HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Peter N. Stearns, PhD

SEXUALITY in EUROPE

ANCIENT PERIOD

THE CLASSICAL MEDITERRANEAN: GREECE AND ROME

Chronology. Another formative society took shape during the classical period, first in Greece and surrounding territory, then also in Rome and its expansion ultimately around the whole Mediterranean basin. Greek city states developed from about 800 BCE onward, reaching a high point in the 5th century; Rome's rise followed a bit later, with the Empire reaching its maximum extent around 180 CE. Greek and Roman approaches to sexuality were not identical, but they generated many similar features, partly because Rome widely shared or imitated Greek values including its religious pantheon.

Public culture*.* Greco-Roman public culture was less openly celebratory of sexuality than was true in India, but particularly in statuary it eagerly represented the beauty of the human body, and particularly the young body, both male and female. Further, stories of the often wanton sexuality and sexual pranks of gods and goddesses played a major role in literature and drama. The goddess Aphrodite – Venus, in Rome – represented sexual pleasure as well as love and beauty, enjoying a host of affairs with gods and humans alike. A summer festival devoted to the goddess featured women imitating the cries of someone mourning a lost lover. Eros (Cupid) even more directly personified sexual desire, symbolizing the sexual attraction of a loving couple but also the potential cruelty of carnal attraction. Here, and also with the wild sexuality of satyrs, Greeks and Romans saw sexuality as a source of excitement and danger alike. Eros (Cupid) for example, far from the cuddly figure of later representations, could be quite frightening, associated with images of disease and even madness. Drama highlighted the risks of sexuality among humans as well, as in the play *Oedipus* where a man is driven mad after unwittingly having sex with his own mother.

Yet drama also highlighted possibilities for pleasure; plays filled with sexual innuendo and often simulated sex acts and nudity, with emphasis on female as well as male sexual desire. In Greece and even more in Rome, urban prosperity brought greater interest in what today would be called pornography, to symbolize and arouse sexual prowess. Nude female statues might stimulate masturbation, and there were also exaggerated portrayals of the phallus, for example in some of the aristocratic villas buried under volcanic ash in Pompey. The Romans even added a god, Priapus, associated with fertility and sexuality, always portrayed with an erect, and usually gigantic, penis. Other painted scenes showed oral and anal sex and even sex with animals in some of the private homes of the later (and arguably somewhat decadent) Roman Empire. Roman literature also celebrated sex, as in the love poems of Ovid, and the Romans generated a number of sex manuals with advice on how to achieve maximum pleasure – including attention to the importance of female orgasm.

Spiritual complexity*.* Comparisons with Indian classical culture are intriguing. Use of gods and goddesses to illustrate various aspects of sexuality show clear overlap, imported in part from a common fund of divinities in earlier Indo-European culture. But Mediterranean religion, far less spiritual in any event, evinced far less sense of a connection between the sexual experience and a higher religious state. Indeed in Rome, a small group of young women, six at any one time, were selected as priestesses but required to abstain from sex – the famous Vestal Virgins. If faithful to their pledge, they received considerable financial rewards, independent of service to men. A few other sects also associated virginity with spiritual insight.

Double standard*.* Actual sexual behavior, however, was rather different from the artistic representations and from special religious functions as well. The gap was particularly important for women, and indeed Mediterranean sexual values in practice clearly illustrated some of the common features of sexuality in agricultural societies, including the strong drive to focus female sexuality both on control and on reproduction.

Marriage and adultery*.* The Greeks placed great emphasis on female restraint both before and during marriage, all the more because of a (male) fear that left to their own devices women could be dangerously wanton. Virginity was highly prized before marriage, and most girls were married young; further, in the upper classes, wives were largely confined to activities in and around the home. In many rural communities women were expected to remain celibate for certain periods, in order to promote fertility of the crops. In militaristic Sparta, men actually visited their wives only infrequently, mainly for purposes of reproduction. Adultery was strictly punished, with elaborate public shaming for offenses; the women involved were often publicly displayed naked or partially clothed to add to their ignominy. Men could be shamed as well, but the onus was greater for women. Revealingly, Greek law held that adultery was a worse crime than rape, for adultery damaged the offended husband's sexual honor, while rape of a single woman merely affected her.

Options;

prostitution*.* Alternative outlets did develop, in some cases even for women. By the 5th century BCE, dildos were being manufactured, made from wood and padded leather with olive oil used as a lubricant. And a few individual women in the upper class, at least in Rome, defied norms and openly consorted with a variety of lovers – amid public disapproval.

For men, prostitutes might be available, including enslaved women in a society in which slavery was extensive. The philosopher Socrates saw use of prostitutes as an opportunity to "release compulsions of lust" – actually protecting respectable women in the process. Brothels ranged in price, catering to various social classes. A few elite prostitutes were praised for their artistic talent and beauty, and prominent Greek men (including Pericles, the Athenian political leader), openly conducted affairs, their mistresses sometimes wielding considerable power. Roman leaders created similar outlets: the emperor Augustus for example had his wife procure virgins girls for his pleasure. Masturbation, finally, was seen as a normal outlet for men, though officially discouraged for women. Romans, similarly, accepted male masturbation though regarding it as wasteful. Greek philosophers urged the importance of moderation in sex as in other areas, even for men, as a matter of health and moral balance, and as in some other societies there was some worry that male orgasm took a toll on health. But there was no question that many men enjoyed varied sexual outlets and valued their prowess, while there was little explicit concern for the sexual satisfaction of women (though Romans would show slightly more interest than the Greeks did) – a contrast with both China and India in the classical period.

