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James Boyd

Denison University

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Sexuality: Confronting Religion's Taboo

James Boyd

Recently, sexuality in America has taken our society by storm. In a culture where selling more than the other guy drives the market economy, the attitude of “sex sells” has been at the forefront of marketing strategies. Media voices such as magazines, television, movies and music fill their products with images of the ideal sexual form. The American culture is embracing this movement toward freedom of sexual expression. In addition, views of sexuality are expanding from traditional views toward a broader range of acceptance. For instance, there is an increasing awareness of homosexuality. Television shows and ads frequently focus on non-heterosexual relationships. Among these surges of sexuality, though, religion still treats the subject as taboo. When people try to combine their sexuality with their spirituality, they often become confused about correct actions. Being loyal to spirituality while at the same time enjoying sexuality creates a tension in many people’s lives.

Our sexuality is a part of who we are as individuals and as a community. It is the ultimate way to express love for one another. In analyzing three books, four authors write about ways to embrace our sexuality and incorporate religion into our daily decisions of sexual ethics. They offer their views on the right way to handle sexuality in terms of helpful religious ideals. They also look into the structures of religion that have fueled many of the problems associated with misuse of sexuality. Religion has been, and can be, an important factor in forming many of society’s opinions about sexual behavior. These authors realize this extremely important point. Therefore, they contribute important discussions on how religion and sexuality come together to help change our view of our sexuality and form our sexual ethics. I first plan to discuss how these authors identify the specific problems that surround sexuality and social relations. Their ideas range from addressing the adherence to specific religious doctrine to attempts to break down social constructs of dominant relationships. They attend to the major issues a Christian must consider. Should a Christian worry about following the rules of the Bible, or should he or she be more concerned with creating a better world by reconstructive change?

In his book Sex for Christians, Lewis B. Smedes describes our sexuality as encompassing desires for physical satisfaction, for an intimate involvement with someone else, and for self-knowledge. Sometimes people treat sexuality as sinful lust, which causes them to look negatively at their sexuality. Instead, we must understand that “our life is body-life” (15). We are just as much physical beings as we are spiritual beings. Our sexuality is our desire to be in communion with another person. “A single person is the image of God; but he is God’s image only when he personally relates in love to others” (20). Driving to love others is the closest way to be like God. Therefore, we must embrace our sexuality. In his book Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality, Marvin M. Ellison defines sexuality not only as genital sex, but also as our embodied capacity for intimate connection. Erotic desire seeks a physical, emotional, and spiritual embrace of others, the world, and God, the sacred source of life (2). Sexuality is a mode of communication that helps us move beyond ourselves towards others. As Beverly Harrison says, “all our relation to others, to God, to neighbor, to cosmos, [are] mediated through our bodies, which are the locus of our perception and knowledge of the world” (79). Sexuality provides us with creative energy and joy for life.

Smedes writes his book for a Christian audience. Therefore, his goal is to provide Christians with a way to use their sexuality in a positive way in the midst of a sexual revolution. His ethic deals with one specific use for sexual intercourse, coming into a deep relationship with another person in marriage. Other uses of sexual intercourse are considered sinful sexual acts. Smedes analyzes sexuality with the Bible and reality, as we discern them, as the only sources of authority for his ethics. He believes that the Bible holds a basis for a morality toward sexuality that will help our culture use sexuality the way God intended. Therefore, he supports his ideas of morally correct decisions about sexuality with ideas and examples from Scripture.

