

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

HISTORY OF SEXUALITY

Course Description

This course surveys how sexual behaviors and values have changed in response to major developments like the rise of agriculture or the major world religions. Sexuality has a surprisingly rich history. Regional perspectives continue to inform attitudes toward homosexuality or child marriage. Sexual values and behaviors continue to shift in the modern world in response to developments as varied as imperialism and feminism, and sexual patterns in turn affect many other facets of modern society.

About the Professor

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Introduction: Exploring a history of sexuality

Sexuality – the ideas and practices associated with sexual behavior – unquestionably has a history, and a significant one. It changes over time. This is most obviously true in terms of public values and representations: the ways sex is portrayed, the moral codes applied to sex, can shift dramatically from one era to the next. But basic behaviors change too, whether the subject is same-sex contact or sexual techniques or the age of first sexual activity or even degrees of interest in sexual pleasure. Assessing developments in sexuality gives us a fuller picture of the human experience in the past, and provides a vital basis as well for evaluating sexual patterns today.

Serious work on the history of sexuality is for the most part fairly recent – within the past half century. Previously, historians believed that other topics were far more important, or that sex was too frivolous or delicate to warrant serious scholarly attention; some of these hesitations apply in some quarters today. (And they can certainly complicate *teaching* the history of sex.) But sex has always been a central feature of social as well as most individual life: the Hammurabic Code, from ancient Mesopotamia, thus devotes considerable attention to regulation of sexual behavior, major religions inevitably grappled with sexuality, and the subject commands great attention in the world today. There is every reason to apply historical analysis to this vital topic, and fortunately we now know quite a bit about it.

Data. To be sure, there are undeniable challenges in dealing with sexual history. The adequacy of evidence varies, with far more information on art and public culture than on personal behavior. We know for example that Victorian society worked hard to discourage masturbation but there are no data to show whether rates of masturbation actually changed: we can assume so, given the pressures, but proof is elusive. Public culture is important and interesting, but actual practice can diverge substantially, which makes for a complicated combination, and again data availability is not the same for the two facets.

We also know more about upper-class and urban behaviors than about lower-class or rural. And while gender factors are vital in the history of sexuality, until recently there is more information about male activity than about female (which perforce could be more secretive). None of this precludes a rich and meaningful history, but the constraints are real.

Biology. Then there is the tension between basic biological components and the far more variable factors involving beliefs and values. The history of sexuality in no sense denies biological factors, but it places greater emphasis on variety and change – even in some physical aspects, and certainly in sexuality overall. It is vital to avoid the assumption that patterns today are somehow “natural” and standard, and that if other societies differed in the past they must somehow be abnormal. And some areas must be open for debate: it may be true that about 10% of the population is biologically homosexual, but we cannot be certain and patterns of actual same-sex behavior can change dramatically – and indeed are changing today, whatever the biology.

Morality. Sex always intertwines with moral standards, and this can complicate discussions about sexuality’s history. It is vital – for historical analysis –not to avoid certain topics in the past just because they seem shocking today: bestiality could be a current example, as a practice far more common in some rural societies than even sexual liberals would be comfortable with in our own day. (In Kinsey surveys in the 1940s a noticeable minority of rural American men had some interactions with animals, and the same holds true for some homosexuals in early modern France when for example goose necks could be used for masturbation.) By the same token it is not helpful to use past patterns as a club to belabor conservative morality today.

World History. The chapters that follow seek to sketch patterns of sexuality in the major regions of the world, particularly since the advent of agriculture some 10,000 years ago. This is an ambitious agenda, which can exacerbate some of the issues of evidence and cultural/moral perspective. Further, the state of historical research varies depending on time period and region. Nevertheless, the global scope also adds important comparative perspective, while the long sweep of time invites attention to major patterns of change and their causes and consequences.

After initial discussion of hunting and gathering societies and the all-important transition to agriculture, which had huge implications for sexuality, chapters 3-5 deal with public cultures and private behaviors in

the major classical societies, where certain traditions were set – associated with basic features like Hinduism or Confucianism – that would last a long time, in some cases even into the present. We then turn more directly to the implications of the major religions, which certainly had a huge impact on public cultures as they gained further ground after the fall of the classical empires. The early modern period, 1450-1750, is less decisive in the history of sexuality, but there were important developments in several regions, and the rise of colonialism introduced a new factor: the impact of trying to impose one society's morality on another. Colonialism and the expanded slave trade also increased opportunities for sexual exploitation. Dealing with the 19th century allows an initial assessment of the impact of the industrial revolution on sex, along with the rise of Victorian morality and its global ramifications. Final chapters deal with the 20th century and even some intriguing new twists in the 21st century: a variety of themes are involved, including the role of growing global consumerism, but regional distinctions still factor in as well.

Further reading:

Sexuality in World History, 2nd ed. By Peter N. Stearns (Routledge, 2017).

History of Sexuality. By Michel Foucault (Vintage, 1985).

Greenwood Encyclopedia of Love, Courtship and Sexuality 6v. Ed. By James Howell and others. (Greenwood, 2008).

See also the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, published by the University of Texas Press from 1990 onward.

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SECTION I ANCIENT PERIOD SEXUALITY

Overview

Two principal features of sexuality during the Ancient Period were, first, the clear articulation, both in sexual standards and in what we know about sexual behavior, of the basic sexual contours of Agricultural Societies, including the double standard in treatment of men and women; and, second, the emergence of some characteristic regional features associated with the development of the main regional classical civilizations.

The Family. All the early civilizations placed great emphasis on the importance of female chastity before marriage. All also urged against adultery. Classical Greece rated adultery a worse crime than rape, because it affected the husband as well as the woman herself. Emphasis on the importance of family-based sexuality ran high. The focus on controlling women's sexuality, before and during marriage, had much to do with reassuring men that the heirs of their property were indeed their own progeny. Social shaming was abundantly deployed to maintain propriety.

Birth control. At the same time, though this was less widely discussed, the early civilizations also faced challenges in achieving a workable birth rate. Having a number of children was important, as a measure of family success but also a source of labor. But too many could overwhelm available resources, especially for the lower classes. All the early societies experimented with birth control devices or contraceptive herbs, though there were no great breakthroughs. In China and the Mediterranean, infanticide was widespread, affecting up to a quarter of all babies born. But still there could be tension between biological capacity and economic constraints. Many families surely had to resort to periods of abstinence.

Prostitution. All the early societies also developed substantial prostitution in the cities, and while most prostitutes were low-status a few gained considerable prestige. All the classical societies created a considerable literature on the pleasures of sex, including advice on how to maximize satisfaction; and while attention went to the male, there were discussions of female pleasure as well.

All the classical societies, finally, tolerated same-sex behaviors, often depicting some in art. Many ruling houses had same-sex as well as heterosexual opportunities.

China and concubines. Within these general parameters, each of the classical civilizations developed some distinctive features in their sexual cultures and styles. In early Chinese history, polygyny was widely practiced. Governments sought to regulate this practice, and over time it evolved into a system of concubines for wealthy and well-placed men, beginning with the emperor himself. The main goal of this system was to assure the birth of boys, but it obviously provides a variety of sexual outlets as well. The use of castrated eunuchs accompanied the system, men who could guard the concubines without fear of sexual interference. Some eunuchs gained wider power positions in government as well.

The Chinese system involved a pronounced divide between the sexual contexts of the ruling classes and the mass of ordinary people, for whom concubinage was out of the question.

Confucian morality. Chinese sexual culture was also affected by its dominant system of political philosophy, Confucianism. Confucian leaders were not hostile to sex, but they urged moderation and their focus on strong, stable families could modify undue pleasure-seeking. At times in Chinese history Confucian morality seems to have had a restraining force.

Indian family. Sexual behaviors among ordinary Indians may have differed little from the patterns in China, with the strong family emphasis and the importance of female chastity. Even more than in China some girls in India were married early, which was one solution to the problem of chastity before marriage.