Bisexual patterns*.* Classical Greece generated one other sexual outlet: a widespread and open indulgence in same-sex activities, though primarily in the upper classes and primarily among men. Greek art and literature frequently referenced homosexual desire. Some upper-class men both in Greece and Rome (including Julius Caesar) fairly openly engaged in cross-dressing on occasion. More important was the custom of apprenticing young men to older partners (who were often also married), with arrangements sometimes furthered by the youths' parents, eager for this kind of advancement for their offspring. Many of the young men would ultimately themselves marry and engage in heterosexual activity. Many prominent older men openly participated in these relationships: the playwright Sophocles for example was widely known for his arrangements, one story featuring an effort to seduce a young wine-seller by kissing him on the lips. In some cases also, men of the same age lived together as if married. Male same-sex arrangements were not only accepted but widely praised (reflecting also the low prestige of women): Plato assumed that serious love was more likely between an older and a younger man than between man and woman. (Later, to be sure, Plato began to condemn any sexual activity not aimed at reproduction; so there was some tension among sexual goals.) Aristotle was somewhat more guarded about homosexuality, but he agreed that an occasional liaison was a good way to assure that women did not gain too much power. Female same-sex arrangements also won some attention, with reference to real or imagined practices on the island of Lesbos. The female poet Sappho (ca. 610-580 BCE) praised the mutual desire of women, and probably had some same-sex relationships herself, although she also married and had at least one child.

Romans maintained the practice of same-sex outlets for upper-class men, though with greater ambivalence. Sex between older and younger men might be regarded as dishonorable adultery. But the emperor Hadrian had a torrid and open affair with a younger man, despite being married, and suffered

greatly when the adolescent grew up and turned his attention elsewhere. On the other hand, accusations of homosexuality could be wielded as a weapon against political opponents. And while same-sex love might be praised in literature – Ovid even offered a female example – a standard sex manual in the 3rd century CE condemned same-sex relationships as obscene violations of appropriate gender roles. Roman hesitations were important at the time, and also potentially as a backdrop for the later and fiercer opposition to homosexuality that would develop with Christianity.

Challenges to reproductive sex*.* At a few key points, Greek and Roman history offers one other example of the range of human possibilities where sexuality is concerned: an apparent decline of interest, at least in reproductive sex within the upper classes. The Greek historian Polybius, writing in the 2nd century CE about the Greek (Hellenistic) societies in the eastern Mediterranean, described what he saw as a "decay of population" because too many upper-class men were no longer accepting the responsibility of having children, addicted instead to "show and money and the pleasures of an idle life." Later the Roman emperor Augustus expressed similar concern about aristocratic behavior, urging more attention to sexual fidelity and the primary duty of reproduction. The possibility of a lifestyle in which reproductive sex was downgraded in favor of other interests (sexual or otherwise) was an interesting phenomenon that might echo in other times and places.

Conclusion The principal features of Greek and Roman sexuality obviously invite comparison with developments in China and India during the classical period. Not surprisingly, the comparison yields important similarities, including gender imbalance and (for men, or at least upper class men) the balance between reproductive sex and a wider quest for pleasure. But key differences in sexual behaviors existed as well, as in the Greek same-sex arrangements, and public cultures varied considerably – and some of the differences would persist well beyond the classical period itself.

Study questions:

1. Was the gap between public culture and ordinary sexual behavior unusually great in Greece and Rome?
2. Why were the Greeks so concerned about adultery? Why was it seen as a worse offense than rape?
3. Did the Greeks and Romans show more ambivalence about sexuality than was true in Indian or Chinese culture?
4. Why did prostitution play such an important role (at least in the cities) during the classical period?
5. What were the main differences between Mediterranean culture and Indian culture in the relationship between religion and sexuality? Were there any significant similarities?

Further reading:

In Bed with the Ancient Greeks: sex and sexuality in ancient Greece. By Paul Chrystal (Amberley Publishing, 2016).

Homosexuality in Greece and Rome. By Thomas Hubbard (University of California Press, 2007).

Eros: the myth of ancient Greek sexuality. By Bruce Thornston (Westview, 1997).

Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture 2nd ed. By Marilyn Skinner (Wiley, 2013).

Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome. By Rebecca Langlands (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World. By Thomas A. McGinn (University of Michigan Press, 2004).

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

CHRISTIANITY

Celibacy and mistrust*.* Perhaps the most striking feature of the Christian approach to sexuality, as it developed in the early centuries after the death of Christ, was the premium placed on celibacy as a path to religious reward and as a requirement for many if not all religious officials. Obviously this bore some

resemblance to aspects of Buddhism, but it extended further and it was not complicated by any substantial impulse to link sexuality with spiritual advancement. Emphasis on the religious advantage of celibacy showed in the characteristic insistence of the virginity of Mary, the mother of Jesus, but it would extend to the sexual denial of many early Christian hermits, some of whom wrote of their battles against sexual temptation. And as in Buddhism it would serve as a basic component in monasticism, in both the Eastern and Catholic versions of Christianity, but also ultimately, in the Western church, as a requirement for the priesthood.

Suspicion of sexuality was combined with a number of moral regulations, though many of these were less unusual. The Christian code sought to confine sex to marriage, opposing for premarital and extramarital sex. It viewed masturbation as a sin, at least in principle: sex should be for reproductive purposes. And although there is some debate over how quickly the aversion to homosexuality emerged, there is no question that a fierce opposition ultimately developed.

Causation*.* Several sources contributed to the Christian approach, which contrasted so strikingly with many of the standards and practices that had been widely accepted in the Greco-Roman world. Many of the regulatory features maintained prohibitions developed in Judaism. The larger suspicion of sexuality may have owed much to the Stoic philosophy that had blossomed during the Roman era and that urged the importance of restraint and moderation. Some individual experience may have entered in. The most influential Christian thinker in the Western church, Augustine of Hippo in the 5th century, had spent a rather wanton youth, but then, suddenly converted, renounced his sexual past with particular vigor, and played a significant role in bathing sexual urges and excesses in deep guilt. Augustine highlighted the Biblical precedents for the belief that sex itself was the result of human sin, not present in God's original creation but only the outcome of the violation of divine commandments.

Gender. The traditional Christian approach to sexuality was also informed by particular suspicion of female temptation. Women, though technically spiritually equal to men, were seen as the weaker vessel – which barred them from the priesthood, though if celibate they could certainly enjoy a holy life in convents. Control of female sexuality, beginning with virginity at marriage, was vitally important, though in this respect Christianity shared attitudes with many other religions and cultures in the Agricultural Age.

