hedonic oddity. This oddity only exacerbates the ambivalence surrounding sex.

*Summary*

To conclude this section, I hope I've given sufficient evidence that hedonic ambivalence is rumbling beneath many of our conversations about sexuality. Our implicit theology of sex tells us that the hedonic aspects of sex are what make it problematic. Thus, spiritual sex must seek to marginalize the hedonic goals of sex. Anything that places hedonic gratification as the terminal goal of sex (e.g., sex with birth control, masturbation, casual sex, oral sex) is viewed as spiritually dubious, if not immoral.

**A MODEST PROPOSAL: HARM OVER HEDONICS**

The sum of the matter is this. It appears that the theological conversation regarding sex in most churches is implicitly preoccupied with hedonic ambivalence.<sup>8</sup> This has caused many churches to communicate a very mixed message about sex. The outcome is to be expected: if mixed, confusing and conflicting messages proliferate in our churches, we cannot be surprised if many congregants hold to confused and conflicting belief systems regarding this very important facet of human life.

How to proceed from here? I want to be cautious as my training does not equip me to make any strong ecclesial or theological recommendations. However, in an effort to move the conversation in fruitful directions, I would like to offer a modest proposal. In doing so I hope to draw other voices into this conversation.

To begin, obviously, I am going to suggest that we displace hedonic issues from the center of the conversation regarding sex. As I hope I've demonstrated, our hedonic ambivalence makes this starting place problematic. Further, the hedonic focus tends to only confuse audiences regarding God's endorsement and support of bodily pleasure.

This displacement of hedonic concerns can be accomplished by locating the conversation around a different set of issues and guiding principles. My recommendation is that, rather than centering on hedonics, our conversations about sex should focus on issues of harm and violence. Let me sketch out how I see these conversations proceeding.

When we look at how God attempts to regulate and manage the human sexual drive, the centerpiece of his intervention is binding sexual activity to a strong covenant bond. We may ask, why? Does this intervention on God's part inform us about his concerns and worries about human sexual activity?

Clues come to us when we note that two of the Ten Commandments are explicitly focused on managing sexual relationships: "Do not commit adultery" and "Do not covet your neighbor's wife." If we reflect on God's goals in the Ten Commandments we grasp that God is calling out and creating a new kind of community. This suggests that God's main concerns regarding human sexuality are more sociological than hedonic. That is, God's concerns over sexual activity appear to be less concerned with the fact that sex is pleasurable, and more to do with issues involving the violation of social contracts (Do not commit adultery) and the reduction of sexual rivalry (Do not covet your neighbor's wife). This latter may need some explanation. Suffice it to say that sexual jealousy and rivalry are leading causes of domestic violence as well as being strongly implicated in homicidal ideation.<sup>9</sup> Sex is sociologically volatile, a potential powder keg in human relations. Thus, it seems reasonable for God to step in and manage the situation. We find, then, that God's interests in binding sex to the marital bond has less to do with God's concerns over pleasure and more about the reduction of social tensions.

In short, sex is deeply implicated in the etiology of harm and violence. This sociological perspective can also be scaled down for application on the personal scale. Specifically, in the sex act humans are at their

8. This is only a descriptive assessment. The reasons why we are hedonically ambivalent (an explanatory assessment) I have left unspecified, as this would be a treatise unto itself.

9. For research into the links between sexuality and violence, see David Buss, *The Murderer Next Door: Why the Mind Is Designed to Kill* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2006).

most vulnerable—physically, emotionally and relationally. Thus, sexual/relational violations (i.e., cheating, infidelity, “using”) represent, outside of murder, one of the greatest acts of harm we can commit against another human soul. As the psychologist Steven Pinker has recently written, “Sex has high stakes, including exploitation, disease, illegitimacy, incest, jealousy, spousal abuse, cuckoldry, desertion, feuding, child abuse, and rape.”<sup>10</sup> Harm done in this context can result in permanent psychic scars that can drastically alter self-concept and, thus, spiritual development. Lives can be ruined in ways that go beyond all words. Thus, God’s concerns about restricting sex to marriage may have less to do with barring us from a “forbidden fruit” (the hedonic concern) and more to do with God’s reticence to prematurely entrust us with the caretaking of another human heart. We must be deemed worthy of this task. Thus, “waiting” to have sexual relations until marriage is not the result of God asking us to arbitrarily suppress hedonic urges because God is a prude. Rather, we “wait” because we are undergoing a test of character, a maturing process, to determine if we are, in fact, worthy to be the caretaker of a human heart.

I find this reframing of the conversation useful on a number of levels. First, we are able to communicate God’s feelings regarding human sexuality in clear, unambiguous terms. God’s concerns are about harm. By displacing the hedonic focus, worries that we are representing God as a prude are negated. Second, this perspective allows us to create a more coherent and comprehensive theology where sexuality is treated identically as other “sins.” In the hedonic conversation, as we’ve seen, sex keeps getting treated differently, as a class unto itself. In this new framework, sex isn’t set aside as a different category, as a different or special conversation. Rather, sex is now spoken of constantly in the church whenever we speak of failures of love and acts of harm. When we speak of gossip, or materialism, or failures of kindness, sexual issues should be right there in thick of the list, every time that list is presented. We hurt each other with sex. And we can hate each other because of sex. So when it comes to sex, maybe it is this potential for harm, and not the fact that sex is fun, which concerns God most of all.

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10. Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought: Language As a Window Into Human Nature* (New York, NY: Viking, 2007), p. 347.