Erotic culture. But Indian public culture was distinctive. Representations of Hindu gods and goddesses frequently emphasized sexual prowess and depicted sexual scenes. India did not develop a sense of separation between sexuality and spirituality, and indeed the two could intertwine; the same linkage would show up in some versions of Buddhism. To be sure, some Hindu mystics renounced the flesh; overall, however, the relationship between religion and sexuality was positive. It is no surprise, in this

context, that India generated the most elaborate sex manual of any of the early societies, the Kama Sutra, devoted to advice about pleasure including homoerotic pleasure.

Mediterranean religion and philosophy. Greece and Rome, in the Mediterranean, did not replicate India's celebration of sexuality in public art, though many sexual scenes were available in the homes of the wealthy. Roman religion featured twelve vestal virgins, whose chastity was supposed to honor the gods – an interesting variant. And there were philosophical schools, particularly the Stoics, who urged moderation in sexual behavior. Overall, however, Mediterranean culture celebrated sexual pleasure, and its art certainly highlighted the beauty of youthful bodies.

Homosexuality. Perhaps the most distinctive sexual pattern in the Mediterranean involved the widespread practice of older upper-class men taking young boys as lovers – often alongside their regular family but frequently commanding greater passion. This practice faded a bit with the Romans but it was still maintained, even by several emperors; and it contrasted vividly with the approach to same-sex relationships that would develop with Christianity.

Conclusion. In sexuality, as in other areas, the classical societies featured a number of important similarities and some distinctive signatures. Similarities centered on family-based reproductive sex and efforts to control female sexual behavior, but also the importance of prostitution as an additional outlet. Distinctions showed in different philosophical and artistic approaches and in special options for the wealthy, from concubinage to same-sex relationships.

CHAPTER 1: HUNTING AND GATHERING SOCIETIES

Hunting and gathering societies – the original framework for humanity – provide something of a baseline for many types of historical analysis, and this is certainly true for sexuality. Though there are undeniable problems of evidence, it is highly probable that sexual behaviors and values in these societies were quite different from what came later. These early societies were small and localized, so it is also likely that there was considerable variation in specifics, but there is wide agreement on some probable general patterns.

Evidence. Issues of evidence are obvious: these societies left no written records, and early art and artifacts do not always shed much light on sexuality. It can be inferred, from burial evidence, that child births were usually spaced an average of three and a half years apart, which limited population growth; prolonged lactation was almost certainly the basic control mechanism involved, for it constrains ovulation, which means that the low birth rate was quite compatible with frequent sexual intercourse.

But the direct evidence is anthropological, from a host of careful inquiries into contemporary hunting and gathering societies. And here is where there is some measure of agreement, that then can be extended to the probable patterns of a much earlier time.

Basic features. For many people In hunting and gathering societies display what, by later standards, would be regarded as considerable latitude in sexual activities. Children's play, for example, often involves little direct adult supervision (a pattern which many authorities regard as highly desirable from the standpoint of creativity). Sexual touching may sometimes be involved, and while adults express some concern about this they do not usually interfere. In some cases, masturbation is also encouraged. Where temperatures permit, clothing is often rudimentary, which adds to the possibility of physical contact.

Young adults. After puberty, sexual encounters are more substantial. In her pioneering 1923 study, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, anthropologist Margaret Mead emphasized the latitude that was permitted for young people of both genders (including explicit interest in female as well as male pleasure). Her findings were later disputed, but further research largely confirmed them, though there is still dispute about the extent of promiscuity involved, as opposed to a more limited opportunity for a few partners. Even after the advent of Christianity, a substantial minority of Samoans continued to engage in premarital sex,

beginning as early as age 15, and brag about it privately. Here and in many other cases, no premium was attached to female virginity.

Role of culture. This does not mean that all hunting and gathering societies displayed this kind of behavior (climate, again, may play a major role), but it does suggest, first, that at least in a number of cases patterns differed considerably from those that would develop later on and, second, that culture plays a huge role in determining sexual rules – in contrast for example to beliefs that biology dictates some innate constraints, as in the claim of some social biologists that women are “naturally” more sexually conservative than men because of the need to control access to their limited supply of eggs.

Initiations and training. Several other cultures provide examples of the interest taken in initiating young people into sexual pleasures. Both among some aboriginal groups in Australia, and among some clusters in Africa, older girls or women actively instruct their younger counterparts; in some cases, this involves direct sexual contacts among the women, even though the older partners often have boyfriends or husbands as well. A number of hunting and gathering societies, such as the !Kung people in the Kalahari desert, encourage younger children to watch sexual acts (both homo- and heterosexual) in order to learn appropriate techniques for providing and obtaining pleasure.

Adulthood. In some cases, latitude is extended well into adulthood, even after family formation. In some parts of Papua New Guinea, villages construct special huts for extramarital sexual activity. Here and elsewhere, adults can enjoy at least occasional flings, sometimes conditioned on an expectation that they will offer a brief apology to their normal partners. (Some similar arrangements existed among certain hunting and gathering groups in North America, with separate tents involved.) In some cases also, adults talk rather freely about the sexual attributes and talents of others in their group. (The role of bragging in some of these societies often complicates evaluations of actual behaviors.)

Complexities. It is important, again, to emphasize the variety of possibilities in relevant ideas, behaviors and rituals. Several hunting and gathering societies express concern about female sexuality, warning young men of the dangers of excessive involvement. In some cases, male pleasure is emphasized with little concern for female reactions. It may be revealing – anthropology aside – that primitive art far more commonly emphasizes male prowess, particularly through exaggerated phalluses, than female, though there are some sexualized female figures. Menstruation was often disdained, with women supposed to remain isolated during their menstrual periods. Not surprisingly, many early societies also expressed concerns about birth control, in the absence of any reliable artificial devices. Sticks have been found with markings suggesting that some women kept track of their monthly cycles as a means of knowing when indulgence could be practiced without fear of pregnancy.

Several conclusions emerge, along with a host of questions given the limits on the relevant evidence available from the early human past. There is no absolutely standard set of human beliefs about sexuality: for any number of reasons, including climate and available food resources, ideas and expectations vary widely. This said, an interest in pleasure and practices that permit considerable indulgence seem fairly common, absent some of the conditions that would lead to more restrictive attitudes later on, particularly with the advent of agriculture; childhood does not necessarily require a host of sexually-inspired limitations. Gender attitudes vary widely, but there is no inevitable division between opportunities for women as well as men. While biology certainly plays a role, Margaret Mead's claim that culture – beliefs and values – is a more important factor seems widely justified.

Sexual orientations. The latitude of many hunting and gathering societies shows in one other area: the approach to differences in sexual orientations. We have seen that some societies permitted both heterosexual and same-sex activities, sometimes as part of sexual training. To be sure, there is an argument that outright homosexuality may have been rarer in early societies than was true later on – the argument hinges on a claim that in later periods the rise of arranged marriage encouraged procreation and therefore genetic reproduction by people with a relatively low heterosexual drive—in fact direct evidence is absent. What we do know is that strict boundary lines were not inevitable.

In many cases, hunting and gathering cultures explicitly recognized what are sometimes now called “two-spirit” people, who express both male and female attributes – whatever their apparent biology at birth. These people sometimes are given distinctive tasks, in some cases also believed to possess important

spiritual or creative qualities. The tradition of acknowledging this kind of sexual differentiation was prominent in a number of native groups on both the American continents, where it was widely misunderstood and attacked by European conquerors later on. But similar attitudes also developed in South Asia and elsewhere, and in several cases traces of this kind of openness persist still today.

Precedents and disputes. Clearly, the history of human sexuality builds on a complex and varied set of precedents from early societies, precedents that at least in some cases may seem more constructive than the sexual norms developed later on. At the least, human sexual history does not seem to provide a steady record of progress – however progress might be usefully defined.