Eunuchs and mystics. Christians were more hesitant about the use of eunuchs than was true in some other cultures. On the one hand their celibacy was welcome (and assured), on the other castration might seem extreme. But eunuchs were granted a significant role in the Byzantine Empire. And in the West, castrated male singers (castradi) ultimately gained great prestige for their vocal skills, with primary emphasis on religious music – their sexuality sacrificed to the powerful sounds they could generate.

Christianity did not produce monastic branches that saw sexuality as part of religious expression, in contrast to Buddhism (though monks in some cases hardly lived up to their vows). But in Western Europe during the Middle Ages some individual mystics, perhaps particularly women, had intense sexual visions as part of their religious ecstasy, and in some cases wrote about this movingly. One, Hildegard of Bingen, extended her views to include the importance of sexual pleasure, for women, within marriage, vividly describing female orgasm and claiming that children conceived amid sexual pleasure were more likely than others to be strong – and male.

Marriage ambivalence*.* Marriage, in the Christian view, was double-edged: it was tainted, at least normally, by its association with sex, but it was infinitely preferable to ungoverned sexuality. And in the Eastern Orthodox version of Christianity, priests themselves were allowed to marry, one of the basic disagreements between the two main Christian branches that contributed to their schism in the 11th century (though there was no dispute about the celibate basis for monasticism; some Eastern monasteries even banned women from coming close to their property).

Ambivalence about marriage abounded in the early centuries of the religion. St. Jerome, in the 4th century, ventured a common opinion among Christian thinkers: marriage was vastly preferable to fornication, but it was clearly second best to celibacy. Jerome urged husbands and wives to seek celibacy within marriage and to urge it on any children they bore (particularly daughters). Jerome warned against too much husbandly devotion; undue sex within marriage was clearly a sin in its own right.

Compromise. In practice, most Christians did have sex at some points in their lives, and the main churches established abundant paths to salvation even for the noncelibate. As in most agricultural societies, many families took great pride in having a number of children. Some people, as in Buddhism, probably hoped for spiritual benefit from worshipping saints who were celibate. And it is possible that more Christians faced greater moral ambivalence about their actual impulses and behaviors than was true in many other cultures – though this is impossible to measure precisely. Not a few older people, with sufficient resources, turned away from family life in later age and entered a religious institution, seeking the best of both worlds. And all Christians, married or not, were urged to abstain from sex during holy periods, particularly in the 40 days before Easter – another interesting compromise.

Family morality. As Christianity increasingly entered the mainstream, from the 4th century onward, church officials, while maintaining the valuation of celibacy, devoted growing energy to supporting but also regulating the family, beginning with the fact that marriage itself was a sacrament – though insistence that undue sex even within marriage was immoral persisted. The great emphasis was on the importance of confining sex to marriage and placing primary emphasis on reproduction. And on the whole this approach, not in itself uncommon, was combined with less attention to the possibility of pleasure as a side effect than was true in other cultures. Some ideas circulated that clothing should not be removed during sex or that only one position was valid – man on top, presumably to maximize male control and opportunities for conception.

Rules. Christian emphasis on family and reproduction highlighted a number of common proscriptions. Adultery was firmly proscribed, and while female adulterers drew the greatest attention males were included as well. (Women were more commonly excommunicated from the church for adultery.) In Western Europe a man convicted of adultery could lose his rights to his wife's dowry. Abortion was attacked, punishable by death in England for example (though actual cases were rare). Masturbation, or "wasting of the seed", was another target; a person should fast for 20 days if he indulged in the practice, and other punishments, including flagellation, were sometimes recommended (for example, for women who used devices to pleasure themselves). Thomas Aquinas, a leading theologian, argued that masturbation was an offense worse than rape since it contradicted both reason and nature, whereas rape only offended reason. And of course strong arguments urged against premarital sex.

Public culture. Christian morality strongly limited public representations or discussions of sexuality, driving most of them underground – a marked contrast to the traditions of the classical Mediterranean. Materials did circulate, including bawdy stories and sex manuals describing various possible positions for pleasure. Sexual symbolism, including the rose to represent the vagina, also emerged, and became more common with the rise of cities and other developments. Stories about cuckolds, describing men who could not retain their wives' fidelity, were also common, suggesting the unofficial importance of masculine prowess.

Prostitution. Christian moralists obviously disapproved of prostitution, both for the women involved and for the temptation for male sin. Primary attention was directed toward the women themselves – though there were redeeming stories of prostitutes who mended their ways – but men who used prostitutes were occasionally singled out; a Byzantine law allowed wives to divorce husbands who visited prostitutes. Christian officials might also occasionally admit that prostitution might usefully curb male lust, protecting against extramarital affairs. And in fact, prostitution flourished in Christian Europe, especially as cities grew – reflecting the difficulty single women might have in supporting themselves by other means. Immigrant women were not uncommonly forced to resort to prostitution. The Christian dilemma over prostitution was not unusual, but it highlighted the limitations of official sexual morality in practice.

Homosexuality. Efforts to outlaw homosexuality may have had greater impact, for the Christian position on this subject became increasingly severe. Homosexual activity certainly did not stop, but it was definitely driven underground. In this domain, strictures against men were particularly severe, around the sin of sodomy, "that incontinence which is against nature." At least a few men were executed (by burning) for the offense. Several laws, including one in the Byzantine Empire, also decreed the death penalty. On the other hand, regions like southern Europe were long regarded as more prone to homosexuality, probably reflecting earlier Mediterranean traditions.

Practical impact. Christian moral strictures clearly had varying degrees of success in practice, as the differences between fairly open prostitution and the limits on fully extirpating homosexuality suggest. Interest in contraception and even abortion remained, mainly through uses of medicinal plants, though as always effectiveness might be limited (several texts provided information about herbal potions). Many penalties officially on the books were not rigorously enforced, particularly for acts like masturbation and abortion, and even homosexuality was not always punished. And of course much sexual behavior was simply concealed, in a very decentralized society. In many villages and cities more traditional enforcement – often involving public shaming, rather than efforts to instill guilt – sought to limit adultery and premarital sex, and this may well have counted for more than religious strictures. Finally, Christianity, along with its various suspicions of sexuality, also urged forgiveness, particularly when an offense was followed by true repentance, and this could also factor into impacts in practice.

