

Literature

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→ *Charismatic Movement, Communication, Language, Mission, Oral Tradition, Televangelism, Theology*

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Sexuality

An Approximation: Sexuality in Myth

1. The relationships between sexuality and religion appear on many levels, and are reciprocal. On the one side, religions have a powerful effect on the meaning of sexuality and gender roles in a society (→ Gender Stereotypes), and on the other, sexuality is a key theme in religious systems of interpretation. Especially, the myths of the various religions illustrate the complex meaning of sexuality as a frontier between 'nature' and 'culture,' and their close connection with border regions of human experience, such as the appearance of life and creativity, the transient, and death, but also areas such as power and governance, dependency and love. A creation myth from Japan can illustrate these complex associations.

The mythological first couple, Izanagi and his sister and bride Izanami, carry out a commission attached to their duty to mold the earth by inventing a wedding ritual and the first sexual act. A 'leech child' results from this act however, who is consigned to death in the sea. According to an oracle of the gods, Izanami is responsible for this failure, since it is she who first spoke at the ritual. A second attempt—now the husband is the first to speak—results in the birth of the shimmering world of the Japanese isles, and the emergence of other gods. At the birth of the God of Fire, Izanami dies, and from the excrement, vomit, and tears of her husband, new deities emerge. An encounter with the underworld follows, with death and corruption, and a series of sexual encounters, which, in their true identity as struggles for power over divine and human governance, actually lead to the emergence of culture, and to the first race of Emperors.

Levels of the Relation between Sexuality and Religion

Sexuality as Concept and as Pattern of Explanation

2. a) Sexuality is not a 'phenomenon on its own,' or 'object in itself.' Rather, its meaning and importance emerge only in the co-efficiency of physiological 'conditioning,' individual experience and practice, societal institutions, and cultural and religious conceptualizations. Even the concept of *sexuality*, and its current meaning, first appeared only in the Western culture of the nineteenth century. Religions are concerned in this process somewhat as models of interpretation and bestowal of meaning, as they apply sexuality as a pattern of explanation. At the same time, of course, they integrate the meaning of sexuality into these models. Thus, many myths describe the emergence of the world in sexual metaphors, or as sexual relations among

gods (→ Cosmology/Cosmogony). ‘Duality,’ and the destruction of a ‘paradiacal oneness,’ is often explained by a sexual transgression on the part of the human being (→ Dualism).

b) By way of exemplars (‘idealization’), or dreadful presentations (‘demonization’), religion possesses a great deal of influence on imaginary images of gender and role-orderings. Insofar, for example, as abstract dualisms such as → ‘body’ and ‘spirit’ are transferred to real men and women, or certain behaviors are attributed to them as essential features, pictures of gender roles, gender relations, and gender differences firmly inscribe themselves, and become elements of stereotyped world-images. Often it is mythical female images, such as Pandora (→ Prometheus) or Eve, who bring death and unhappiness into the world. Such images—such as that of Izanami, in the case above cited—often become bases for attempted religious justifications of woman’s subordinate position in society, and thereby deeply affect the construction of rule, government, and social differences.

*The Category ‘Gender’
between Myth and
Science*

In European culture, one of the agents of the undermining of the concept of a ‘God-willed’ or ‘natural’ polarity of the sexes was the new sexual science arising about 1900 (Richard Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia sexualis*, 1886; Magnus Hirschfeld’s battle against the criminalization of homosexual practice). It began to distinguish biological gender from individual gender-identity. Then came the feminism of the 1970s, and today many research disciplines include the category of gender in their thinking. Since the 1980s, a distinction has been invoked between (biological) sex and (social) gender. As the relation between sex and gender becomes defined, it is becoming the object of discussion, and is variously adjudged (Butler 1990; Irigaray 1993).

c) Sexuality can be an element of the molding of → cults, and key for the distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane.’ Through a ritualization of the sexual, norms are observed in society, and rendered subject to control, whether sexual acts are ‘sanctified’ (‘Holy Matrimony,’ Gk. *hieros gamos*, ritual sexual intercourse, sacred → prostitution), and sex symbols are venerated (e.g., *yoni/linga* cult in Hinduism, veneration of symbolical sexual parts), or, just the other way around, sexuality is excluded from cultic acts (e.g. prescription of virginity or celibacy for religious specialists such as priestesses and priests). In the orgiastic experience of ‘enjoying life to the full’ at Carnival, and in a religious festival culture, sexuality, and other drives potentially dangerous for society (aggression, lust; → Emotions/Feelings), receive, as it were, a legitimate place.

