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The Problem of Pleasure and the Making of Sexual Sin in Early Christianity

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Introduction

On the fiftieth anniversary of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, it is fitting that we pay attention to ideas of the past that have helped shape the way in which we think about sexualities and pleasures today. I have been asked to speak upon some aspects of sexual history, and today my topic is ‘The Problem of Pleasure: the making of sexual sin in early Christianity’. Before we begin our journey into the past, I want to make two points: first, I am not an historian of religion - I am a sociologist of sexuality who has always looked to the past to gain insights into present complexities. Second, that when I speak of ‘the sexual body’ I am not speaking about its physiology or about what people actually did. I will instead be focusing on the **social construction** of ideas about the sexual body in the first millennia of Christianity. In the conclusion, I will be suggesting ways in which some key elements in this social construction remain relevant today.

From the very beginnings of its formal writings, followers of the Christian faith singled out sexual pleasure as being worthy of special attention. The values attached to it, however, were not positive but negative. The body was characterized as simultaneously a source of temptation and through it the inevitable means for sexual sin. The sexual body was thus doubly perilous, on the

one hand its attractions to the **observer** were ever-present and undeniable; on the other its **inhabitant** was forever susceptible to these temptations. Whether the inhabitant or the observer, unmediated proximity to the sexual body (as constructed by early Christianity); assured a fall from grace – a surrender to the irresistible temptations of the flesh.

This notion of ‘the body as flesh’ is a commonplace in the New Testament and the term itself identifies a feature of the body that is negative in its impact at both an individual and social level. The notion of ‘all flesh is grass’ refers to the temporary nature of the physical body, as it will wither and die like the grass, but was also subsequently associated with the ‘combustibility’ of the desiring body. The body in early Christianity was not only a temporary earthly container for the eternal soul; it was also seen as a threat to living a good and sin-free earthly life. The source of this threat was its sensuality, a quality seen as simultaneously inescapable and destructive. But where did these ideas come from?

The problem of the body

The making of the new Christian sexual morality in the first 400 years after Christ’s death drew on a range of sources; pagan philosophies and faiths mingled with the writings of St Paul and St Mark and of Genesis 1-3. All were developed and interpreted in the scholarship of the Church Fathers, scholars and teachers who created the foundations for Christianity as a livable faith. There is a striking absence in this list of contributors: there is no biblical record of Jesus specifically condemning sex as sin. His most direct references to sexual activity, reflecting his education in the Judaic faith, related to adultery, not fornication. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus quoted Genesis 2,4. *Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh*. (Genesis: 2:24). Likewise there is no evidence that he condemned those who had been weak in the face of temptation – look, for example, at Mary Magdalene, the ‘fallen woman’ whom he embraced, not rejected.

The first explicit reference to sinful sex in the New Testament can be found in the letters of Paul to the Romans and Corinthians – groups referred to later by St Augustine as the gentiles (of neither the Jewish nor Christian faiths). In these letters, Paul identifies forces inherent in the sexual body that are as powerful as they are threatening:

But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind and bringing me into captivity of the law of sin which is in my members. Oh wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? (Paul's Letter to the Romans 7:23-24). Likewise, in his letter to the Corinthians Paul warns famously: *'Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord and the Lord for the body'* (1 Corinthians vi, 13) and later *'Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body'* (1 Corinthians: vi, 18).

Describing the body in these negative terms reflects the impact of non-Christian philosophies – some that have ancient origins. Stoicism (301BC to 263 AD) typified in the first century AD writings of Seneca was the leading Hellenic influence on the dualism that identified the body as a peril to salvation (Brundage:1987:18). As John Noonan has commented:

'Stoicism was in the air the intellectual converts to Christianity breathed. Half-consciously, half-unconsciously, they accommodated some Christian beliefs to the Stoic sense (Noonan: 1966:46).

Stoics recognized passions in Peter Brown's words as *'unavoidable, muted creaking of the biological self'*. (Brown:1988:129). All passions, but especially those that involved the body, must be avoided or annihilated. Here were two more ideas that offered grounds for a new sexual morality – first passions threatened the ability to reason, and second that they were thereby associated with moral failing. Stoics taught that sexual pleasure, more than any other sensation, caused man to lose his reason, a view that is also evident in Classical antiquity. Yet they also believed that the intellect and will could counteract the temptations of bodily desire and that marriage provided an ideal context for this to be demonstrated.