Conclusion The tone that Christianity set for sexuality was vastly different from earlier classical precedents in Europe and other parts of the Mediterranean. Public cultural shifted. Homosexuality was far more marginalized. Some upper-class behaviors changed: while wealthy men still sometimes took mistresses, open use of concubines (or younger men), clearly declined. In the later Middle Ages, in Western Europe, an ideal of courtly love developed that praised emotional passion but removed from sex (at least in principle). Sexual misdeeds, as religiously defined, could be attacked more vehemently than before. Some of these patterns, or at least strong residues, have persisted into our own time, at least in some Christian circles, so the innovations had impacts beyond the postclassical period itself.

Study questions:

1. Why and how did Christian views about homosexuality depart from earlier Mediterranean patterns?
2. What are the principal problems in evaluating the Christian impact on actual sexual behavior? What behaviors were most likely to reflect Christian standards?
3. Why did Christianity place a high value on celibacy?
4. What were the two most important innovations in the Christian approach to sexuality?
5. What were the main differences between Christian and Jewish views on sexuality?
6. What are the main similarities and differences between Christian and Buddhist sexual values?

Further reading:

Adam, Eve and the Serpent: sex and politics in early Christianity. By Elaine Pagels (Vintage, 1989).

The Body and Society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity. By Peter Brown (Columbia University Press, 1998).

Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality; gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century. By John Boswell (University of Chicago Press, 2015); see also Boswell's *Same Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (Villard, 1994).

Sex and Society in the World of Orthodox Slavs, 900-1700. By Eve Levin (University of Cornell Press, 1989).

From Shame to Sin: the Christian transformation of sexual morality in late antiquity. By Kyle Harper (Harvard University Press, 2019).

Shame: a brief history. By Peter N. Stearns *(*University of Illinois Press, 2019).

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

The early modern period, 1450-1750, did not introduce the kinds of systematic changes in approaches to sexuality that the rise and spread of the world religions had done. This is a period known primarily for changes in global relationships with the new inclusion of the Americas, for growth in trade, and for the formation of a range of new empires, both land-based and overseas. Several of these developments affected sexuality, but not in sweeping ways. Attention focuses primarily on changes in regional patterns, along with important continuities from the past.

Two developments in Western Europe did have significant implications for sexuality: the rise of Protestantism and the emergence of what has been called the distinctive "European-style family". The relationship between these two changes was potentially somewhat uneasy. Furthermore, at the very end of period by the mid-18th century, another set of changes emerged that in many ways were particularly dramatic and unsettling.

Protestantism. Beginning with Martin Luther, Protestant reformers explicitly rejected one of the key features of Catholic sexuality: the special spiritual valuation of celibacy. Luther himself pointedly married a former nun, and ministers in all the Protestant denominations were free to marry. Monasticism was abolished in virtually all the denominations as well, in explicit recognition that denial of sexuality was unnecessary and potentially misleading. In a letter Luther indeed termed celibacy a state in which "one is prey to devouring fires and to unclean ideas."

Luther's reading of the Bible and his own pastoral experience led him to recognize that human beings were physical creatures who must be able to provide for their bodily needs. Christians need human relationships, of which marriage is a prime example – and the relationship between man and woman must have a physical element. Sin, for Luther, was more a matter of unbelief than a set of particular behaviors. Through faith, God's love can flow from a lover to his beloved, and through faith their mutual desire is justified. Marriage, including the mutual sexual desire of the spouses, in center of faith. As Luther again wrote to a friend: "Kiss and rekiss your wife. Let her love and be loved….A married life is a paradise, even where all else is wanting."

Anglican Protestantism similarly led to growing attention to the validity of sex in marriage and the importance of mutual sexual satisfaction. By the 17th century marriage manuals in Britain increasingly emphasized the need to provide for the sexual pleasure and general happiness of wives, This did not lead to detailed formulas – sex was still a somewhat difficult topic – but the change in tone was clear. And the same shift applied to Calvinism and the smaller sects.

Caveats. Other aspects of Protestantism, however, maintained or even heightened the regulatory impulse. Sex within marriage might be fine, but it always had a dangerous linkage to the possibility of sin; and sex outside the marital context must be fought if anything more vigorously than Catholics believed. In Calvin's Geneva, for example, a rule required an engaged couple to marry within six weeks – for otherwise the temptation to premarital sex was too strong. Adultery, homosexuality, and in principle masturbation were opposed as vigorously as ever. And Protestants promoted a general public culture that discouraged much attention to sexual expression; the somber dress of the good Protestant highlighted the general need to control display and desire. Even within the family context, the recognition of mutual pleasure was sometimes conditioned by an emphasis on the reproductive function of sexuality.

Nor did Protestants shake a lingering belief that women's sexual behavior required particular attention. European males by the late 17th century, and maybe some women too, still subscribed to the idea that women were the temptresses, requiring supervision and control.

Finally, the fact that Protestant eliminated some of the Catholic avenues for the salvation of sinners – largely doing away with confession and ritual penance, placed greater emphasis on stern enforcement of family morality. This tone, rather than the significant revision of the approach to sexuality itself, often dominates impressions of the main Protestant approach.

The European-style family. From the later Middle Ages onward, West Europeans (whether in ultimately Protestant or Catholic regions) increasingly adopted a new pattern for family formation, and potentially a very demanding one. In the European style family, marriage age came late for most ordinary people – about 27 for men, a couple of years earlier for women. Presumably, the goal was limitation of the birth rate to prevent undue burdens on family property: this is why the change particularly focused on delaying permissible sexuality for women, with their special role in fertility. Nor did the change apply particularly to the aristocratic upper class, who had long maintained a higher birth rate in any event and where women continued to marry young.

Delayed marriage – plus the fact that a significant minority, lacking property, never married at all – placed a premium on controlling the sexuality of young adults. Strictures against premarital sex were not new,

but they now applied to a wider age range. Christian morality was invoked. Young people were discouraged from individualized contacts: heterosexual groups formed, allowing people to get acquainted but under some collective supervision. And parents tried to remain watchful when a couple was permitted to begin more individualized courtship. Shaming may have increased, as another form of group pressure. Outright law played a role as well: in Calvin's Geneva an unmarried couple caught having sex could be sentenced to a short jail term. Finally, in many villages a custom developed through which groups of people would gather around the house of a newlywed couple after their first night, expecting bloody sheet to be displayed to indicate that sex had occurred and that the bridge had been a virgin.