But one final complication is vital as well: partly because of limited evidence but partly because the subject involves deep beliefs and passions in any society including our own, specific findings about early human sexuality continue to be vigorously disputed. There is always a risk, particularly given the absence of extensive data, of making early society a convenient foil for modern constraints, without attention to the complexities of human sexuality in any era. Extent of possible promiscuity remains a flashpoint, with some scholars urging that we not exaggerate the differences between earlier behaviors and patterns later on. But the role of what today is called homosexuality or transgender also generates controversy, again reflecting present-day disputes but also the challenge of grappling with societies whose assumptions were so different from prevailing attitudes today. It remains fair to urge that early societies often generated different sexualities from those common subsequently, but precision remains elusive.

Study questions:

1. Why do anthropologists have better evidence about sexual ideas and practices in “primitive” societies than historians do?
2. What factors might promote differences in sexual behaviors among different hunting and gathering groups?
3. Why is childhood such an important variable in sorting out the sexual values of any society?
4. Why did many readers, including many scholars, find the claims of anthropologists like Margaret Mead hard to believe?
5. Why were some hunting and gathering societies far more permissive than the more complex societies that developed later on? (Note: this question will be repeated in a slightly different form after chapter 2)

Further reading:

The Trashing of Margaret Mead: anatomy of an anthropological controversy. By Paul Shankman (University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

Anxious Pleasures: the sexual lives of an Amazonian people. By Thomas Gregor (University of Chicago Press, 1983).

Culture, Biology and Sexuality. By David Suggs and Andre Miracle (University of Georgia Press, 1999).

Sex at Dawn: the prehistoric origins of modern sexuality. By Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jathe (Harper, 2010). But see also the counterargument in Lynn Saxon, *Sex at Dusk: lifting the shining wrapping from Sex at Dawn.* By Lynn Saxon (Createspace, 2012).

Spaces between Us: queer settler colonialism and indigenous decolonization. By Scott Morgensen (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

CHAPTER 2: THE ADVENT OF AGRICULTURE

Rise of agriculture. Beginning around the Black Sea about 9000 BCE, the advent of agriculture began to introduce a vast set of changes in human institutions and behaviors, as the patterns of hunters-gatherers began gradually to be replaced. Agriculture spread slowly, because it involved a number of disadvantages along with its striking capacity to generate larger food supplies – but over several millennia it did gain ground. From initial centers, not only in the Middle East but also through separate developments in southern China and central America, agricultural peoples pushed out steadily, taking over additional territories in Asia, Europe, Africa and, though on a more limited basis, the Americas. Unquestionably also, agricultural societies quickly began to contain the largest populations. Birth rates went up rapidly almost immediately, as evident from the changing age structure of Neolithic cemeteries.

While noting the continuing importance of hunting and gathering and also nomadic herding populations, it is fair to say that world history from 5000 BCE until the 18th century CE centers on the characteristics of agricultural societies. And while different regions and historical periods during the long Agricultural Age varied and changed considerably – as we will see with regard to sexuality – agricultural conditions did generate certain standard basic patterns. These included some dramatic new approaches to human sexuality. In turn the important variations within the Agricultural Age would develop amid these constraints.

Basic Changes:

Point 1: Agricultural societies generated more explicit attention to reproductive sex than had been true previously. For most production activities – not only the predominant farming, but craft manufacturing – took shape within a family economy that depended heavily on the use of child labor. It was vital to have kids if at all possible, and indeed childless couples were often in trouble unless they could gain access to other children by taking in orphans or relatives. Correspondingly, having a number of children was a sign of happiness and success – at least for men, who generated most of the writings in these societies. Agricultural families definitely reduced the length of lactation compared to their hunting and gathering predecessors: a year and a half of breastfeeding was a common norm, in contrast to the three and a half practiced earlier. Here was one way to promote more pregnancies without abandoning all constraint.

Building on this, high birth rates were particularly important in the upper classes, who had more resources and who could use their progeny not only to support the family economy but also to serve in political or religious leadership capacities.

Reproductive sex. For several reasons, then, the reproductive role of sexuality received growing attention – which helps explain why, in some agricultural societies, aspects of sexuality not aimed at reproduction were often condemned, at least in principle. This also helps explain why people incapable of reproduction – notably, women after menopause – were usually assumed to be unsuitable for sexual activity.

But the reproductive emphasis had a clear downside: it could be overdone, particularly for the masses of the population whose economic resources were limited. Having more than 6-8 children could be a problem. (Since up to half of all children died young, 6-8 offspring would yield 3-4 adolescents, desirable for family labor and usually manageable with available resources.) Yet if not unchecked an average couple is biologically capable of an average of 14-16 children over a lifetime (this does not include the up to 20% who are biologically infertile.) So along with the emphasis on reproductive sex, agricultural families also needed to seek some limitations.

Limits of birth control. Many agricultural societies experimented with various forms of birth control: some abortifacient herbs were discovered early on. Babylonian texts for example mention a number of abortifacient plants. Early Greeks might place part of a lemon in the vagina in hopes of killing sperm. Some primitive condoms or diaphragms might also be employed: some early Egyptians for example used animal bladders as condoms. Many people also sought recourse to magical practices to prevent or eliminate unwanted pregnancies. And reliance on infanticide was widespread: in ancient China and the Mediterranean, it has been estimated that up to a quarter of all babies born, and particularly females, were put to death (mainly by abandonment in the wild).

These methods, however, were either not very reliable or, in the case of infanticide, were emotionally unpleasant – which means that many couples in agricultural societies had something of a birth control problem which was often addressed by periods of sexual abstinence, particularly when adults reached middle age. It might also be important, partly for birth control purposes, to try to limit the sexual activities of young people before marriage, creating a gap between puberty and acceptable sexual expression.

Agricultural needs and constraints thus added up to a strong emphasis on reproductive sex but also some concern about undue sexual activity particularly for women.

Point 2: Agricultural societies developed practices related to private or family property that were much different from the assumptions of hunters-gatherers, and that had huge implications for sexuality and, particularly, women's sexuality.

Role of property. Peasant households depended a certain amount of landed property to support the family economy, and property in tools and some kind of shop was also fundamental to urban artisans as well. Marriage was, among other things, a property arrangement designed to make sure that a new couple had enough land or equipment for economic support. Reproductive sex aimed at generating child labor that would utilize the property effectively. By the same token, however, sexual activity outside the family context risked bringing children into the world without an adequate property base, and this could threaten the families involved. Agricultural societies thus sought various arrangements to try to reduce the risk of pregnancy outside of marriage, and this could create serious tensions for young people of both genders in the space between puberty and marriage – tensions that had been less prominent in some hunting and gathering societies.

Shame and gender. Tensions were both reflected and expressed in a new emphasis on sexual shame. Nudity, for example, became more shameful than had been the case before – indeed the English word for shame stems from an Anglo-Saxon word for lack of clothing. For the Abrahamic religions, sexual shame was a basic feature of the punishment imposed on humankind as a result of the transgressions in the Garden of Eden. Agricultural communities widely used shame to discipline the behavior of young people but also to regulate activities of other groups – such as widows.

But the implications of the new relationship between sex and property, including the greater use of shame, bore disproportionately on women. Agricultural societies consistently generated a sexual double standard, by which women's sexuality was far more carefully supervised and constrained than that of men. This was most obvious in the upper classes and in the cities, but it applied quite widely. Though specifics varied, respectable women were not supposed to have sex before or outside of marriage; and while this might be urged on men as well, the standards were never as rigorously enforced. Thus Babylonian law stipulated that a man might legitimately take a concubine, particularly if his wife was infertile, but no such latitude was granted to women. Indeed the law insisted on the importance of strict rectitude for women, such that even if a woman was merely accused of infidelity she had to prove her innocence. And while both men and women could be punished by death for adultery, male adultery consisted of sex with another married woman, while female adultery was sex with another man, period. Variants on the double standard occurred in literally all agricultural societies, and leave an important mark even in sexuality today.