'A wise man ought to love his wife with judgment, not affection. Let him control his impulses and not be born headlong into copulation. Nothing is fouler than to love one's wife like an adulteress' (Seneca, *Fragments*, Quoted in Noonan:1996:47).

A more extreme example of the anti-body influences on developing Christian sexual morality came from Gnosticism. Situated historically between the pagan and orthodox Christian beliefs, Gnostic teaching associated the body with active evil that threatened the acquisition of true knowledge. Procreating children was therefore procreating further evil. Origen, an early and influential Christian scholar, was adamant that *'the human body [...] can never beget anything different from what beasts beget, since it itself is produced through sexual intercourse, just as the bodies of beasts are produced.'* Origen Quoted in Williams: 1927:123).

This association of sexual desire and intercourse with bestiality was a recurrent theme in Gnostic writings over the centuries of its greatest influence, one that led its exponents to distinguish between pure and defiled marriage. Sex must be avoided in all circumstances and a sexual marriage was a defiled marriage. Sexual abstinence in or outside of marriage was the only possible route to spiritual salvation.

While it exerted a powerful influence over the development of Western Christianity's view of the body, Gnostic rejection of the material world in its entirety conflicted with the changes taking place as Christianity became the new religious orthodoxy. By the fourth century AD the beliefs of Gnosticism were declared heresy, and adherence to its beliefs and mores banned. The faithful apparently hid the key texts in a pot in the desert at Nag Hammadi, near Cairo where they were to remain undiscovered until a farmer found them accidentally in 1945.

The final non-Biblical influence on the emerging sexual morality was Manichaeism, a religion founded by the prophet Mani in the late 3rd century AD in Egypt and Palestine, later spreading through the Roman Empire. Mani taught that the body and mind were in constant conflict; a battle between darkness and light. Darkness was associated with ignorance, the body and forces

of evil; light with knowledge and salvation. This was the most uncompromising dualism - Manichees advocated complete bodily asceticism, which included the denial of sexual pleasures. Self-control was impossible, Mani argued, and women were especially implicated. Eve's actions in the Garden of Eden were proof of the destructive role played by the body and its desires.

Sexuality: theory and practice in early Christian thought

During the first four centuries of Christianity, the body became associated with evil; with ignorance and bestiality; and with lack of control. More specifically, sexual **desire** was identified as both the proof and exemplar of these claims. As Brown sums up:

'The body was presented as lying in the shadow of a mighty force the power of the flesh. [...] The war of the spirit against the flesh and the flesh against the spirit was a desperate image of human resistance to the will of God' (Brown: 1988:48).

These ideas were to be detailed and refined in their impact by two leading fourth century Church fathers: Ambrose and Jerome. In the summary of their argument I am indebted to the wonderfully clear paper on the topic by Joyce Salisbury (1986). Ambrose's and Jerome's writings were informed by two convictions: that sex was the original sin and that the carnal and spiritual were forever irreconcilable. One could not live in the world of the spirit and of the body at the same time. In order to live and grow spiritually in this world, and thus enter the next, the body must be renounced. This view depended upon the interpretation of Genesis 1-3 that **sex** was the original sin. For Ambrose and Jerome, and the earlier Church Fathers who advocated virginity (Chrysostom and Tertullian, for example) there was **no** sex in paradise. Before the fall, Adam and Eve were as sexless as were the angels.

This belief, that sex was the original sin, led Ambrose and Jerome to focus not just on chastity but the **means** by which this should be attained. In order to manage the problem of the body, its

perils must be explicitly recognized on the one hand; and the means by which they could be controlled taught, on the other.

Ambrose and Jerome claimed that the end point of any sensual stimulation was sex. Every sense of the body thus represented a danger to chastity. Thirst, (especially for wine) hunger; smell, touch and anything that added heat to the body (especially in the young) were all to be avoided. Women were considered to be particularly dangerous. On the one hand, they were inherently impervious to any direction, while on the other they had no self-control. This was not their fault, they were born this way, closer to nature and the world of animals, and consequently further from the dominion of reason. Thus any women posed a threat to reason and sanctity, whether a prostitute or a chaste virgin. As Jerome warned:

It is not the harlot, or the adulteress who is spoken of; but woman's love in general is accused of ever being insatiable; put it out, it bursts into flame; give it plenty, it is again in need; it enervates a man's mind and engrosses all thought except for the passion which it feeds.' Jerome: *Against Jovinianus* Book 1:28 <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/30091.htm>