Cultic rules, sanctions, and taboos are closely connected with the idea of → body and sexuality, conveyed as the former are by conceptualizations of → purity. Who may take part in a given function, and who may not, as well as who is invested with capacity and competency for cult, is often dependent on bodily condition or gender. Taboos are often related to body fluids (blood, semen), and to bodily indications of sexuality such as pregnancy, → birth, menstruation, or defilement by semen; in certain cases they may occasion (temporary) exclusion from cult or from gender-specific rituals.

The extent to which competency for cult becomes dependent on gender, depends on the gender roles that have validity at a given moment. Cult can be the place for crossing the boundaries of the gender role (shamanic transvestitism; → Gender Stereotypes). Men and women alike may be the principal characters in cultic celebration (e.g. priestesses, prophetesses, healers), take on certain tasks, or can be regarded as the only person capable



Founded in 1991, the large Christian organization 'Promise Keepers' has won hundreds of thousands of members in the United States. With their motto, "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13), the 'task to change the world' challenges men to take over the leadership role in family and society, and as "followers of hero Jesus Christ" to battle against the collapse of modern society. Among their basic premises are: "spiritual, moral, and sexual integrity," "dedication to marriage and family," "obedience to the commandment of love, and the missionary commandment." In their emotion-laden ideal of friendship, and their display of masculinity in the style of Hell's Angels (which helps to differentiate them from homoerotic elements) the historical tradition of the Crusades and the 'Holy Warriors' marches on.

of taking the leading role in a cult. Gender-specific presidencies in religious cult—one thinks of the office of bishop or pope in the Catholic Church—by way of esteem, public authority, and monopoly of interpretation, have a powerful effect on the hierarchization of genders.

d) Religions exert direct influence on the social role of sexuality by way of concrete directives, injunctions, and prohibitions. Especially religions that have developed a religious juridical system, as has → Islam, offer clear guidelines regarding permitted and forbidden relations, marriage, divorce, and family law, legitimate and illegitimate offspring, hygiene, the relation between the sexes, initiation and frequency of sexual intercourse, pregnancy and birth, and sexual behavior in various respective stages of the life-cycle. Initiation and puberty rites, such as the Jewish Bar Mitsva, mark sexual and religious maturity alike (→ Initiation; Puberty). Such determinations are far-reaching in the political and economic molding of a society, if, for example, property rights are connected with matrimonial law, or if women may not move in the public arena. Religions, too, that possess no express regulatory structure for daily life (e.g., many forms of Christianity), avail themselves of ethical and moral conceptions in order to exercise direct influence on the practice or sexuality, for example, by their position on birth-control (→ Abortion/Contraception), or their denunciation of homosexual practice (→ Homosexuality/Homoeroticism). Seeing that religion scarcely seems to exert an influence on sexual norms today, the 'secular' meaning of the sexual often takes its orientation (confirming or rejecting such norms) in religious traditions.

The religious interpretation of sexuality, however, is not limited to the production of social order. Its border-crossing and anarchic potential as well, the eradication of civilizing controls over the drives of the human be-

ing, plays a great role. Sexuality forms, as it were, a boundary line between 'consciousness' and 'the unconscious,' between 'sensuality' and 'supra-sensuality,' closely connected with the 'mystery of life,' with birth and creativity, death and aggression. It is not without basis that sexuality and 'potency' form a projection screen for (fantasized) power and violence—as well as for yearnings for salvation, happiness, and redemption—directed toward a state that stands beyond rational visualization. Hence its meaning in religion is closely connected with border-crossing conceptualizations of an existence after death, of a → hereafter and → transcendence, but also with the transitory and → nature. Thus, for example, Western religious culture, which has referred to the corporeal as 'devil' (Ger., the *Leibhaftige*) can be interpreted as a defense mechanism against the uncontrollable, destructive aspects of nature—in a revolt against human mortality (Paglia 1990).