Regulating female behaviors. Because women are the bearers of children, disproportionate attention to their sexuality was part of the delicate balance between reproduction and control; this was the reason that infanticide most commonly centered on female infants, and also why girls were more scrutinized than boys before marriage. But more was involved. Property holdings, particularly in land, were a vital part of the agricultural economy: otherwise there was inadequate incentive to put in the labor necessary to clear land, dig wells and so on – families needed to own the results of this kind of work, and be able to pass property on to later generations as well. In a male-dominated society, however, it seemed vital for a husband to be sure that the children his wife bore were his, and not some other man's. Hence another overriding need to place the clearest possible limits on the sexual behaviors of wives.

Property concerns also added to the reasons to pay particular attention to the sexual behavior of girls or young women before marriage. A pregnant girl, after all, would be ushering a child into the world without appropriate property arrangements. Marriage, in contrast (in most agricultural societies) brought a young

woman into the orbit of her husband's (or husband's family's) property, which in turn set up a family economy suitable for handling a child. Young men who sowed some wild oats might be reproved, but if they impregnated other girls that was their families' problem in final analysis. To be sure, most agricultural societies tried to make sure that a young man would have to marry a girl he had impregnated, but the controls on young men remained notably looser than in the case of their female counterparts.

Other features. While the complicated needs around reproduction and defense of family property introduced the most sweeping innovations into the context for sexual behavior, a few other features of agricultural societies deserve mention.

For most families, housing conditions were limited, and many family members slept in the same room. Children, as a result, could have some awareness of the sexual activities of their parents. For peasants – the vast majority of the population – family members also had direct knowledge of the sexual behaviors of domestic animals. (Some amount of bestiality occurred in some agricultural societies, though it is hard to assess and was widely reproved.) Here were too features of life in the Agricultural Age that need to be factored into any overall analysis. They could provide an earthy awareness of sexuality that strained against some of the conventions seeking to limit sexual expression.

Prostitution. But the most obvious sexual innovation of the Agricultural Age, alongside the new approaches to reproduction, post-puberty experience, and gender, was the widespread development of prostitution. It is impossible to know how widespread prostitution was in the countryside, but there is no question that it became a standard feature in urban areas as agricultural economies became more complex. Prostitution is mentioned in the earliest Sumerian lists of professions, in the 4th millennium BCE, and it developed in literally every urban setting in every agricultural society. Thus records of prostitution in China go back at least to the 7th century BCE, when brothels were licensed by the state and actually provided some tax revenue.

The practice of prostitution expressed many of the basic features and tensions of the Agricultural Age. It created opportunities for sexual activity – and, possibly, sexual pleasure – outside the family context and the emphasis on reproduction. It could provide men with sexual outlets free from concerns about unwanted pregnancies and with some protection as well from the most obvious sources of shaming. It could particularly help some men bridge the gap between puberty and marriage. Of course it expressed the sexual double standard – while there were some male prostitutes in agricultural cities, respectable women did not have access, and the prostitutes most commonly serviced other men – but it also reflected the fact that men married later than women did (because of the need to establish skills and property adequate to support a family), creating a post-puberty tension that women did not experience to the same degree. (In many agricultural societies the problem of controlling female sex after puberty was often handled by early marriage age, but for economic reasons this was not possible for men to the same degree).

For the women involved, prostitution reflected the difficulty of making a living outside of the family economy by other means, but along with real risks (including disease) it could provide a certain degree of independence. There is no way to measure the frequency of reliance on the services of prostitutes, and in the upper classes other, more expensive arrangements, including concubines and mistresses, provided further opportunities. But the antiquity and ubiquity of the institution, as a creation of the Agricultural Age, are noteworthy.

Conclusion Basic features of sexuality in agricultural societies have left an abundance of sources, so the problems of accurate data are far less acute than they are for earlier hunting and gathering groups. And whatever the judgments about earlier conditions, it is clear that the new emphasis on a family economy and property introduced huge changes into sexual values and practices – though the rise of prostitution reminds us that considerable complexity could still be involved. Within the agricultural context, major regions developed a variety of specific systems of culture and behavior, for though pervasive, the context was rather general, inviting a number of different implementations. No small amount of human history is involved in trying to figure out how particular groups and individuals worked through the constraints and opportunities of the Agricultural Age, in creating an array of further innovations. Finally, the sexuality patterns developed in response to agriculture leave a legacy for societies even today, even as they seek to adjust some of the specifics in response to new needs and opportunities.

Study questions:

1. Did agricultural conditions affect opportunities for sexual pleasure?
2. Why was birth control a complex issue in agricultural societies?
3. How and why did sexuality become more gendered in the agricultural context?
4. Why was prostitution such a standard feature of agricultural cities, regardless of specific laws and cultures?
5. Did the rise of agriculture change human sexuality in fundamental ways, or were the necessary modifications relatively modest?

Further Reading:

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CHAPTER 3: CLASSICAL CHINA

Classical features. Though there were some earlier precedents, Chinese civilization began to take shape in the centuries after about 1200 BCE. From that point until the fall of the Han dynasty (220 CE) Chinese society developed a number of distinctive characteristics, many of which would persist into later periods as well. In general terms, these were the centuries in which China developed its strong emphasis on a well-organized central state, under imperial leadership; unified its core territory; and developed signature cultural systems including Daoism and, above all, Confucianism. Under Confucian guidance and its emphasis on hierarchy, a social structure emerged headed by a “scholar-gentry” class at the top, with a large peasantry and, by the standards of the time, substantial cities.

China was, and is, a large and diverse society, so it would be misleading to claim that some single basic approach to sexuality emerged during this formative period. On the whole, however, particularly with the rise of Confucianism, the Chinese approach to sexuality tended to emphasize a certain caution or moderation: strong emphasis on the importance of family and social stability pushed in that direction despite the absence of any sweeping religious sanctions. This tone combined, however, with a vigorous differentiation between the genders, that created far wider range for acceptable male behaviors that that available to respectable women; and the moderate tone was complicated by a number of practices and institutions devoted to sexual pleasure. All of this operated within the general sexual framework of agricultural society.

Sex manuals. Materials from the early Zhou dynasty emphasized interest in sexual pleasure. China generated the first known sex manuals, which graphically described relevant body parts and compared orgasm to the bursting of a cloud. Some pornographic works were written as well, both for men and for women. And at some point a custom developed of giving explicit sexual pictures to a couple as a wedding gift. Much of this applied mainly to the upper class, for among other things literacy was not widespread, but it established interesting precedents.

Polygyny. Early on as well, many Chinese families practiced polygyny – a pattern that would persist in some ways into the 20th century. Multiple wives might be taken to augment the family labor force, or to try

to assure the birth of sons, or to help with child care; but clearly sexual pleasure, or at least male sexual pleasure, could be part of the picture as well. At various points the imperial government issued laws trying to regulate the practice, sometimes seeking to protect the position of first wife, but they also frequently regularized supplementary concubines. At the level of the imperial household, hundreds and sometimes thousands of women would be available as concubines, and some emperors developed complex schedules to keep up with the supply. Officials were sometimes employed to keep track of the visits, noting the superior status of women whom the ruler favored most frequently. In the upper classes more generally, wealth could be demonstrated through the number of concubines a man maintained. Brothels were established during the Zhou dynasty, regulated and openly available; and here, some upper-class women participated as well, taking advantage of the services of male prostitutes. Many brothels, often called “houses of singing girls”, featured music, food and other entertainment beyond sexual activity; and occasionally a favored prostitute might rise to the position of concubine.