In practice the regulatory system sometimes broke down. While rates of illegitimate births were fairly low – about 3% of all births, on average – they did occur (and the rate was almost certainly higher than in societies that promoted an earlier marriage age). Even more commonly engaged couples frequent defied official standards, soon before the ceremony. Rates of "pre-bridal pregnancies" increased, showing up as births that occurred around 7 months after a marriage. And there were other outlets: Western popular culture was often bawdy, and jokes and stories about promiscuity and license may have relieved some pressure.

But the demands of the European-style family, added to conventional Christian regulatory concerns, lent a severity to European discussions of sexuality that clearly played a role in many actual sex lives – again, particularly outside marriage, but potentially within it as well – and that would also condition European responses to sexual patterns they saw, or thought they saw, in other societies.

Conception cycle*.* One other feature of European family behavior deserves note: a clear seasonal pattern in sexual activity. Rates of child birth increased notably in February and March, and again in the early fall; which meant that many couples had more procreative sex in May-June and again in later summer than they usually did, restraining themselves during other months. The reason? Probably, a desire to concentrate births in time periods when women's work was less important – notably, before planting season – and therefore when the disruption of child birth would be less costly. Here was another indication of how economic calculus could play against desire in the lives of ordinary people.

The First Sexual Revolution*.* For a growing number of people – but not all – the European sexual system began to break down toward the middle of the 18th century, in what may aptly be termed an initial modern sexual revolution. Quite simply, more young people began to have sex at an earlier age, and before marriage: the evidence was stark, a rise in the rates of illegitimate births. As one disapproving Bavarian official put it a bit later, around 1800: "both sexes are so inclined to debauchery that you can scarcely find a girl of twenty who's not a mother." This was a shocked exaggeration, but there was a kernel of truth.

Several factors contributed to this change, which would feed into larger patterns of modern sexuality that are taken up in later chapters. New consumer goods, and particularly more colorful cotton cloth, helped feed attention to personal attraction, highly relevant to courtship or sexual contact. Rapidly rising population levels – reflecting better nutrition and some decline in traditional plagues – put pressure on land, meaning that more parents could not assure their offspring of inheritance; in turn, this gave some children less reason to defer to parental advice against early sex. At the same time, new jobs in domestic manufacturing gave some young people a certain amount of spending money without waiting for inheritance – again, a basis for new behaviors. Some young women as well as young men seem to have indulged in these new patterns willingly, seeking their own pleasures, but it is likely that dislocations reduced women's usual protections, making them more easily duped or victimized.

The change in sexual appetites and behaviors was just beginning, and it drew a sharp moral response. But this shift was the first sign that some of the old staples of the Agricultural Age were beginning to erode, that traditional standards were becoming harder to enforce. Here was a final, and unexpected, West European contribution as the early modern period drew to a close.

Study questions:

1. Why did Protestants change their views about celibacy?
2. Why does traditional Protestantism often seem particularly moralistic?

3. What was unusual about the European-style family? What were the implications for sexual behavior?
4. Why might the first sexual revolution have contradictory implications for young women?

Further reading:

Sex, Marriage and Family in John Calvin's Geneva, 2v. By John Witte and Roger Kingdon (William B. Eerdmans, 2005).

The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800. By Lawrence Stone (Penguin Books, 1990).

The Household and the Making of History; a subversive view of the Western past. By Mary Hartman (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Making of the Modern Family. By Edward Shorter (Basic Books, 1975).

19TH CENTURY

As most of the West – much of Europe, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand – industrialized in the 19th century, several striking developments occurred in sexual behaviors and sexual codes. Many of these developments would leave a legacy that remains important, though no longer dominant, in the West today. Many were also globally influential, as the West included strong sexual prescriptions in its last, great imperialist surge in the 19th century.

Two contradictory themes intertwined. First, patterns of urbanization and industrial development eroded many traditional controls over sex. The "sexual revolution" that had begun in the 18th century continued to gain steam, particularly affecting the behaviors and expectations of many young people. But second, partly in reaction, a fierce moral code combined traditional cultural constraints with new strictures, hoping to rein in the tides of change or, at least, protect the immunity of a powerful "respectable" minority. This code is frequently known as "Victorian" in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Signs of change: out-of-wedlock births. Growing interest in, and opportunity for, sexual activity among many younger adults showed in many ways. Most fundamentally, the rate of illegitimate births, as a percentage of the total, continued to rise. Traditionally about 2-3% in Western societies, the rate surged at least until 1850, reaching 6% overall, but in some urban areas up to 10%. The pattern could be seen from Germany to parts of the United States. Community controls over young people's behavior were loosening, and many young people themselves sought new sexual opportunities perhaps in part to compensate for other new pressures in their lives.

As before, the pattern raises huge questions about gender: were women participating voluntarily, or was male exploitation increasing? The answer is a bit of both. Some young women were quoted as enthusiastic about new opportunities to enjoy themselves, but many, surely, were forced or cajoled. When young women worked with men in factories, for example, there were many accounts of sexual intimidation (both by other workers and by supervisors). Outright prostitution also expanded, in urban contexts in which single women often had trouble supporting themselves and in which men, also adrift, sought some satisfaction. A growing number of women also served as domestic servants, not infrequently encountering abuse from the "master" or one of his sons; disgraced servants were one of the sources of prostitution.

Puberty. Another intriguing development was a fairly steady decline in the age of puberty, dropping a few months with every generation during the 19th century. This reflected improved nutrition but also the greater stimulation of urban life. Here was a clear challenge to traditional assumptions for young people but also their sometimes bewildered parents.

Within marriage. There were other indications of growing sexual interest. With marriages, the traditional conception cycle began to even out. In Western society in the Agricultural Age, the seasonal need for women's work had dictated clear peaks of reproductive sexual activity in certain months, aimed at giving birth in periods when work demands were low. In urban contexts the pattern evened out, suggesting that

couples might indulge themselves with less regard for calendar – and possible witrh more sexual pleasure, rather than simply reproduction, in mind.