In particular, the sex act and orgasm, as human boundary-experiences ('little deaths'), have been variously regarded in the religions. As a component of fertility cults, coitus represents, in many ways, veneration of nature in its cyclical return (→ Regeneration/Fertility). In some religions, the sexual act is regarded as an opportunity for spiritual experience, that can climax in the dissolution of the individual consciousness and an 'experience of cosmic oneness' (→ Tantra). Sexual unification as a metaphor for the conquest of duality, as *coincidentia oppositorum* (Lat., 'falling together' or 'coinciding of opposites'), is a very widespread religious motif. Even the Christian mystics of the Middle Ages applied the sexual language of 'union,' of 'fusion' and 'merging,' in order to describe the ecstatic deletion of the boundaries between the human being and God in the *unio mystica*.

On the other hand, the defeat or 'transcending' of sexuality is said to offer assistance on a salvific journey. It occurs in many religions as a notion of → asceticism. In Hinduism, for instance, no moral boundary is drawn between sexuality and spirituality. Instead, both areas are connected, in terms of an 'energy model': sexual self-denial represents an opportunity to amass *tapas* (Hindi, 'fire')—to transform sexual energy into spiritual. It would be interesting to know to what extent these religious interpretations of sexuality as an idealization affect the concrete practice of believers.

3. For religious studies, from the perspectives just sketched—the developing gender-interpretation of the discipline—emerges a cluster of new lines of questioning. What role does religion play in the formation of female and male identity, which stereotypes and expectations does it propose, and how does it legitimate them? How is the relation between the genders determined by religion? What opportunities are afforded men and women to participate in religion? What are the consequences of the conception of gender differences and sexuality for the human image, and for the social function of a religion? A critical consideration of the following material would be in order.

- Pronouncements by the religions *on* sexuality are not identical with the everyday practice of believers. Indeed, laws and prohibitions can even reinforce, or bring about, contradictory forms of sexual life. Thus, pornography flourishes precisely in the presence of a repressive morality. The object of investigation, therefore, ought to be, for one thing, the everyday religious consideration of theological norms and religious laws. For example, the object should include the interiorization and mythologization of a religious interpretation of sexuality in the early Modern Age, as persons were accused of sexual contact with the devil, or as impotence was

*Sexuality in Terms of
Questions Posed in
Religious Studies*

ascribed to witchcraft (→ Witch/Persecution of Witches). On the other hand, and the other way around, the religious discourse on sexuality can be understood as a copy and thematization of human conceptualizations, and become useful for research into gender.

- The authors of religious sources have usually been males, of determinate functions and determinate interests, so that religious sources have neglected the reality of broad parts of society. Although the meager religious history of relations between the sexes, and of women, contains shocking data, the pattern of 'repression' as a one-sided perspective displaces a view of the active role of women in the emergence of the religious interpretation of sexuality. Furthermore, a theory of sexual repression must always submit to an investigation of the counter-concept of 'sexual freedom,' which is just as culturally determined, and does not occur 'naturally.'
- It is precisely pronouncements on sexuality that are so frequently a part of the positive presentation of one's own religion, and the disparagement of that of others (→ Polemics). Thus, these pronouncements are not to be appraised as a description of reality. Neither theological nor scientific literature can be separated from a respective contemporary production of fantasies. This production will be specific to each society, and easily lets its own ideas of value and wish in the area of sexuality become the criterion not only of a perception of other religions, but also of their appraisal or condemnation. Answers to the question, how 'modern' or 'backward' Islam is, often refer, expressly or implicitly, to sexuality, not to mention being determined by the gender of the persons providing the answers to the questions. It was once the same with the outlook of Christian missionaries, or European literati, regarding the cults of a 'nature people.' Observers were shocked by → nudity, and by seemingly indecent fertility rites. Their sexual standards were why they so frequently adjudged these peoples' attitudes as either 'unholy' or 'paradisical.'

Feminist Criticism

4. a) The relationship between religion and sexuality in Western culture has become an object of self-criticism. Especially in recent, and feminist, theology, the 'Judeo-Christian tradition' is frequently made responsible for the expulsion of the feminine from religion, and for the hostility of Western culture to the body and the senses. This way of seeing things is problematic. First, it relates to conceptualizations of a feminine presence in the religions that are difficult to demonstrate and interpret (→ Matriarchy/Patriarchy), and that are not infrequently connected with the religious idea of a 'Golden Age.' What is certain is that there have been powerful female figures, and differently structured relations between the genders, in mythical notions and religious functions. Their operation on social relationships, however, is difficult to appraise. Second, the thesis in question ignores the fact that it has been from non-Jewish traditions of thought that biblical authors have adopted feminine/masculine polarizations between body and soul (Plato), matter and form (Aristotle), and (in a Manichean and 'gnostic' dualism) 'sinful flesh' and 'divine spirit.' Third, it is precisely with reference to sensuality, corporality, and sexuality, that the differences between Jewish and Christian doctrine are passed over. Conceptualizations of salvation in Judaism are in no way connected with a disparagement of the sexual; nor has the distinction of body and soul there the same motif as it has in Christianity. Indeed an enjoyable sexuality in marriage is of particularly high value, as it guarantees the preservation of the people of Israel (→ Kabbalah). What