Now, if sex itself was seen to be unpleasant complete chastity may have been an easier script to write, and to follow. But these venerable scholars were the first to recognize that sex with women was overwhelmingly enjoyable, a reality that made the perils of the body more intense. Ambrose said '*a woman is a delight, a bodily enticement*', while Jerome spoke of '*the soft fire of sensual pleasure*' associated with lust (Dooley WJ (1948) Quoted in Salisbury:1986:284). Worse still, there was the recognition that once experienced; sex could not be resisted in the future - once you have started you cannot stop. To quote Peter Brown again, the *citation that "all flesh is grass" was interpreted as meaning that men and women, as indelibly sexual beings, were permanently liable to spontaneous combustion'* (Brown:1987:298).

The renunciation of the body and its sensuality was to lead eventually to the establishment of monasteries as retreats from the temptations of the world and its carnal pleasures. Early

Christian sexual morality demanded the 'death of the senses' through the practice of bodily asceticism in extreme forms. Yet there was little confidence that such self-denial was effective in killing off the desires of the flesh, especially when in closer contact with women.

'A dying celibate priest, parted from his wife for 40 years, and reunited with her on his death bed, repelled her last embrace with the words "Get thee away, woman: a little fire is yet left, away with the straw"' (The dialogues of St Gregory, quoted in Murnstein:1974:93).

These extreme views were to come under direct challenge in the late fourth century by the most well known author of Christian sexual morality: Augustine, Bishop of Hippo.

St Augustine on Good and Bad Sex

'What food is for the health of a man, intercourse is for the health of the species; and each is not without carnal delight which cannot be lust if, modified and restrained by temperance, it is brought to a natural use' (Augustine of Hippo The Good of Marriage 16.18 Quoted in Noonan:1966:129).

This quote illustrates the core of Augustine's contribution on sex and sin. His was a radical departure from the dichotomy that had for centuries claimed that the body and especially the sexual body presented an obstacle to a good and holy life. Born in 354 AD of a Christian mother and Pagan father, Augustine had a complex spiritual background made more so by his espousal of the anti-materialist Manichean philosophy in his formative years. He was to reject the teachings of Mani for those of Christianity and was baptized (by Ambrose, whom he much admired) at the age of 33. In his writings against Manichaeism Augustine rejected explicitly the dichotomy that set the carnal and the spiritual in opposition. Instead, he returned to a literal interpretation of Genesis 1-3, on which he worked for nearly 20 years (*de genesis ad litteram libri*). It seems presumptuous to attempt to summarize this extraordinary work, but for our purposes, there are some key claims.

Augustine argued that to identify God's creation – the human body - as inherently sinful was blasphemous. That God had created sexual feelings meant that they could not be inherently and at all times contrary to God's will. More than this, Augustine argued, God must have intended sex to take place; otherwise he would have made two men. Actually, what Augustine said was that if God had wanted simply to create a companion and helpmate for Adam he would have created another man. Thus there was a puzzle to be addressed **again** that had for centuries apparently been resolved: what was the original sin? Did God intend Adam and Eve to have sex before the Fall?

Elaine Pagels has summed up Augustine's response to this question:

'Adam and Eve would have reproduced in Eden even if they had remained sinless. Although they had animal bodies, they did not feel the appetite of carnal pleasure. They could command the organs of reproduction in the same way as they commanded other bodily parts, such as their feet. They would have conceived offspring without experiencing bodily passion, and Eve would have given birth without pain' (Pagels: 1986:371).

Augustine argued that God had intended sex in paradise but in the manner that he found acceptable, that is, motivated by purpose and reason, not passion. In developing this argument about what was acceptable sex for God, Augustine argued that the original sin was not sex, but disobedience. Ordered to avoid the tree of knowledge, Eve was tempted by and yielded to the excitement of the forbidden. Disobeying God's orders was an example of passion (for gratification and the forbidden) that overruled reason: conforming to God's will. Here then was Augustine's new dichotomy - the opposition between passion and reason.

How did this relate to the distinction between good and bad sex? The intended form of sex in Paradise was without desire, or the term Augustine himself preferred, concupiscence, a desire for self-gratification. Ideally, Augustine argued, this would mean that the sexual organs *'would be servants of the mind [] they would begin their activity at the bidding of the will, instead of being*

stirred up by the foment of lust' (Augustine *The City of God* 14.16 Quoted in Salisbury:1986:287).