Pornography and sexual radicals. Elements of public culture also changed, with new printing techniques but also a growing audience for sexual fare. The production of sexual materials expanded. Novels, though frequently officially banned, featured strong sexual scenes, from the 1749 book *Fanny Hill* onward. A booming industry generated pornographic postcards (sometimes highlighting foreign settings, such as imaginary harems).

A number of reformers also explicitly attacked traditional sexual codes, urging more free love and an open admission of sexual pleasure. Several experimental communities were established in the United States, though they were usually banned fairly quickly.

Courtship. Finally – though as we will this development did not necessarily affect sexuality – the role of parents in arranging marriages unquestionably declined. More and more young people sought their own partners, and this expanded the importance of emotional and physical attraction. Young women, particularly, were urged to pay more attention to personal appearance, including the desirability of slender waists. Sexually-relevant standards and behaviors were changing in many ways.

Social class. Many of the new developments affected people in various social groups, though on the whole it was clear that shifts were slower in the countryside than in the growing cities. But men, clearly, had or seized more license than women. And the working class, broadly construed, participated more openly in several changing patterns than did their middle-class counterparts. In turn, the middle class mounted a vigorous campaign to define a more systematic respectability, which they worked to impose on their own ranks but which they also used as a basis for criticizing real or imagined lower-class behaviors.

The middle-class problem. For propertied middle-class families faced a series of issues during most of the 19th century. There were the signs of growing license in the lower social ranks, from which many sought to protect their children. There was the falling age of puberty, a challenge in its own right. But there was also a particularly intense need for controlling the birth rate. With a strong emphasis on schooling rather than work for children, plus a falling child death rate, middle-class families took the lead in seeking to protect their economic status by having fewer offspring. The pattern began as early as the 1790s in some places, and became quite a general marker for middle-class family life. But the need to limit births first hit before there were any particularly reliable artificial measures, which meant that controlling sexual frequency – during as well as before marriage – took on stark new importance.

For several reasons, then, middle-class leaders but also many actual families introduced new kinds of rigor, into culture and behavior alike. The campaign was often conducted as an exercise in traditional Christianity, but in fact it contained many novel elements.

The moral response. Advice during the 19th century poured out not only from religious leaders and related popularizers, but from doctors, who began to promote (often dubious) medical opinions concerning sexuality. This was directed mainly at a middle-class audience, but it could resonate beyond, and certainly helped form judgments about other groups.

The moralistic response to sexual issues, new and old, included firm insistence on a number of familiar staples: the importance of avoiding sex before marriage (particularly for women); the dishonor of premarital pregnancy; the need for sexual fidelity within marriage (particularly for women). Even within marriage, a certain degree of restraint was essential, now with a variety of health warnings attached. And of course sedate public culture was vital as well; here, commentary was joined to a wide variety of censorship efforts. Even major literary works like *Madame Bovary* came under fire for raising subjects like adultery. Censorship was not the only outcome: the new moralism spilled over into a variety of advice about reducing sexual desire, including a nutritional movement aimed at controlling passion; quite literally, new foods like Kellogg's cereals, in the United States, were introduced as part of this purity movement.

Masturbation. Innovations were significant. First, a huge attack was mounted against masturbation, and particularly male masturbation. This was not totally novel, but the intensity was impressive. Clearly, the effort was an attempt to instill restraint in the young, even before other sexual activity was likely – and it

could leave a lifelong mark. For masturbation was not only morally wrong, it would produce a host of diseases from acne to impotence to mental degeneration. Concerns about masturbation motivated a new level of parental watchfulness, and a surge in a sense of guilt in many young people themselves when desire and standards clashed.

Women. Second, familiar gender differentials were redefined. At an extreme, moralists argued that women had no natural sex drive, which made them ideal guardians of family morality (a very new idea, as against traditional beliefs in female degeneracy). Men should heed female caution. Of course women should be willing to have reproductive sex – as one author put it, urging the importance of national population strength, "close your eyes and think of England" – but this should not happen too often, and other sexual activity should at best be limited.

Birth control. Strictures against abortions increased, often written into law, and definitions were tightened against considerable traditional tolerance for measures taken in the first three months of pregnancy. Artificial methods were also attacked, even when, and to some extent because, better products became available. The idea here was that while these methods might help limit births they would also promote irresponsible sexuality – given the widespread view that sexual pleasure was dangerous and wrong. The ironic result was a host of measures – banning advertising for example, or preventing devices from being sent through the mail (in the United States) – that vastly complicated sexuality in practice given the growing recognition that the birth rate must be limited. All of this placed further premium on restraint.

Homosexuality. The new moralism had less to say about homosexuality than might be imagined. The practice was wrong, but there was no sense that it was posing a new problem (at least, within the West itself). A number of Western countries had laws against some same-sex practices, such as sodomy, but enforcement was spotty. The British law reemphasized traditional prescriptions as late as 1861, terming sodomy "against nature". But French revolutionary and Napoleonic reforms had decriminalized the category. Law, however, was not the main point within the West at this juncture; while Christian standards were not revisited, during most of the century the issue seemed far less acute than other aspects of sexuality. Only at the end of the century did a new intolerance surface, as in the brutal trial of the British writer Oscar Wilde. Otherwise, through much of the century, discrete activity was largely ignored.

Impact*.* Victorian culture had massive impact. Obviously it led to a host of moral condemnations, of lower-class behavior, of sexual reform advocates, of prostitutes. Condemnations might apply vigorously to immigrants – like the Chinese in the United States – who were seen as particularly shocking. The new strictures could also have deep impact on the sexual expectations – and fears – of young people. A new middle-class courtship ideal emerged that highlighted the importance of deep love, honed through months of interaction – often in classic venues, like the young woman's front porch – but no outright sexuality. And while the combination was sometimes impossible – some premarital sex did occur – it often worked, creating an interesting separation between emotional and sexual expectations. (For young men, of course, the equation was sometimes aided by visits to a brothel or even homoerotic friendships; but the ideals could be taken literally as well.)