connects Judaism and Christianity—and Islam as well—is, of course, the conception of one God (→ Monotheism), without a ‘sexual biography,’ such as have, for instance, the Indian or Greek gods. In both Judaism and in Islam there stands an androcentric morality, rigidly ordered by religious laws, along with a positive appraisal of the sexual, all of which is evident from the Jewish rejection of celibacy, or the glorification of male sexual fantasies in Islamic notions of Paradise. Ancient Christianity, especially through Paul and → Augustine, developed, in its doctrine, an essential devaluation of the sexual. The Fall is first and foremost a sexual transgression, that has been transferred to the whole of humanity. The original sexual lapse (→ Sin), and the idea of a defeat of the body (resurrection), bind ‘the material,’ along with its representatives, ‘sexuality,’ and ‘woman,’ to prevailing and conquering ‘evil.’ Thus, sexuality receives a theologically justifying place in soteriology, as an obstacle, and the sexual transgression becomes heresy. Just the contrary, in Greek and Roman antiquity, sexual morality had taken its orientation in the consequences of sexuality for a society apportioned by masculinity and militarism. It was not so much religious restrictions on enjoyable sexual relations, but a social ‘code of honor,’ that prevailed. Thus, it was the free middle-class male who had the active role to play where the act of sexuality was concerned, whether with free women, slaves, or men, and the gender of his partner was—at least for the moment—of secondary consideration. Asceticism and celibacy, in Christian contexts, are to be traced to the radical division of sexuality from the godly, and, comparably with gnostic groups and today’s ‘eschatological sects,’ to be seen in connection with an imminent expectation of the End. Apart from the ascetical ideal, the exercise of sexuality was permitted, but only for purposes of procreation without sensation of pleasure, or of a necessary satisfaction of the sex drive, in marriage alone. Under this premise, special religio-sexual phenomena developed: a hostility to the body that stamped the mentality, the highly erotic presentation of an experience of God in medieval mysticism, with its spiritualization of a craving for → love, and a superabundance of sadistic sexual violence motivated by religion in the early modern persecution of witches.

b) In the Modern Age, the relation between religion and sexuality—along with inter-religious battles—was determined by the project of the → Enlightenment. The human being’s self-concept as an individual was to be grounded, and—partially with a reference to Greco-Roman antiquity—a humanistic ethics was to be sketched out. First, Luther’s concession of clerical marriage and sexuality was an element of the confessional rift. The Enlightenment requirement of personal responsibility and autonomy, two of whose preludes were the interiorization of piety and the ethic of Protestantism, was more fundamental, however: it changed existing morality. The development that led to the modern age was a movement of innovations and their counter-movements (Counter-Reformation, Counter-Enlightenment), even in the area of sexual morality and practice. One of the last attested witch-murders (1782) was practically contemporaneous with the high point of the Enlightenment—the declaration on human rights during the French → Revolution (1789). Sexuality and sexual morality became a component of the radical Enlightenment → criticism of religion. The Marquis de Sade, for example, conveyed his sharp criticism of the Christian categories of good and evil by way of sexual provocation. Rousseau’s powerful picture of the human being, and of an ideal education and upbringing, again, idealized a ‘natural’

Modernity: The Project of the Enlightenment

morality ultimately based on Christian norms, and indicated problematic areas of sexuality of 'culture,' an argumentation repeated as a pattern of religious cultural criticism down to the present.