Here was the definition of good sex – sex that was under the control of the mind. Bad sex was what man was left with after the fall, and for Augustine the proof lay within everyone's experience:

Well, then, how significant is the fact that the eyes, and lips, and tongue, and hands, and feet, and the bending of back, and neck, and sides, are all placed within our power—to be applied to such operations as are suitable to them,(.) but when it must come to man's great function of the procreation of children the members which were expressly created for this purpose will not obey the direction of the will, but lust has to be waited for to set these members in motion, as if it had legal right over them, and sometimes it refuses to act when the mind wills, while often it acts against its will!' St Augustine On Marriage and Concupiscence Book 1, Chapter 7.

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/aug-marr.html>

Any sex that was driven by passion was against the original intention of God and therefore was a sin and, of course, to be avoided. Given that this was a punishment for all humanity, life was a perpetual struggle against the pleasurable lusts of the flesh, even for the devout married Christian.

'Even if he has embraced conjugal purity and not total continence,(..) he will have to struggle to avoid using even his wife intemperately, since he will have to abstain for a time from sexual relations with her consent, in order to be free for prayer, and then return to them so that Satan will not tempt them because of their lack of control' (Augustine *Letter to Atticus* in Hunter:1992:126).

Augustine's' interpretation of 'original sin' as lustful disorderly irrational coupling replaced the unequivocal rejection of *all sex* as sin, typified by Jerome and Ambrose. But this relaxation of the rules of absolute chastity meant that the new faithful had to be educated into the distinction

between good and bad sex, a requirement that placed the *management* of sex at the centre of the management of the rapidly growing Christian population. To explore how this happened and some consequences, we move forward to the early Middle Ages – the time when Christianity in general and sexual behavior in particular, was formally institutionalized.

Administering Sexual Sin

In the early years of Christianity, the confession of sin took place once in a lifetime in front of the whole congregation. Penances were draconian, not to mention the public shame involved, and as a consequence confessions were postponed as near death as was possible. From the early sixth century these events were replaced by regular private confession that offered the setting for the monitoring of, and absolution for, sinful behavior. But confessions also performed the function of moral education - of particular significance in a society that was nominally Christian but, as Bullough pointed out, *had not yet accepted Christian morality'* (Bullough: 1976:357). So confessions had two purposes, to punish sins that had already been committed and help the penitent identify and thus control their own sinful desires **before** they occurred.

A key feature of this process was the penitentials - handbooks that listed sins and appropriate penances. The first of these handbooks for priests appeared in the monasteries of Ireland and Northern England at the end of the sixth century, becoming widespread across Europe over the 7th and 8th centuries (Payer: 1980:9). The lists were wide-ranging and inclusive, covering the original eight and later seven principal sins. But as scholars of this literature have pointed out, nearly half of the questions were concerned with sexual behavior (Payer: 1984:3-10, Brundage: 1987:153). Payer discusses in detail the wide range of sexual acts covered by the lists of sins. He notes that although the modern categories of sexual activity had yet to be established, the acts that were to later to be labeled perverse or diseased, or associated with sexual identities were nevertheless marked as problematic 1400 years ago. These included sex between men and between women, bestiality; adultery; cross generational sex; seminal pollution; masturbation; oral and anal sex, the

use of aphrodisiacs or contraceptive methods and the use of 'instruments' to aid sexual pleasure. The detailed work of Brundage (1987), Ranke-Heinemann (1991), Payer (1980) and Noonan (1986) on the penitentials illustrates the degree to which a range of erotic practices were already being classified, long before the 'scientists of sex'.

Even within marriage, following Augustine's prescriptions, there were questions to be asked and answered, and rules to be followed. Procreative heterosexual coitus between married couples, while not strictly sinful, was subject to scrutiny about how often sex took place; what time of day; what day of the week; where the woman was on her menstrual cycle and whether she was pre or post-pregnancy. Special attention was paid to sexual positions, as these were understood to intensify pleasure and to prevent pregnancy. The only position tolerated, and the one deemed most effective for conception was the 'monastic position' - the woman supine below the man. The positions that attracted the most severe penances were those with the woman on top or the man entering her vagina or anus from behind. This latter was **trebly** condemned – for its lustful pleasures, its bestiality and its infertility (Brundage: 1984:82; Ranke-Heinemann: 1991).