Ellison does not think that religion should only play the role of providing an individual with an ethic of how to act upon sexuality. He thinks religion should help create a sexual ethic that promotes justice throughout the social world. He is a white, middle class, gay, single parent with a female teenager. He is writing as a Christian ethicist for, among other people, all oppressed groups, namely those who are sexually oppressed. Ellison does not see the problem of increasing sexuality in our society as pertaining to personal morals. Rather, the prob-
lem lies in the distorted views of sexuality. Distorted views are caused by things such as continuing Christian traditions, general Western sex-negativity, patriarchal structures, and the rapid social change of the sex revolution. These views include negative attitudes toward sex, the human body, women and other marginalized people. This is often seen in the porn industry, sexual assault/abuse, anti-gay/anti-lesbian violence, and the spread of STDs (16). Our society has had a tendency to glorify domination in relationships. The more power one has over others, the more successful a person he or she is. Ellison’s goal is creating an ethic that eroticizes justice. Justice is the ongoing, never-ending journey to remake a community by strengthening relationships within the community and correcting harm towards others. The desire for and the persistence of domination in our relationships are at the root of much of the abuse and violence in society today.

In the book Casting Stones: Prostitution and Liberation in Asia and the United States, authors Rita Nakashima Brock and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite focus on a more specific problem having to do with the misuse and abuse of sex and our sexuality. Both women are feminist activists working within the Christian tradition. They define prostitution throughout the world in its many forms. They spend a great deal of time identifying the cultural influences that lead to a male-dominated society and world militarism. “The sex industry is a massive symptom of deeper societal problems” (9). Religion is seen as a major influence to the domination of men in our society today. This male dominated society is turning a blind eye to the amount of abuse girls/women are receiving from forced prostitution. They refer to prostitution as the sex industry. The sex industry, or sex work, comes in many different forms, and is prevalent throughout the world. They describe the sex industry as “the institutionalized sexual use, by the more powerful members of male-dominant societies, of the less powerful. This use involves financial transaction focused on the sexual use itself” (15). In most cases, prostitution is not voluntary by the women. They are forced into the sex industry by either male-dominant institutions or oppressive economic institutions. Brock and Thistlethwaite provide a vivid picture of the types of problems with prostitution that religion has to address in our culture today.

Smedes wants to help guide Christians through a confusing time of an increasingly sexual culture. Smedes derives a set of three normative patterns of sexuality from the Bible that provide the framework for the ideal use of sexuality for a Christian. These norms are the intentions that God has for sexuality. The first normative pattern of sexuality is that sexuality should be woven into the relationship. These are “not moral rules for everyone, but [simply] rules that tell us how far to go and when to stop” (235) within our own relationship.

The second normative pattern is that sexuality is meant to encourage us toward a deep, personal relationship with another person. The goal of the relationship should be a life-union with the other person. This norm is to prevent people from engaging in sexual activity as a self-centered act to relieve tension and use the other person as a sex machine (29). On the way towards developing a relationship that results in life-union, a couple may use “responsible petting” (129). This means using self-control when petting so a couple does not “lose control and plunge mindlessly into sexual intercourse” (129). The intensity of the petting should depend upon the personal involvement and commitment of the couple. Smedes does not necessarily advocate petting, but he realizes that a couple is going to do it. Thus, he provides us with these guidelines. Sexual intercourse, on the other hand, should be reserved until after the couple is in a life-union. This life-union is signified by marriage.

The third normative pattern of sexuality is that sexuality is meant to be “a heterosexual union of committed love” (29). Smedes originally feels that heterosexual unions were what God fully intended. Smedes thinks homosexuality is neither normal nor a self-chosen perversion (50). He believes that homosexuality is somewhat of a condition, though he recognizes he does not know the source of the condition. He also originally felt that a homosexual person has to confront his or her condition. The person “must resist the temptation to say: ‘This is my nature so it is normal for me’” (55). Thus a person must hope for and seek change. If that is not possible, he or she should consider celibacy. Smedes later modifies what he says in this section of the book with a section written after the original publishing. In his “Second Thoughts,” Smedes says he believes that homosexual people who cannot practice celibacy should be able to morally involve themselves in a monogamous relationship with another person. Instead of confronting the condition of homosexuality, the person must try to live as morally as possible within their tragedy, just as other people must live...
homosexuality is a condition and is unnatural. Therefore, the question remains whether the Bible can be considered the ultimate authority in coming to conclusions about orientations such as homosexuality.