Constraints and the double standard. These various practices were qualified, however, at least in respectable culture, by a number of reservations, aimed particularly at women. Again during the Zhou period the influential *Book of Songs* warned against premarital sex for women, arguing that it would jeopardize the all-important success of the family later on. In subsequent centuries, Confucian emphasis on the orderly family added further elements, including strong warnings against deviant acts such as incest. Confucius was concerned about the disruptive potential of sexuality – particularly, female sexuality – and urged careful regulation. Respectable families worked hard to maintain the virginity of daughters, vital to qualify for marriage; and as was common in many agricultural societies, women often married quite young, to husbands 10- to 15 years their senior, frequently with prior sexual experience of their own. But while disproportionate attention was devoted to women’s constraints, Confucianists and others, including doctors, had warnings for men as well, not so much in terms of fidelity but because of the physical dangers of overindulgence. Undue expenditure of semen was a risk to male vitality and health.

Arranged marriage. As in many agricultural societies, marriage arrangements normally had little to do with sexual attraction. Girls, most obviously, were contracted into marriage by their parents; some imperial daughters were even sent to be wives of “barbarian” leaders in central Asia, as conciliatory gifts, often to their loud dismay. But men, also, normally had little choice in a union designed to combine appropriate economic assets for successful family life. These practices help explain why, particularly in the upper classes, other sexual outlets were sought so often.

Sexual orientations. Homosexuality was widely if not loudly accepted. Many emperors had male as well as female concubines, and poems were written to the joys of love affairs between men: “sharing the peach” became a symbol for anal sex. Lesbian relationships received less attention, but they occurred fairly openly as well, and were often recorded in erotic art.

Eunuchs. Imperial China became one of several societies to create an important group of eunuchs, men who were castrated in order to qualify for certain kinds of public service. Most obviously, eunuchs played a vital role within imperial households, because they could be trusted not to violate royal wives and concubines. Under the Zhou, the practice was probably introduced as a response to acts of treason, since given the emphasis on male prowess the punishment was dire. But with time, the constructive potential of the practice became clear as well: trusted eunuch could achieve great informal power. Under the Han dynasty, the imperial household supported as many as 5,000 eunuchs – recruited from all regions of the empire, sometimes deliberately castrated and sold into service by parents eager to see these boys advance in status.

Parental strategies. The complexity of Chinese sexual norms could create dilemmas for some lower-class parents, particularly in the cities. On the one hand, respectability could seem vital for family formation and preservation. On the other hand, economic pressures, amid high birth rates, might prompt some parents to train children, particularly girls, in entertainment skills and other graces, hoping that they might be taken into some wealthier male household.

Conclusion Overall, classical China developed a rather complicated balance between regulation and family respectability, on the one hand, and a variety of sexual outlets on the other. Religious considerations introduced few complications: Daoism, China’s main contribution to spirituality, accepted sexual activity as a spiritual practice. Daoist texts described a number of sexual acts under the heading of

“joining energy” or “joining the essences”, appropriate for good health and spiritual advancement. Ultimately (a few centuries after the classical period), Confucian moderates actually sought to dampen Daoist enthusiasm in the interests of public moderation and decorum.

Questions:

1. How did Chinese emphasis on strong distinctions between men and women show up in sexual ideas and practices?
2. What were some characteristic Confucian concerns about sexuality?
3. How did the considerable acceptance of homosexuality fit the larger sexual culture of classical China?
4. Did the development of the eunuch class suggest a belief that abstention from sex was morally preferable?

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CHAPTER 4: CLASSICAL INDIA

Basic patterns. After the decline of an earlier river-valley civilization in present-day Pakistan, classical Indian history took shape gradually with the formation of regional governments but above all through the emergence of Hinduism and Buddhism plus the unfolding of the social caste system. Hinduism was a cluster of beliefs and practices that evolved over time under the guidance of priests or Brahmins and through epic poems, initially written in Sanskrit, which began to emerge by the 7th century BCE; Buddhism developed as a partial religious alternative by the 5th century. The caste system similarly took shape during final millennium BCE, rigorously separating groups by occupation and permissible social contacts (including marriage).

Artistic culture. Distinctive features of Indian sexual culture were most clearly linked to the rise of Hinduism and related public art, which at least superficially contrasted rather vividly with the cultural patterns of classical China. As in China, however, some significant sexual patterns developed outside the leading religious and social systems. Simply put, aspects of Indian culture embraced sexuality more openly and enthusiastically than was the case in Confucian China, though actual sexual practices, centered around the family and reproductive life, probably varied considerably less.

Artistic representations were striking. Depictions of Hindu gods and goddesses frequently emphasized sexual attributes, for example in friezes on temple exteriors. Public art also included scenes of copulation, including divine lovers like Krishna and Radha, and murals might contain paintings of nude dancing girls. A 5th century (CE) poet described men pining over portraits of their lovers, commenting on the beauty of their bodies. In the Gupta period, sculptors portrayed voluptuous mother-goddesses in pink stone, with almost lifelike fleshy qualities. Other artists in the Gupta empire offered illustrations of sex manuals, with detailed descriptions of anatomy and sexual positions. Clearly, sexual expression and spirituality were not seen in opposition. Women were esteemed for beauty and fertility, not sources of dangerous temptation.

Religion and literature. Some ambivalence did exist: holy men might renounce sex as part of their removal from worldliness, and boys might take vows of celibacy during religious training. Sexual abstention was also recommended on some Hindu holy days. On the whole, however, it was the compatibility of sexual pleasure and religious goals that was most striking.

These attitudes readily carried over into literature. Thus in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, a major epic: "In the embrace of his beloved, a man forgets the whole world, everything both within and without" – the same sensation that occurs in the process of spiritual advancement. A variety of writers authored sex manuals, describing positions and techniques designed to offer maximum pleasure – for women as well as men. The *Kama Sutra*, the most important textbook of love ever devised, was written in the 2nd century CE, but it had many antecedents. The *Kama Sutra* itself, with its varied and detailed suggestions beginning with elaborate foreplay, was republished frequently in India and was also widely translated – even gaining audience in the United States during the 20th century when interest in recreational sex began to increase in a very different cultural context.

Family and marriage. This distinctive sexual culture, which would deeply shock Western observers when they began to reach India in any numbers during the early modern period, may have had some impact on actual sexual behavior, but some caution is essential – partly, of course, because the evidence is less abundant. Rulers early in the classical period probably took several wives, and some polygamy persisted in other groups; but – more than in China or the Middle East – India on the whole emphasized the importance of monogamy – and this would include assumptions of strict female chastity, with women often marrying quite young. Marriages were carefully arranged by parents – here was a tradition that took deep root – and couples often did not even meet until their wedding. This said, the Indian tradition also stressed the importance of a get-acquainted period of four days at the outset of the marriage, prior to sexual activity – followed by six days of further seclusion designed for enjoyment. And sexual pleasure, along with fertility, was a valid goal as the marriage progressed, with husbands responsible for their wives' satisfaction along with their own. Here, possibly, was a real life link with the assumptions embedded in the public culture.

Prostitution and adultery. Considerable prostitution developed, not surprisingly not only because of the public culture but also because men usually had to wait for years after puberty before marrying. Some Indian women, trained as entertainers, were even exchanged with other societies – as far away as Egypt – in what might be seen as an early version of the sex trade. In India itself, brothels but also street prostitutes flourished in the larger cities, loosely supervised by regional governments and, as in China, supplying tax revenues. The autumn Diwali festival might include visits to prostitutes, and accomplished, high-level prostitutes frequently accompanied leaders when they traveled.

On the other hand, adultery was strongly condemned, at least in principle. And prostitutes themselves might be punished if caught with ordinary married men (more harshly than the men themselves). While female beauty was certainly praised, standards emphasized qualities appropriate for childbirth: fertility was a clearer goal than pleasure. Many rituals developed to promote conception, and both pregnant women and new mothers were carefully supported and monitored. Indian culture also tended to disapprove of homosexuality, another sign of the link between sex and reproduction. Male prostitution seems to have been less common than in other classical societies. But there were some artistic depictions of same-sex activity, as well as considerable acceptance of the idea of the "Third Sex"; traditional Hinduism ranged from critical to neutral. Revealingly the *Kama Sutra* dedicated an entire chapter to erotic homosexual behavior. On another front: while eunuchs existed they were far less numerous or important than in China (or, later, the Middle East).