Marital coitus could not be undertaken on Sundays, since the unclean partners could neither enter the Church nor partake of the Sacrament. Following childbirth, women must be purified, for successfully procreative sex must have involved some measure of pleasure for both parties, especially if the child was female (Brundage: 1987:157). No sex on Thursday and Friday either, these were devoted to pre-communion fasting and self-denial. No sex in Lent, and the early Christian calendar had three Lenten periods, extending from between 11 and 13 weeks of the year (Brundage:1987: 158). Abstinence was also required on the numerous 'feast days' of the Church calendar, and of the days before communion on each of these. The church calendar was thus also a sex calendar, underlining the integral relationship between sexual and religious life.

The detailed questions relating to how, with whom and how often one had sex were in effect training the sexual body. The focus remained on distinguishing good and bad sex, and these lists

provided a moral framework within which such distinctions could be institutionalized and maintained. The penitentials not only listed sexual sins, but in effect brought them into existence. For four centuries these texts both defined and circumscribed human sexual desire and its expression. But their efficiency would be their eventual downfall. For the detail that was required for effective moral and sexual education had, it was feared, an unwanted consequence. Instead of being dissuaded from erotic exploration by the shame and punishment associated with confession, the Church bureaucrats began to fear that the faithful might be receiving an erotic education. Accordingly, by the eleventh century the erotic detail in the handbooks of sin disappeared, but more general questions in confession continued to focus disproportionately on sexual behavior. Arguably, the penitentials had done their work – centuries of dissecting sexual practices and identifying most with sin had established internalized boundaries of shame and of moral responsibility that allowed the focus to shift more to education in the management of the individual sexual body.

Then and Now: Some Ideas in Summary

This story has crossed many centuries and I should apologize to historians for my rather cavalier use of ‘the past’. But I think this is justified if the outcome offers us some further insights into a topic that remains today – 2 millennia later - characterized by complexities and anxieties. This history of ‘the making of the sexual body’ offers an account of how the association between sex and sin began. There were a number of strands in this process that allow us to see the logic then, but also offer insights into some **current** controversies about sex and the body. First, the need to control the body was grounded in the view that its sensuality was a pathway to its sexuality. Exposure to sensual pleasures from any source would ensure the immediate and permanent corruption of the will. It was not the **person** that was sexual but the body itself. Second, this construction of the sexual body established a distinction between good (reasoned) and bad (passionate) sex. Sexual expression primarily driven by the quest for erotic pleasure was morally

inferior to sexual activity towards a more socially validated purpose. Third, the association with religion, and especially with confession and penance, conferred upon the sexual body a sense of shame as well as of anxiety about its uses. Certain parts of the body and their erotic potential were especially imprinted with shame and secrecy. The further away from procreation, the more this was the case.

But there was a fundamental contradiction in the construction of the sexual body in early Christianity. Pleasurable sex was sinful and to be avoided on the one hand; while on the other, it was nigh on impossible to have consensual sex without pleasure. This contradiction intensified anxiety. If pleasurable sex could be avoided at will, then the 'problem of sex' may never have developed in the way that it has. But the sexual body had a will of its own, one that was powerful and difficult to resist even if one knew how. This second dimension keeps the issue of sexuality firmly at the centre of the management of populations, as Foucault reminded us in 1979. And it does so through our internalized feeling of anxiety and shame about whether or not our feelings are normal, acceptable and right.

Finally, there is the issue that perhaps seems most ancient ideologically and the least relevant in the hyper-sexualised and sex positive modern Western cultures: the peculiar quality of the sexual body that rendered it not just corruptible but contaminating. I was reminded when writing this paper of a story that has been reverberating through the media for nearly twenty years now – it appears, then disappears – and it has to do with nudity, but specifically, the naked breast.



Babytalk 2007

In contemporary Western culture, the breast is primarily identified with sexual attraction. Its nutrition function takes a bad second place. In Australia, but also I discovered in the US and Great Britain, the sight of a naked nursing breast in public is a consistent source of discussion and even legislation in all three countries. Apparently the sight of naked breast with an infant attached to it has an impact upon the general public, but especially on young men. It is here that we see some echoes of this powerful flesh theme that we have examined. The impact of the naked breast transcends the will and in some ways corrupts the mind of the viewer.

When "Baby Talk" magazine, which bears the slogan "Straight talk for new moms," published a photo of a breast-feeding baby on the cover of its August 2006 issue, a flood of readers objected. In a poll of their readers, a quarter called the photo 'inappropriate'.