Smedes believes the message in the Bible can be applied to correct the wrong actions people commit today concerning their sexuality. Ellison moves beyond this approach. He does not look to the Bible as a source of ultimate authority. He states that the cultural crisis about sexuality is complicated by the absence of a reliable moral tradition to guide our inquiry (5). The only way to keep moral traditions alive and working is by an ongoing process of self-criticism and reconstruction (5). Historically, religion, namely Christianity, has played a major role with shaping our understanding of sexuality and of proper relationships with others. Unfortunately, Christianity has traditionally had a negative, patriarchal tone about sexuality. “The moral problematic about sexuality in this culture is that racist patriarchy annexes body pleasure and attaches it to injustice” (76). The Christian response to sexuality has been that sex is seen as evil and urges must be oppressed unless for procreative purposes. Thus, sex is used as a tool for control and power in humanity. The “Elvira Syndrome” happened around the third or fourth century during the rule of Constantine. There was a shift in the church from prophetic tendencies toward an attitude in which “the hierarchy asserted power by controlling the sexual behavior of believers and creating a heightened clerical image for itself” (61). This imperial approach operates on three assumptions. First, moral truth about sexuality is located in our past within a tradition that was defined by patriarchal authority. Second, theological discourse about the truth arrives independently of our bodily experience. This is where religion is said to hold the truth independently of our body-selves. And third, religious elites claim they offer truth not involved in self-interest, while in fact the opposite is true (61-62). They use the support of God to serve their own interests.

Brock and Thistlethwaite also see a problem in the traditional religious beliefs of both Christianity and Buddhism. Both Christian and Buddhist roots lie in male-dominant military empires of the first millennium BCE. They “project earthbound sexuality onto women and classify women according to the types of sexual relationships they are to have with men, who represent spiritually more transcendent, less fleshbound existence” (82). Therefore, the woman is categorized as anti-spiritual. “Women exemplified the subordinate world, the natural world of menstruation, birth, sex, pleasure, desire, and sickness, and the temptations of the flesh that blinded men to spiritual truth” (90). The woman
then becomes a symbol for the man to act out ideas about his existence as potent and powerful. As these religions blossomed during the first millennium, they placed a growing emphasis on the separation of their spirituality from the physical world of the flesh. These religions did promote compassion, righteousness, self-control and virtue. Yet, at the same time they “convey negative attitudes about women’s sexuality and bodies and expect women to be subordinate to male authority” (84). Also, the history of these religions shows that there was a shift in thinking that “strains toward transcendence” (86). This thinking was the idea that religious forces could separate one from the mundane cycles of life toward salvation. The idea of salvation gave people the impression that pain and suffering in this life did matter, because there was a better life waiting for them after they died. This often helped condone the activities of oppressors in forming slave and peasant institutions.

These traditional patterns of religion have contributed to forming a dominant masculine culture that has significant consequences for its members. First, our culture fails to notice or listen to those who are dominated by elite men. Therefore, the marginalized are prone to just accept the normalcy of their domination. Next, men and boys are easily convinced that what is good for them is also beneficial for social subordinates. Also, privileged men lack accurate knowledge about women, children and non-dominant men whom they dismiss as other. Often elite men do not care to know about these people because they feel above them. Brock and Thistlethwaite describe a male-dominated society as hypermasculinity. This is a “cultivation of exaggerated forms of masculinity that especially emphasize aspects of dominance, control, and strength” (15).

When a man enters into a situation where he loses his identity and becomes part of a group that advocates control over the body, he is in a hypermasculine culture. This is often seen in the military, monastic institutions, business guilds, athletic teams, men’s clubs, and fraternal organizations (92).

One of the most pervasive hypermasculine cultures, according to Brock and Thistlethwaite, is the military. Young men are taken from their normal social locations and isolated in a new environment. The new environment is usually very stressful and lonely. Here these men are taught protection, dominance, and control, while working in a system based on status hierarchies. These young men usually have underdeveloped emotional and social skills. Therefore these men turn to a relationship with a prostitute either to satisfy a need for physical tenderness or to assert their dominance. These actions are concealed by strategies of dissociation. For example, the man separates women into two distinct classes.