Sexual jealousy. One other feature of Indian sexuality, measurable today, might have had roots in the classical period: a slightly higher than average level of male sexual jealousy. Jealousy is a sexually-linked emotion found everywhere to some degree, though more common among men than women, which in itself reflects the gender disparities of the Agricultural Age. The greater intensity of sexuality in Indian culture, combined with larger assumptions of male superiority, might spur a readiness to lash out in cases of real or imagined sexual rivalry. There is no direct behavioral evidence from the classical period, but the theme emerges in several stories within the Hindu epics, sometimes featuring women who deceived their husbands but were ultimately brought to justice. Even wives forced into sex by other men could be roundly condemned (and, at least in literature, sometimes renounced or even put to death by their husbands).

Conclusion Overall, it remains highly probable that Indian sexual representations were considerably more distinctive than daily norms and behaviors. As in other classical societies, and despite the esteem

for female pleasure, gender distinctions mattered considerably; and social differentiations, between the mighty and the population as a whole, complicated the picture as well. Within marriage, however, the values of public culture may have had some impact in expectations and practices alike.

Study questions:

1. What were the most important differences in sexual culture between India and China during the classical period?
2. How was sexuality compatible with the strong emphasis on religion in classical India?
3. What might have been distinctive about prostitution in the context of classical India?
4. What were the principal sexual constraints for respectable women, and were they particularly unusual for a predominantly agricultural society?
5. What are the main problems in relating sexual culture to actual sexual behavior in classical India?

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CHAPTER 5: 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?

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SECTION II POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD SEXUALITY

Overview

The big new variable in the history of sexuality during the postclassical centuries involved the spread and growing influence of the great missionary religions. Religion had affected sexuality before, of course, as with Hinduism and early Buddhism. Judaism had introduced an unusually firm emphasis on reproductive sex, with a variety of rules not only against extramarital sex but also against masturbation and homosexuality. However, most people in the world before the postclassical period were polytheists, and while polytheism could offer examples of the gods enjoying sex or seized with jealousy, it did not usually generate elaborate rules.

The missionary religions. As Buddhism spread more widely in the centuries after 500 CE, as Christianity not only spread but clarified its approach to sexuality, and as Islam first took shape, the role of religion in sexuality measurably increased in many parts of Asia, Europe and North Africa. (Conversions to Islam in sub-Saharan Africa were also significant, but Africans often downplayed the implications for sexuality at this point.) On the whole, the new religions pushed for greater sexual control, altering the approaches taken by the classical societies. But there was considerable variation from one faith to the other, and sometimes within. Further, it is not clear how many people significantly altered their ideas or behaviors.

Buddhism. Of the three major missionary religions, Buddhism proved the hardest to pin down. Buddhists vigorously urged renunciation of life's pleasures in favor of meditation and spiritual quest. Most monasteries and convents required celibacy, on pain of expulsion. But Buddhist lay people were not expected to avoid reproductive sex – their spiritual ventures were more sporadic and some also hoped that the virtues acquired by Buddhist saints would spill over to them. Furthermore, while Buddhism cautioned against indulgence, it did not set down detailed rules about sexual behavior; there was more room for individual interpretation.

Sex and spirituality. Finally, some Buddhist sects, including some monastic movements, actually incorporated sexual activity with their spiritual exercises. A movement called Tantric Buddhism developed a detailed set of sexual positions, sometimes associated with extreme yoga. Several monastic orders in Korea and particularly Japan were known for their sexual activities. A decentralized religion, Buddhism harbored an impressive variety of sexual approaches – though for most people the counsels of moderation were probably the most influential.

Christian struggles with sex. By the later stages of the Roman Empire Christianity developed the most distinctive, and hostile, approach to sexuality of all the major religions. Insistence that the mother of Christ was a virgin was already an interesting indication of the separation between sex and holiness. Early centuries of Christianity witnessed a number of hermits who loudly struggled with their sexuality in pursuit of spiritual advancement. St. Augustine, the most influential of the Western theologians, pointedly renounced an abandoned youth as he wrote of the dangers of sexual desire for the Christian.

Celibacy. The decision of the Western Church to require celibacy for priests, as well as monks and nuns, was a clear statement that chastity was the best path to salvation. And while most Christians were not expected to take this path – marriage itself was a sacrament – the Christian approach could enhance feelings of guilt. Not a few Christians, once married, abandoned their vows later in life in favor of entering a religious order. Christianity did produce a few religious aspirants who mixed sexual fantasies with their spiritual quest, but this was rarer than with Buddhism.

Orthodox approach. Eastern Christianity took a somewhat more modest approach, particularly in the decision that priests could marry. But monks were supposed to remain fiercely celibate; some Orthodox monasteries constructed elaborate arrangement to make sure that no women could approach.

Rules for behavior. Building on Judaism, Christianity also had a host of rules for the sexual behaviors of ordinary folks. Chastity before marriage; adultery was a sin; masturbation was a sin; and the Church came out unusually strongly against homosexuality.

Islam and pleasure. Islam ventured a somewhat different combination. There was no particular virtue in chastity. God had created the possibility for sexual activity and pleasure, and this should be honored. Islam was quite specific about the validity of sexual pleasure in marriage and the obligations for husbands to provide satisfaction for their wives. Visions of heaven even included a sexual component.

Rules and punishments. But this approach was balanced by a host of rules and punishments, most obviously against premarital or extramarital sex. During the holy month of Ramadan, sex was forbidden during daylight hours. Penalties could include stoning, though Islamic officials urged mercy and forgiveness where possible. Anal sex was forbidden, but same sex activity more generally was tolerated.

Public culture. All three religions, finally (with a few exceptions for Buddhism) urged against displays of sexuality in public art or literature – again, a significant shift from the patterns of the classical world.

Vice and variety. Predictably, religious strictures did not change everything. Prostitution for example continued to flourish, often in the same neighborhoods as a major mosque or church. Pornographic writings circulated as well, though slightly underground. The Arab Golden Age featured an array of literary works with sexual themes, and during the later Middle Ages sexual symbolism – for example, the rose as a symbol for the vagina – showed up in Western literature as well. These developments must be included in any overall synthesis of sex during the religious age.

Conclusion. This said, there is little question that the rise of the missionary religions altered rules for sexual behavior, dampened the public culture, and undoubtedly created new pressures for guilt or shame for some of the faithful.

CHAPTER 6: RELIGION AND SEXUALITY

Religion, one of the key ingredients in most human culture and predominant in some, can offer three approaches to sexuality, either separately or in some combination. It can largely ignore sexual issues in favor of worshipping and conciliating various forces of nature. It is possible that many early animist religions had few direct sexual implications, which would have been consistent with some other aspects of hunting and gathering societies.

Or religion can embrace sexuality as entirely compatible with divinity, sometimes seeing sexual climax itself as an essentially religious experience. Linkage of this sort showed in Chinese Daoism, where sexuality was part of a spiritual connection to nature: desire, or sexual energy (*jing chi*) is part of the basic energy of life. While the Taoist approach created concerns about loss of semen, some Taoist groups viewed intercourse as an explicitly spiritual activity.

Or, finally, religion can view sexuality skeptically or even critically, worrying about the moral implications of sexual excess and concerned about the extent to which sexual pursuits distract from appropriate attention to the divine. In this final approach, virginity or celibacy can be highly valued as a sacrifice to the divine or as the best state in which to pursue transcendent religious goals. We have seen elements of both the embrace and the recoil in some of the religions covered within the classical societies.

