

## SEXUALITY

*Peter N Stearns, Ph.D.*

**A Challenge** Sexuality is not an easy topic to tackle historically, but it has drawn increasing attention for what it can reveal about basic features, but also important changes, in the human condition. There is even a Journal devoted to the subject, founded in 1990. Many questions remain, both about the extent of change and about some regional variations. But there are a number of interesting findings as well.

**Impact of Agriculture** Agriculture did not change basic sexual drives or techniques. By allowing a higher birth rate, it may have permitted greater sexual activity than had been common in hunting and gathering groups. Most agricultural societies also, however, developed stricter rules about sex, partly because of the new desire to regulate women's sexuality in order to assure paternity of children. Many hunting and gathering societies, while supporting some sexual conventions, allow some latitude about sex both before and during marriage. Agricultural societies still had to worry about controlling sexual activity lest families have too many children. They also developed new concerns about adultery and about the potential dangers of sexual pleasure.

**Birth Control** Hunting and gathering societies may have tried sometimes to calculate women's fertile periods, in order to allow sex without conception. Agricultural societies experimented with various birth control methods, in addition of course to infanticide after the fact. Herbs were used, along with magic incantations; early Greeks used lemon juice to discourage conception. Several societies used animal bladders as condoms. No really reliable method was available, however, which meant that agricultural societies relied heavily on fairly long lactation period – 18 months was common – and also abstinence to prevent unwanted conception. Sexual activity, and conception levels, declined even before menopause. And menopause itself was usually taken as a sign that women should end sexual activity altogether. Sex and procreation, and the limits this imposed, retained the primary emphasis.

**Early Civilizations** Some cultures developed the practice of male circumcision. Several societies in northeastern Africa also introduced female circumcision, which remains an issue in the region even today. Several societies tolerated homosexuality and sexual ambiguity, though here too there was variety. Prostitution developed early, with the rise of small cities and the harsh punishments for premarital or extramarital sex for “respectable” women. The Sumerians had a word for prostitutes as early as 2400 BCE. Double standard sexuality was common: women were punished much more harshly for adultery than men. The Hammurabic Code, in Babylonia, insisted that a woman charged with adultery, though not proved, “throw herself in the river” to demonstrate her innocence for the sake of her husband's honor. Upper class men frequently took concubines, particularly of course if a wife could not produce sons. Art in many early civilizations show a fascination with sexuality, as in exaggerated representation of male sexual organs.

**Classical Societies** All the classical societies produced manuals for sexual pleasure, though this was most elaborate in India with the Kama sutra. China tolerated homosexuality, but homosexual practice was particularly common in Greece, where many upper class men took boys as lovers (a pattern continued in Rome but to a lesser extent). Greece punished men more for adultery than for rape, since adultery attacked the sexual honor of the husband involved.

**Religious Impacts** The major religions offered different approaches to sexuality, and of course they also raised questions about actual results. Buddhism and Christianity both touted celibacy as spiritually preferable to sexual activity. But Buddhism also featured some holy men who were sexually active. In Eastern Orthodox Christianity, priests were not celibate, though monks were supposed to be. But Catholicism ultimately insisted on celibacy for both groups. And Christian emphasis on the virginity of the mother of Jesus indicated wider concerns about the relationship between sex and spiritual purity. Christianity also developed vigorous hostility to homosexuality. Islam offered a partially distinctive approach, though insisting strongly that sexual activity should be confined to marriage. Sexual pleasure within marriage, however, was encouraged. Harsh punishments attacked adultery, though Islamic officials urged forgiveness within a married couple. Actual practices varied more than religions did. Prostitution continued, despite religious opposition. Many peasants retained a much more relaxed attitude about sex than some of their religious leaders did; bawdy literature was an interesting undercurrent in Christian Europe during the postclassical period. The impact of religion continued, of course, with European colonialism during the early

modern period. Native sexual practices were often judged immoral, and there were also attacks on native tolerance of transgender groups of berdaches. At the same time, colonial situations, and also Atlantic slavery, generated a great deal of sexual exploitation by European men. Columbus himself “gave” a native American slave girl to a friend, and sexual violence in slave quarters and native villages was common.