One class is the woman back home for whom he is risking his life to protect. The other is the promiscuous whore whom the soldier exploits and holds in contempt (77). If he is protecting the woman back home, then he dissociates himself from the act of exploiting and abusing the other woman. These patterns of dissociation also correlate to the “strains toward transcendence” of religion. Both are ways to justify wrong actions toward other people. This is not the only connection between religion and warfare. A war often has religious undertones that give the impression that God is for the war and rooting for one side. This is often a strategy of a country to get its population’s support.

The problem sexuality is facing is far more complex than just immoral actions. The social constructions of the way our society enters into relationship with each other are standing behind our actions. Unfortunately, up to this point, as has been indicated, religion has only contributed to these harmful patterns of social relationship. If our religious traditions have been contributing to these negative patterns of dominance, what needs to be done? Ellison says we need to work toward a liberating ethic of sexual justice. For this to occur there needs to be a reconstruction that focuses on the voice of the marginalized. He provides us three assumptions of a liberating ethic that help move toward sexual justice and work against the imperial approach to an ethic. First, moral truth is constantly changing as our community evolves. Moral truths are always limited to the context in which they are given. Therefore, truths that are formulated in the past, such as the Biblical messages, are limited to and partial to their social situation (62). The second affirms that applying truths from the past is a dynamic process. “A responsible reading of the past requires an awareness of the diversity of voices within the tradition itself, a critical examination of their strengths and weaknesses, and an ongoing dialogue between past and present” (62). And third, there is no source of moral insight that has authority over being scrutinized for its effects on the lives of women and marginalized men. A source of authority becomes valuable for us if it works toward justice for all people (63). Therefore, parts of the Bible that enforce the subservient nature of women must be involved in a dialogue of change. Ellison’s hope is that Christians “locate ourselves as struggling inside and with the tradition. Our hope is that we may disarm its oppressiveness, reshape it in positive directions, and secure a liberating spiritual home that welcomes our sexualities and therefore welcomes us” (65).

In the attempt to move away from an imperial approach to interpreting an ethic of the tradition and to move towards an ethic that eroticizes justice, Christianity must move from apology to reconstruction. An apologetic stance
provides justification for the fallacies of the tradition instead of working to create a new interpretation of the tradition. The reconstructive view of a Christian ethic must interpret the Bible with a dynamic intention towards today's social context. Ellison believes that tradition and scripture are devices used by the dominant social elite to sustain existing power structures. Therefore, a liberating ethic must have two main components. First, it must have a "hermeneutics of suspicion." This is approaching the text with the suspicion that it was written for a different social context and for patriarchal functions (71). Second, it must have a "hermeneutics of remembrance." This is approaching the text with the desire to extract the stories and messages of liberation within the Bible (71).

After analyzing the Christian tradition and identifying the dangers of power structures, there now must be an application of these new views toward creating a sexual ethic. This sexual ethic must move away from the comfort people feel by being involved in an unequal power relationship. The desire for power in relationships must be eliminated. "The danger lies in the misuse of power against another" (79). Therefore, to renew Christian sexual ethics we must invite people into a process of unlearning the culturally supported desire for power. Also, we must teach the value of mutuality in our relationships and help people recognize that we are all interdependent of each other in our connections. In addition, we need to close the gap between church teachings and real life experiences. The conventional religious code has pushed us away from incorporating our experiences with our sexual morality (78). Ignoring the sexual revolution in religious discussion will only cause a further distancing of religious messages from our sexual reality. Our discussions must correlate with our lives outside of the church. This all has to be done to move toward reconstruction. There must be values behind a sexual ethic that affirms our sexuality and uses erotic power as a moral resource. These values are that our bodies are good, that we need freedom from the control of others to use our bodies as we wish, and that we should enter into completely mutual relationships with one another (82-83). When these values are the basis for our sexual ethics, we can then enter into an ethic that eroticizes justice. The final component of this sexual ethic of justice is reclaiming a moral vision and personal courage. We must commit ourselves to the creation of a radical new world where everybody's beauty is loved (91). We must have the courage to create a world that eliminates sexism, racism, poverty, and any other mode of domination. It is our courage that drives us to create a change.