Polytheism. Building on earlier animism, many polytheistic religions provided opportunities to model sexual goals and problems through characterizations of the gods and goddesses. Most polytheistic systems fully associated the gods with sexuality, rather than suggesting a deep gulf between human strivings and divine standards. The doings of the gods could highlight possibilities for sexual pleasure and delights of the body. But they also could connect sex with excess and disease, and they often vividly illustrated the links between sexuality and jealousy, and even outright conflict.

While polytheism on the whole suggested the normalcy of sexual expression, despite some risks, it could also generate some sense that devotion to celibacy, for a small group, might be an appropriate way to honor the gods.

Judaism. More clearly and consistently than any prior religion, Judaism, as it took shape in the centuries after about 1200 BCE, emphasized a single, all-powerful God. Unlike polytheism, monotheism created a massive gulf between the divine and the human; divinity was not tainted through any involvement with

sexuality. Gone were the images of sexually cavorting gods and goddesses. Indeed, as the story of Genesis made clear, sexuality was visited on humans as part of the punishment for their sins of desire: Adam and Eve initially had no sexual impulses, and lived without shame in their mutual nudity.

At the same time, however, focus on a single God could highlight the importance of human reproduction, to create additional souls for service and worship – giving basic religious sanction to this key feature of sexuality in agricultural societies, as polytheism for the most part had not done.

These somewhat complex implications showed clearly as early Jewish views on sexuality were elaborated. Jewish sexual standards focused strongly on the importance of reproduction, and while this by no means precluded sexual pleasure it dramatically limited the ways in which pleasure could be sought. The result resembled sexual guidance in other cultures in many ways, but the regulatory limits loomed larger, at least in principle.

Core teachings. One of the leading duties stipulated in the Torah was the commandment to procreate: God wants the world to be populated, and men have a particular responsibility in this regard. Other commandments instructed men to provide pleasure for their wives (even if they are past childbearing age or are otherwise incapable of having children). Men were urged to stay home for at least a year after marriage, to establish a good sexual relationship. And sexual pleasure within marriage can be sought in virtually any way imaginable: Maimonides, a medieval philosopher, stated simply, “a man may do whatever he desires with his wife. He may engage in relations whenever he desires, he may kiss any organ he desires” – all provided however that he “does not release his seed in vain.” (Other material however urged against using any compulsion for a wife to have sex.) While the basic approach emphasized male initiative, and women were urged to remain “desirable” for their husbands, other guidance stressed female pleasure and the need for arousal, and even the desirability of assuring female orgasm first during marital sex. Maimonides also insisted that God created nothing ugly; “if we were to say that intercourse is repulsive, we blaspheme the God who made the genitals.”

Some tension was attached to this enthusiastic approach. Sexual activity was technically impure, and some sources urged that particularly pious people should abstain from sex. Moses kept separate from his wife during his prophetic leadership, either to avoid distraction or to maintain purity or both. And it was vital to maintain the ability to discipline sexual desire, if only to assure that it remain confined to marriage.

Prohibitions. Several potential sexual activities, however, were absolutely out of bounds: incest, male-male anal intercourse, bestiality, and sex during a wife’s menstrual period. The prohibitions most obviously reflected the intense focus on procreation as the ultimate sexual goal. Certain categories of people were also out of bounds in sexual relations, including sexual contacts between Jews and Gentiles. Masturbation was firmly proscribed, and since it wastes a potential future human being it was actually a form of murder. (Female masturbation was also reproved, but less intensely.) And extramarital sex was also forbidden, with a man who entices a single woman to have sex obligated normally to marry her afterward.

Strictures against homosexuality were intense. “Thou shall not lie with mankind...it is an abomination.” Any effort at marriage between two men invites divine punishment. Less attention was paid to same-sex activities among women, though they were also forbidden in principle.

The traditional Jewish approach to sexuality thus combined enthusiasm with an emphasis on an overriding purpose and a host of related prohibitions that could potentially compromise the enthusiasm – particularly for young people exposed most directly to the cautionary approach. This kind of tension was hardly unknown in other societies, but its religious base, rooted in God’s purposes and judgments, added a further dimension.

The idea of a religious age. The interaction between religion and sexuality is a consistent theme in world history, certainly important before and during the classical period, and vital in developments in more modern times. Contemporary studies show important correlations between particular religions and the frequency, or infrequency, of behaviors such as premarital or extramarital sex (in the contemporary world, Buddhists and then Muslims are least likely to engage in sex outside marriage, according to sociological surveys).

However, religion assumed particular importance in the centuries after the fall of the classical empires. It was during these centuries that Buddhism enjoyed its most rapid expansion, even as its role in India lessened: missionary efforts and new contacts promoted a Buddhist surge into Southeast Asia and also into China and from there to Korea and Japan. Christianity, a newer religion, gained ground rapidly in the later Roman Empire after Constantine began to provide state support in the early 4th century CE. Christians comprised about 10% of the Roman population before that point, but now moved forward rapidly. From this base, in turn, Christianity expanded into all parts of northern Europe by the 10th-12th centuries. Finally Islam, the newest of the world religions, arose after 600 and quickly spread through the Middle East and North Africa, and soon into India (as the largest minority faith), Central and Southeast Asia and parts of Africa.

The vigor of these religions, and their claim to appeal to all of humankind rather than just one people, gave them growing influence in areas ranging from politics and art to individual conduct. Religious change was not the only theme of the postclassical period (c.600-1450): interregional trade also expanded and there were a variety of regional political developments. And the power of religion varied, lower for example in China than most of the other Afro-Eurasian societies. Nor, finally, did individuals react to religious strictures identically, even within a single area. All this said, the missionary religions brought new factors into play concerning sexuality – though the changes were not identical among the three – and their expansion generated some durable new impulses. Alterations in sexual values and behaviors still operated within the basic framework of the Agricultural Age, but several of the innovations were striking.

Study questions:

1. Why is the subject of religion and sexuality likely to be complicated?
2. What were some key differences between the Jewish and the polytheistic approach to sexuality?
3. What were the implications of the Garden of Eden story for evaluations of sexuality?
4. How did the Jewish sexual code compare to common values in the various classical societies?

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CHAPTER 7: BUDDHISM

Buddhism formed initially as a reaction against aspects of Hinduism, most obviously what Gautama Buddha saw as excessive Hindu commitment to ritual and the priestly role plus its embrace of the caste system. Buddhism also moved against some of the Hindu approaches to sexuality, though – just to complicate matters – Buddhist faithful might also replicate aspects of Hindu thinking and representation.

Sexuality as danger. At one level, Buddhism could seem unusually hostile to sexual interests. Buddha's first discourse, focused on craving as the key cause of human suffering, illustrates his warnings through sexuality:

“ If one, longing for sensual pleasure, achieves it, yes, he's enraptured at heart. The mortal gets what he wants. But if for that person – longing, desiring – the pleasures diminish, he's shattered, as if shot with an arrow...So one, always mindful, should avoid sensual desires. Letting them go, he will cross over the flood like one who, having bailed out the boat, has reached the far shore.”

Other early Buddhist comments pointed in the same direction: desire was like a tree laden with fruit but too dangerous to climb. The *Dazhidulum* clarified the admonition: “He who enjoys pleasures is never satisfied; he who is deprived of them suffers greatly; When he does not possess them, he wants to possess them. When he possesses them, he is tormented.”

Monasticism and gender. Correspondingly, most Buddhist religious orders – both male and female -- remained firmly celibate, with any violation a cause for expulsion. Similarly, Buddhist temples, far less elaborate than their Hindu counterparts in any event, dispensed with any explicit sensual imagery. The tone of Buddhist public and artistic culture was, usually, vastly different from Hindu patterns.

Concern about sexuality applied to specific comments concerning women: while the spirituality of individual women was praised, many stories offered warnings about women who led men into sexual temptation. An East Asian Buddhist story highlights a monk who fell in love with a courtesan; ridiculed in public, he lost all his spiritual power.