For daily life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was no progressive movement of 'sexual freedom.' The morality of the strengthening middle class, not least of all on account of church influence on pedagogy and legislation, was extremely 'normed' and narrow in the area of the sexual, and was tied to socioeconomic conditions of rising → capitalism. Counter-sketches of workers' and women's rights, as well, usually took a conservative stance in the area of sexual morality. An ambivalent role for the modern understanding of sexuality is played by the sciences. For one, they replace the Church in its function of authority, and produce 'dogmas' themselves: theological argumentations turn into scientific ones, moral verdicts are replaced by the concept of disease, as in the case of homosexuality or onanism. For another, the → theory of evolution, and critical sexual science, fundamentally challenge theology and sexual politics. Especially Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory of drive and religion remains today, often against critical resistance, the focal point for the confrontation over religion and sexuality. Freud takes the 'libido' as a key human 'driving' power (even for the emergence of religion!), and coins the concepts of 'compensation,' 'sublimation,' and 'repression.' Thus he transfers human sexuality from the moral area to that of a value-free unconscious, open to analysis.

Sexuality Today

5. In the late 1960s and the 1970s, there appeared the 'sexual revolution,' which developed into a drastic social phenomenon. With the development of the contraceptive pill, a sexuality emphasizing lust and enjoyment, and severed from procreation, became the medium of anarchic social and political criticism, and central for the new myth of the person who now had been delivered from taboos and was engaged in self-development. The feminist → women's movement used the growing sexual knowledge of quantitative sexual research (Kinsey Reports, 1948 and 1953) in a radical critique of the erstwhile 'privately' handled sexual relationship of marriage and family, and insisted on its political meaning. As for the quest for a female identity not defined by structures of male dominance, most Western states saw the beginning of a revision of prevailing, extensively Christian-oriented norms, and this was reflected in an alteration of the law (right to divorce, position of female labor, immunity of homosexual acts from punishment). Through these alterations, Christian churches came under a growing pressure to revise their sexual norms in the direction of a 'modern' understanding. The Catholic Church in particular was fundamentally challenged by a waning acceptance of clerical celibacy, and a demand that women be accepted into the priesthood. A religiosity that was traditionally Christian was in crisis, and many persons sought alternative models in pre- or extra-Christian religions, in order to incorporate sexuality and corporality in a way that seemed positive (→ Esalen Institute; New Age; Paganism/Neopaganism). From the women's movement, there emerged—in part, neo-mythical—religious interpretations of a 'new femaleness,' and sketches of a 'feminist spirituality.' In new religious movements (→ New Religions), as well, sexuality plays an important role as a moment of attraction. Apart from organized religion, the relationship between religion and sexuality in the literature and music of the pop-culture (beat generation, flower-power movement, pop icon Madonna) grew into a key theme. It remains to be explored to what extent, through these develop-

ments, needs and expectations formerly directed to religion have today been transferred to sexuality.

Judgment upon the consequences of the sexual revolution has become an object of controversy. First, it is alleged that liberation from religious morality has been exhausted in the mere commercialization and medial presence of sexuality. The 'demystification' of sexuality is seen in opposition to the—even religiously coded—'allurement of the forbidden and concealed.' The spread of the HIV virus since the 1980s has stirred a counter-movement, which goes as far as to embrace conservative values (marriage, fidelity), and finds itself provided with new, fertile soil, so that even the new religious movements are revising their perception of 'free sexuality.' Thus, the Neo-Sannyas movement, on the occasion of the spread of AIDS, is radically altering its practice and interpretation of sexuality (→ Osho Movement). Again, increasing knowledge and acceptance of 'sexual variance' (homo-, bi-, trans-sexuality, S/M practices) has led to a 'neo-sexual revolution,' in which the meaning of sexuality, gender identity, and gender roles is open as never before. The tension among individual needs, traditional morality, religious orientation, the ideal of a positive, problem-free sexuality, and of independence from procreation and 'natural' ascriptions of role, has been problematized. The question of the meaning of sexuality, the relation of sex and mind or spirit, and bodiliness and sexuality is posed anew in our era.

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For further literature see → Eroticism, → Gender Stereotypes, and → Love.

→ Asceticism, Body, Celibacy, Communication, Criticism of Religion, Enthusiasm, Eroticism, Family/Kinship/Genealogy, Gender Stereotypes, Homosexuality/Homoeroticism, Initiation, Life Cycle, Love, Matriarchy/Patriarchy, Nudity, Puberty, Purity, Sin, Utopia

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Shamanism

1. Shamanism, originally and exclusively a theme for anthropologists, religious scholars, medical professionals, colonizers, and Christian missionaries,