Brock and Thistlethwaite also want to work toward the liberation of oppressed people, particularly prostitutes. Their liberation focuses on structures of power and difference in our male-dominant society just as Ellison does. They see the problem of sexual abuse through prostitution coming from the same social constructions that support unjust power relationships in other areas of life. Thus, we must deconstruct these power-based constructions. They have focused their study of prostitution on the actual experiences of women and girls oppressed by it. Like Ellison, they believe that a "life-giving theology does not emerge primarily from doctrine but from a social analysis of human experience" (214). The first step in looking at the experience of the prostitute is to change our view of the woman who is in prostitution. A change in view helps "the examination of religion and prostitution by shifting the weight of our constructive reflection away from the dominant public discourse, which sees prostitutes as 'immoral,' to the positive moral agency they often exercise under conditions of immense oppression" (226). A majority of prostitutes are forced into prostitution, and we must move away from considering these prostitutes dirty or sinful. Also, we need to incorporate the erotic into our discussion about prostitution. The erotic encourages us toward being present and whole in the world and with other people (231). "Hence, to experience the erotic is to know that liberation from oppression is not the same as healing and wholeness, but that the two are mutually interdependent processes" (232). As liberation begins, so does the healing.

Although Christianity and Buddhism hold a major role in contributing to the distortions that spawned the sex industry, these religions also contain important responses for helping. They hold a major role in distributing the values of grace and compassion. Since we are social beings, the space for suspicion and critique of social construction provided by these religions is crucial for deconstruction. Brock and Thistlethwaite advocate being truer to the grace and compassion embodied within our religious traditions. First, through compassion the people in power must realize something is totally wrong. This must lead to repentance—a major step in change. "Repentance in a social sense comes when we realize how we have fought to 'get ahead' to protect our own power and privilege at the expense of others" (273). Understanding must also come from those who are oppressed. They must understand their oppression before they can act against it. The grace and compassion of the community must let prostitutes know they are not "the icon of sinfulness" (286) in our society. Instead, they are the ones who need to be empowered to work against their oppression. Grace and compassion help us move toward an attitude that we are all human. It is through a community understanding, and thus, community
movements, that we can reconstruct our ideal about social and sexual injustices such as prostitution.

All authors recognize the importance of changing our views of sexuality. Religion must be at the front of the charge to help this change. Concepts such as compassion, justice, self-sacrificing love, and mutuality must become the basis for our religious analyses of our sexuality. Religion has focused too much on doctrine, and has smothered virtues with rules and strategies that enforce a male-dominant society. Smedes recognizes patterns of male domination and sees the Biblical influences that help support it. Yet he only dismisses it as a sexual distortion of "the sexual putdown" (37-38). Rather, he focuses on the sexual life of the individual Christian. Is this a remedy for the misuse of sexuality? Ellison, Brock, and Thistlethwaite would think not. They believe the problems arising in our sexuality are deep rooted in the very religion Smedes is trying to work with. Ellison would consider Smedes an apologetic, only offering reasons for sexual distortions instead of working to change them. Smedes' view may be helpful for Christians entering into a relationship, but that is where his ethic stops. The question every Christian must ask is what are his or her concerns? Should a Christian worry about justice within humanity, or following the rules that God has set forth in the Bible? The other authors believe that following the guidelines set forth in the Bible is a contributing factor to the very societal conditions that cause abuse of our sexuality. Our concentration must be on liberation of the marginalized. This has to be done by working within the traditional religious values, while working beyond the traditional patriarchal patterns. It is the reconstruction of our society, based on the values within religion, that will help our society view our sexuality, and thus, create an effective sexual ethic during an increasingly sexual time.