**The Long 19<sup>th</sup> Century** This period displayed a number of crosscutting currents. In the West, illegitimacy rates began to rise substantially in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century. The spread of domestic manufacturing and early urbanization broke down some parental and village controls over sexual activity, releasing a growing interest (at least on the part of the men involved) in sexual pleasure. Urban growth spurred prostitution. In response, “respectable” groups – particularly the middle classes and religious leaders – tried to insist on the importance of sexual restraint, entirely outside of marriage, partially even within. This generated the so-called Victorian standards, emphasizing considerable prudery. The growing need for stricter birth control, to prevent more children than could be supported or advanced into appropriate careers, also affected sexuality. Sexual restraint seemed to be the only reliable and respectable method – and again, for many decades, this supported Victorian standards. Western norms also affected other societies, either because of colonial controls outright or because of the desire to win Western approval. Thus Japan introduced a new law against homosexuality, The Chinese government introduced new regulations over pornography. Several colonial African administrations sought new regulations over female sexual behavior. Against these trends, imperialism also created additional opportunities for sexual exploitation of local women. Female poverty, often increased as jobs were lost because of industrial competition, also encouraged prostitution. A new problem – capturing women for sale to brothels in other regions, the so-called “white slave” trade emerged in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cities in many regions, including the United States, began to establish clearer “red light” districts where commercial sex was unofficially tolerated. Early industrialization both in Russia and Japan saw a growth in illegitimacy as had occurred earlier in the West. Not surprisingly, venereal disease spread in a number of different regions. Again, trends varied and competed, with different groups pursuing different emphases, sometimes involving considerable hypocrisy as well.

**The Contemporary Period** On the whole, and amid continuing variety, the big trend globally over the past century has been increasing acceptance of “recreational” sex independent of procreation. This would show in many regions, including the West and Japan, in growing rates of premarital sex, and on the whole in a decline in the intensity of disapproval of adultery and certainly of divorce. It would show in changes in acceptable costume, including vacation-wear. It would show in increasingly sexually-charged popular entertainments and in a proliferation of pornography, both encouraged by new communication techniques including ultimately the Internet. Many societies reduced or eliminated many efforts to regulate sexual activity, at least for “consenting” adults. The whole trend was based in part on increasing availability of birth control devices and/or more widespread use of abortion. Particularly crucial, from the later 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, were devices based on the vulcanization of rubber, both condoms and diaphragms; but around 1960 contraceptive pills added in, helping to generate a widely-hailed further “sexual revolution.” This main theme had, however, a number of competing variants. Many religious authorities continued to hold out for older sexual standards. Catholicism and Islam both opposed artificial contraception and abortion. Many religious leaders, perhaps particularly in Islam, attacked the sexually charged costumes and entertainments spreading in the West. Communist leaders also attacked Western sexuality, though the end of communism in eastern Europe brought greater alignment, in this area, with Western patterns. Many feminist leaders also worried about sexual exploitation. Sex trafficking probably increased, though there were new international policing efforts. Concerns about rape and other sexual attacks on women rose in many regions; this included new standards, in the West, against unwanted sexual advances (the intriguing new term was “sexual harassment”), but also growing concern in places like India about what seemed to be a lax approach toward rape. Another complication, though particularly in Africa, involved the spread of HIV-Aids, a new sexually-transmitted disease. Finally, new disputes arose over homosexuality. After long opposing homosexuality, actually with even greater vigor in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western opinion began to shift, tearing down older laws and even in some cases tolerating homosexual marriage. But many regions reacted by actually tightening their approach. New laws against homosexuals cropped up in Russia and parts of Africa, while police enforcement expanded in parts of the Middle East. Sexual standards and globalization maintained an uneasy relationship.

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## Suggested Reading:

*Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire*. By Anthony A. Barrett (Yale University Press, 1999).

*The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565-1830*. By Susan S. Lanser (University of Chicago Press, 2014).

*Sexuality in World History*. By Peter N. Stearns (Routledge, 2009)

## **Discussion**

1. What has contributed to the development of the field of history of sexuality? What ideas have contributed to its growth?
2. What major changes in sexuality have occurred over time in world history?
3. How did social status impact homosexuality in ancient Greece? How did gender play into this sexual behavior?
4. How did sexuality change in the Middle East during the early modern period? How did religion impact these changes? What challenges are there to writing a history of this time period and region?
5. Did differences among the major religions cause significant differences in sexuality?
6. What are the main themes in the history of circumcision? How has gender factored in?
7. How did European colonialism and imperialism affect sexuality?
8. What concerns were there with sexuality in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century? How did this differ between the Atlantic World and Asia? What impact did transnational and global connections have on sexuality?
9. What are the different historical arguments regarding circumcision centered around? How does it differ when involving men or women?
10. Has industrialization caused major changes in sexuality? How have regional differences affected patterns of change and continuity?
11. What role has sexuality played in politics? How can sexuality serve revolutionary purposes?