Other comments included:

"I was SHOCKED to see a giant breast on the cover of your magazine"

"I immediately turned the magazine face down"

"Gross"

"I shredded it,' 'A breast is a breast — it's a sexual thing. He [her 13-year old son] didn't need to see that."

"I don't want my son or husband to accidentally see a breast they didn't want to see."

"Men are very visual. When they see a woman's breast, they see a breast — regardless of what it's being used for."

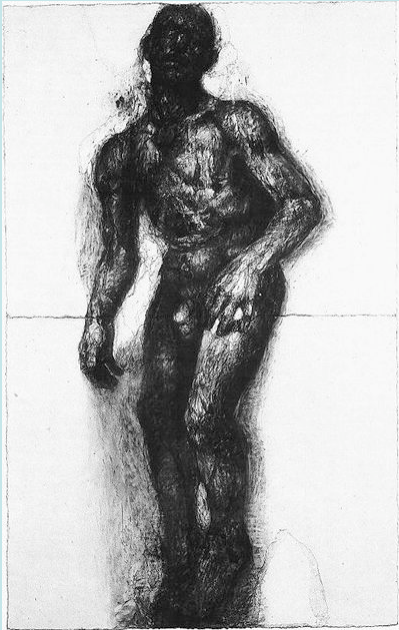
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/16773617/>

<http://womenshealthnews.blogspot.com/2006/07/babytalk-magazine-cover-controversy.html>



Plans to encourage Australian women to breastfeed using a striking advert were nearly scuppered when it was given a PG rating. Advertising bosses originally deemed it unfit for children as they claimed it showed "too much nudity". They said it could only be shown with parental guidance (PG).

In Australia, in 2003, Victorian Labor MP and new mother Kirstie Marshall was recently asked to leave State Parliament because she was breastfeeding her 11-day-old daughter.. Ms Marshall and her child were ejected from Parliament by the serjeant-at-arms because of a parliamentary rule that does not permit ``strangers" or unelected members in the house



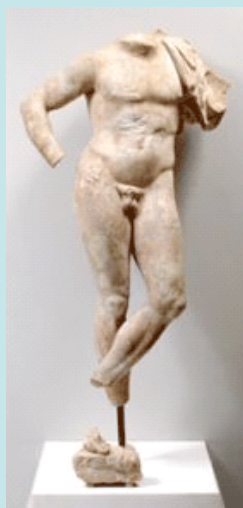
2007

Confronting Bodies

Artist: Alison Lambert

In 2004 the Fermanagh District Council of Northern Ireland omitted four frontal nude paintings by Surry-born artist, Alison Lambert, from its council-run art exhibition. The artist was told that the council felt the images might offend people bringing their children to an adjacent coffee shop.

October 2006 Texas



<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,,1891616,00.html>

In Texas in 2006, an art teacher claimed she was fired after a complaint from a parent of a student, relating to a school field trip to the Dallas Museum of Art. He was concerned about his child seeing "an abstract nude", which was a 4BC Greek marble torso.

In January 2002 the US Justice Department has spent \$8,000 on curtains to hide a semi-nude female from media cameras.



January 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1788845.stm>

A final example: this time about the propensity of the sexual body once aroused. When I was doing research on family planning clinics, (Hawkes:1991) one reason for doctors being reluctant to give under age girls contraception was that it would encourage sexual promiscuity because as they said 'once they have started, they can't stop'. Sexual promiscuity is a much used and much stigmatized term but one that defies definition. A promiscuous individual will have a lot of sex (but who knows how much), and the motivation is sexual gratification (itself a stigmatized term that harks back to Augustine's concupiscence). But arguably the key negative feature of promiscuity is that it is activity driven by passion, not reason.

It is difficult to reconcile these anomalies with the sex-positive setting – but all of us who study this fascinating topic do so, to a greater or lesser extent, **because** of the complexities and contradictions. The past (however distant) offers one lens through which to more closely

examine their origins. The link between sex and sin may be to some axiomatic to others misguided and still others irrelevant. But regardless of our personal beliefs there is a cultural message that has lingered over time: we still recognize the existence of distinctions between 'good' and bad' sex, we still hesitate to celebrate in public the joys of erotic diversity and we still, to quote a famous cream cake advertisement in the UK, understand the concept of 'naughty but nice'.

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