At extremes the new morality could lead to phenomena such as respectable British women covering piano legs to prevent erotic implications or the young woman in France who believed she had lost her virginity because she sat in a train seat occupied by a man.

The most stringent moral urgings were however taken with a grain of salt, and they might have little impact at all on the working classes, which began to develop their own new standards of sexual propriety (save of course in the difficulty of obtaining birth control devices or abortions). Even in the middle classes the extreme views about women's passionless were not necessarily widely accepted, and marital sex may well have been somewhat more expressive than the moralists intended.

After 1870*.* Considerable evidence suggests that the most intense impact of Victorian moralism occurred before the final decades of the 19th century. One study, for example, shows that upper-middle-class women in the United States born after 1870 were much more likely to have and expect orgasm that their mid-century predecessors. Gradually, despite the barriers, married couples with some resources began

increasingly to use birth control devices, reducing tensions about unwanted births. New expertise, like the work of psychologist Sigmund Freud, revealed the unhealthy results of too much sexual guilt.

More generally, members of the middle class began to indulge more extensively in a somewhat relaxed leisure culture. On both sides of the Atlantic, for example, middle-class young people began to patronize popular theater venues – called music hall in Britain, vaudeville in the United States – that included a host of bawdy themes. Entertainers did pare these back a bit, to suit middle-class taste, but they still challenged the strictest moral code. Dress styles also began to relax, with less emphasis on the rigidly-corseted female figure of mid-century. These various shifts would gain further momentum after 1900, for example in campaigns to pay greater attention to women's sexual needs or to widen access to birth control devices.

And it is vital to remember that Victorian sexuality had never been fully triumphant: the new impulses toward greater sexuality remained vigorous. As one example: while attacks on prostitution were more extensive than ever, rates of use almost certainly increased. Both trends – new needs and expressions and new rigor – were significant, and in the long run the relaxations of traditional morality may have been more important.

Legacies. Victorian moralism, however, left a huge legacy, even as it began to unravel in part. Battles over remnants of the new moral code as still being waged in Western society, particularly in the United States, as will be discussed in the later chapter.

At least as important was the impact Western moralism had on other parts of the world during the 19th century itself. Here, it enhanced an existing Western tendency to criticize the sexual standards of other cultures, translating into a number of new tensions and regulations during this age of imperialism. Here too, as we will see, a considerable legacy persists.

Study questions:

1. What were the causes of new kinds of sexual activities for key groups in Western society during the 19th century?
2. What were the most important innovations in the Victorian sexual ethic, compared to more traditional standards?
3. What were the principal causes of the new rigor of official middle-class morality?
4. Did sexual behaviors really change as a result of the new moral code?

Further reading:

Love for Sale: a world history of prostitution. By Johan Rindahl (Grove, 2002).

International Exposure: perspectives on modern European pornography. Ed. by Lisa Sigel (Rutgers University Press, 2005).

Intimate Matters : a history of sexuality in America, 3rd ed. By John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Prostitution: prevention and reform in England, 1860-1914. By Paula Bartley (Routledge, 2012).

Inventing the Victorians. By Matthew Sweet (Faber and Faber, 2002).

20TH CENTURY

SEXUALITY IN 20TH CENTURY IN MODERN CONSUMER SOCIETIES

Recreational sex The overriding development in the history of sexuality in the 20th century is the triumph of recreational sex as legitimate and desirable, and the corresponding reduction in the emphasis on reproductive sex. This shift showed up, to some extent, almost everywhere in the world, but it was particularly pronounced in the advanced industrial/ high consumer societies, and therefore particularly in the West and Japan/Pacific Rim. The sexual "new regime" advanced particularly rapidly after World War II.

Obviously, recreational sex has been part of the human experience for a long time, but it had never before gained the centrality, and respectability, it has attained during the past century. Changes in sexuality earlier in the industrial revolution, including the "sexual revolutions" in places like the West and Russia, had prepared the shift. But this does not detract from the larger claim: it was in the 20th century that the quest for sexual pleasure increasingly embraced "respectable" as well as lower-class behaviors, and female as well as male. And all this constituted a major change in human behaviors and expectations.

Of course there have been complexities, including loud moral complaints and countermoves (interestingly, particularly important in the United States). Predictable generational disputes emerged, especially in the 1960s. And new behaviors brought some new problems. These developments must be folded into 20th-century sexual history.

A number of changes contributed to the new pattern, but it ultimately the combination that mattered.

Birth control. Access to birth control devices improved fairly steadily during the 20th century, and willingness to you them expanded as well in the advanced industrial zone. Desired family size steadily diminished, as birth rates, though fluctuating, tended toward 2-3 children per family. These two developments, taken together, dramatically shifted the balance from reproductive to recreational sex.

By the 1940s married couples throughout the West were increasingly accustomed to using birth control devices to help regulate pregnancies. Conversions were particularly striking, if complicated, among groups such as Catholics, for the Church continued officially to oppose the use of artificial means. In Japan, similar trends emerged by the 1950s, as the government began to encourage population control.

Many Western countries also eased access to abortion by the 1960s, amid great debate. While actual abortion rates declined, given other birth control options, the changes contributed to the drop in unwanted reproduction.

The pill. Further steps occurred after 1960, with the introduction of the pill and other means such as inter-uterine devices. By this point most adolescents as well as adults in the advanced industrial societies could and did engage in sex independent of reproduction. Unintended pregnancies still occurred, and abortion remained an important option in many cases; but even abortion rates ultimately declined in these regions in favor of the other methods. Religious objections also complicated the picture, particularly in the United States: huge debates raged over abortion but also adolescent access to birth control. A vocal minority continued to believe that birth control could lead to undesirable levels of recreational sex. Debates over particular devices also complicated Japanese response; use of the pill, for example, was approved only in 1999. But the overall trends were clear.

Baby boom. The decline of reproductive sex was interestingly interrupted, from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, by renewed interest in childbearing, partly to compensate for the demographic impact of Depression constraints. A number of families now had 3-4 children, often rather closely spaced. The surge was particularly strong in the United States. But while briefly important, the boom soon yielded to renewed birth rate decline, which continued fairly steadily in these regions into the 21st century.

Sexually transmitted diseases. Recreational sex was also facilitated by the strides made against some of the classic venereal diseases. By the mid-20th century, antibacterial drugs effectively and fairly inexpensively treated syphilis and gonorrhea, as these complications declined in importance. Here, the rise of new problems, such as genital herpes and AIDs, introduced important challenges in the 1980s, but these did not alter the basic trends, and ultimately additional medical measures lessened the threat in the wealthy countries.

Public culture. Access to erotic materials was hardly a modern invention (particularly in countries like Japan), but there is no question that, by the mid-20th century, sexually explicit themes became increasingly widespread. Movies and television, long carefully regulated, began to introduce more open sexuality, and official codes were adjusted in the process. "Bedroom scenes", once barred, now became commonplace, even on television, along with partial or complete nudity. The real-life sexual antics of movie stars added to the new culture, while other popular practices – like the parade of bikini-clad

contestants in beauty contests –contributed as well. It was noteworthy that exposure of female bodies was far more extensive than that of males, where sexual organs were still commonly concealed.

Magazine publications increasingly featured nude poses, and major publication empires developed around *Playboy* and its rivals; for several decades the "nude centerfold" became a staple for many male readers. Some explicit magazines were also targeted specifically at teenagers, like *Bravo* in Germany. Shading off from this, outright pornography became more widely available, by the 1990s including materials featured on the Internet.

These trends generated some backlash, particularly among religious conservatives. Limitations were particularly interesting in the United States where, compared to Europe, nude scenes were curtailed in venues like newspapers and billboards. On the other hand, erotic images – including displays of pubic hair – gained ground steadily in Japan.

Sexual advice*.* Public culture was also altered with a new generation of expertise, willing to discuss sexual issues openly and eager to promote greater pleasure – often with specific commitment to altering traditional notions of female reticence. Experts like Masters and Johnson, in the United States, urged the importance and validity of pleasure, and discussed methods – from foreplay to oral sex – that could provide it – for both genders. Books with titles like *The Joy of Sex* won wide popularity. Authorities in the United States did worry about the impact of this kind of advice on teenagers, and for the most part sexual education classes offered in American schools continued to emphasize the importance of abstinence – "Just Say No" was a major theme in the 1980s and beyond – but the overall trend was clear.

Behaviors. Measurable changes in behavior were, of course, the most important component in the new sexuality. Some developments were hard to chart: it is very likely that rates of masturbation increased in the more sexualized atmosphere, and older Western biases against masturbation eased, but precision is impossible.

Sexual activity among teenagers measurably increased. The famous "sexual revolution" of the 1960s centered most obviously on a decline in the age of first sex, particularly for women. In the United States, 29% of women reported a first sexual experience between the ages of 15-19; by 1988 the figure had risen to 52%. Similar patterns emerged in Europe and Japan; while younger teens In Japan were unlikely to have sex, older teens openly expressed embarrassment if they remained virgin. At the same time, the age of marriage was rising steadily, as more people sought to complete their education and establish an economic foothold. So, obviously, the linkage between sex and marriage for young adults was loosening steadily. Correspondingly, older expectations about female virginity declined rapidly, as did acceptable sexual jealousy.

Adults*.* Sexual activity within marriage undoubtedly increased as well, and while adultery could still cause great turmoil, public dismay declined. During the 1960s an "open marriage" movement emerged advocating regular access to multiple partners, and while the public fad did not last, various couples continued to make their own arrangements. Sexual methods probably shifted as well, particularly with the growing popularity of oral sex.

Sexual expectations among older people changed, in response to the growing interest in pleasure; menopause was no longer seen as a barrier. By the late 1990s the introduction of drugs like Viagra to maintain potency both reflected and encouraged sexual activity among older adults (though attention focused disproportionately on men).

Debate*.* Quite apart from the ongoing concerns of conservatives, and some interesting regional variations within the advanced industrial zone, new sexual patterns raised some important issues. Most basically, a potential gap existed between the expectations fanned by public culture, and the actual sexual experience of many people. Women, particularly, often complained that the new attention to female sexuality and pleasure was not carrying through in practice.

Homosexuality. Western attitudes toward homosexuality actually toughened through the first two thirds of the 20th century. New scientific studies drew a sharp distinction between homosexual and heterosexual behaviors – complicating the actual experience of bisexuality – and experts claimed that homosexuality

actually was a form of psychological disease. Police attacks on gay clubs increased in severity, particularly during the early stages of the Cold War when “deviance” sometimes seemed unpatriotic.

This began to change, however, in the final decades of the century, throughout the West and Japan. . While growing commitment to human rights and resistance to police oppression most obviously fueled the new gay movements, the larger atmosphere of acceptance of sexual pleasure and nonreproductive sex played in as well.

Various court rulings in the West and Japan began to push back discrimination. Psychologists removed homosexuality from the list of mental disorders (the World Health Organization followed suit in 1992). Openly gay behavior became more widespread – despite the flurry of concern over AIDs – and public opinion steadily shifted in favor of gay rights, even gay marriage. Here was another striking reversal of traditional sexual attitudes – particularly in the West – though bitter disagreements continued among conservative critics.

Conclusion The second half of the 20th century saw, quite simply, an impressively systematic reconsideration of both traditional sexual morality, and the patterns that had developed in the Victorian 19th century. The result was a significant change in the human experience in a number of world regions.

Study questions:

1. What caused the key changes in sexual attitudes and behaviors? Why did they develop most widely in advanced industrial societies?
2. Why and how did traditional sexual jealousy become less viable?
3. What were the differences in European and United States patterns?
4. Had there ever before been such a significant set of changes in human sexuality?

Further reading:

Sex in the Heartland. By Beth Bailey (Harvard University Press, 1999).

Abortion before Birth Control: the politics of reproduction in postwar Japan. Eds. T. Norgren and C. Norgren (Princeton University Press, 2001).

Japan in Transformation. By J. Kingston (Longman, 2001).

The Repeal of Reticence: a history of America’s cultural and legal struggles over free speech, obscenity, sexual liberation and modern art. By Rachel Gurstein (Hill and Wang, 1996).

Why Marriage? The history shaping today’s debate over gay equality. By George Chauncy (Basic Books, 2005).