Complexities. Yet a number of further elements entered in, modifying what otherwise might seem an unusually bleak view. In the first place, while sex was certainly a good example of the snares of pleasure-seeking, it was not the only one. Some Buddhist leaders have been at pains to point out that sexual enjoyment was not distinctively worse than other kinds of superficial indulgence.

Further, while the Buddhist approach emphasized caution, it did not generate an elaborate list of do's and don'ts – except for a few admonitions to monks and nuns about specific practices to avoid. In contrast to the Abrahamic religions, all of which built on the Jewish impulse to develop specific regulations, Buddhism allowed considerable discretion, leaving decisions about particular sexual interests largely up to the individual or the specific community. A key Buddhist precept did warn against “sexual misconduct” but without detail. This could generate, among other things, wide differences of opinion about issues like same-sex involvement. Buddhists in general were instructed not to have sex with another's spouse or betrothed, with someone under age, or with a person vowed to celibacy, but that was about it. Nor, in contrast to Judaism, was there particular emphasis on focusing only on reproductive sex (which in principle could be just as disappointing as any other human striving).

East Asia. Lacking a single holy book or elaborate governing apparatus, Buddhism, as it expanded its geographic range, also generated a number of variants, and sexuality was one of the elements involved. In China, for example, Buddhists encountered concerns about the lack of emphasis on the family, and some adjustments were made to stress the importance of family life for most people. At the same time, even non-Buddhist Chinese sometimes found Buddhist sexual caution desirable, for example in disciplining wayward girls, who might be sent to Buddhist nuns for guidance.

Buddhism in Korea and particularly Japan often greatly modified the warnings about sexuality itself. Several Korean stories featured Buddhist holy men who indulged in sex without harming their sanctity. One, from the 12th century, even highlighted a monk who regularly visited brothels, but by being open about his desire suffered no spiritual damage. Other Buddhists might claim that their enjoyment of sex merely expressed a love for humanity, and so they were not defiled. Yet another story featured two

monks, one, celibate, was condemned because of false beliefs while the other, though committing immoral acts, won salvation because of his true faith.

Japanese monks were particularly likely to participate in sexual relationships, visiting prostitutes and sometimes maintaining longstanding relationships. Some claimed that this was a vital part of their spiritual quest. A Buddhist representation of the Hindu god Ganesha was worshipped by elements of the Japanese public, including women in the pleasure business. In the 12th century an extreme monastic order arose that explicitly used ejaculation in ritual, though this was ultimately condemned by mainstream Buddhists. More quietly, several Japanese Buddhist leaders preached that sex and love were paths to Enlightenment. And, unsurprisingly, in the Japanese context some Buddhist saints were worshipped as gods of love and sources of fertility.

Tantric Buddhism. Even outside Japan, Buddhist groups might directly associate sexual acts with spiritual goals. A variant called Tantric Buddhism developed in India, Tibet and elsewhere that – against the Buddhist norms – highlighted sexual intercourse in artistic representations of the ultimate reality, as a means of stimulating meditation practices and chants. While the female form, including the vagina, was central in these representations, most practitioners were male; women’s bodies promoted Enlightenment, but a woman was rarely directly enlightened. Some forms of yoga were developed that also involved sexual expression. In some services a Tantric master had intercourse with a female acolyte and then used the resultant bodily fluids to anoint others. Over time (and into the modern era), this aberrant form of Buddhism could lead to a variety of sexual abuses, and also served to promote attacks on Buddhism more generally that greatly exaggerated the extent of sexual license. Many Buddhist leaders themselves condemned that Tantric approach and urged adherence to the original ascetic purposes.

Variety. The variety of sexual implications in Buddhism obviously complicates any overall evaluation. The overriding goal of seeking spiritual enlightenment and release from ordinary worldly concerns could lead to sexual restraint, including monastic asceticism or, simply, adherence to more common rules about avoiding adultery or premarital sex. A number of Buddhist variants sought to downplay female sexual pleasure, seeing the female body as impure and a source of temptation, leading to particular emphasis on the need for restraint. But for some, the goals of enlightenment and release incorporated sexual outlets directly, making sexuality one of several domains that highlighted the multiplicity of Buddhist styles. It is vital also to remember the absence of detailed rules about sexual behavior in the overall Buddhist approach, which could generate some tolerance for different sexual expressions.

The Buddhist mainstream. It is not easy to determine the general impact of the Buddhist approach to sexuality. The religion encouraged a minority toward asceticism, but it also, though more rarely, could steer another minority to incorporate sexuality into religious ritual. Many ordinary people, sincere Buddhists, might well conclude that the religion did not address sexuality particularly clearly, muting its impact and confirming older traditions about the importance of reproduction and male potency, or the need to keep a watchful eye over female behavior. At most, Buddhism might enhance a concern about undue emphasis on sexuality more generally, and it is important to remember that some people explicitly turned to monasteries to train sons and particularly daughters in restraint. The absence of specific regulations, apart from some monasteries, also played a role in popular interpretations. For the literate, Buddhism offered varied discussions on sexuality and even on sexual positions – depending on the specific sect – but it avoided detailed commentary on daily issues like birth control, homosexuality, abortion, masturbation or even the promotion of fertility. As a result, a “Buddhist approach” to sexuality is harder to define than would be the case with the other world religions.

Study questions:

1. How could Buddhism lead to contradictory extremes in dealing with sexuality?
2. What was the role of the monastic movement in Buddhist approaches to sexuality?
3. Did Buddhism promote major changes in sexual ideas and practices for the majority of the faithful?
4. Why did Buddhism, in the main, avoid detailed rules about sexual behavior?

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CHAPTER 8: 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 culture 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?

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CHAPTER 9: ISLAM AND SEXUALITY

The Prophet said: "When one of you has sex with your wife, it is a rewarded act of charity.' The Companions were surprised and said, 'But we do it purely out of desire. How can it be counted as charity?' The Prophet replied: "If you had done it with a forbidden woman, it would have been counted as la sin, but if you do it legitimately, it is counted as charity."

"If *Fahisha* (promiscuity or sexual immorality) appears among a people to such an extent that they commit it openly, plagues and diseases that were never known among their predecessors will spread among them."

Basic approach. Islam's distinctive approach to sexuality combined acceptance of sexuality and even sexual pleasure within marriage, or for men with concubines, with an unusually strong effort to prevent, or punish, sexual expressions outside that context. No special value was placed on lifelong celibacy but a variety of measures were introduced to channel sexual activity, particularly for women – with marriage setting the basis for the highest spiritual state for both parties. Compared to Christianity or Buddhism, it was a distinctive combination.

The Islamic view of heaven reflected the positive view of sexuality, for it would be filled with delights (though, in the popular view, most obviously for men, who would have an array of partners) – one of the rewards for religious observance in this life. And during life, sensual love was an appropriate, if obviously incomplete, accompaniment to striving for the love of God. Only one spinoff sect in the 9th century, Khraji, placed any religious value on celibacy. For most Muslims, only during the holy month of Ramadan should marital activity be curbed -- from dawn to dusk, along with access to food and drink, as part of religious renewal; here, Islam joined other major faiths in seeing religious merit in periodic control over appetite.

Centrality of marriage. Marriage was the vital institution to channel sexual desire appropriately. The theologian al-Ghazali, writing in the 11th century, saw marriage as a means of "the overcoming of carnal desire", protecting those involved from the devil. Some Islamic writings urged men to limit sexual activity with wives, aiming primarily at procreation, but more commonly marriage – reflecting the ideas of the Prophet – was seen as a union of a chaste man and a chaste woman for whom sexual congress was really an act of worship. Any form of sexual activity was permitted within marriage except anal intercourse or sex during menstruation. Husbands should provide ample foreplay and wait for their wives' orgasm before enjoying their own; a number of writers consistently highlighted the importance of female sexual fulfillment. Here, obviously, was a marked difference from the more restrained Christian approach. Wives, in turn, should be responsive to their husbands' requests.

Gender. However, Islamic ideas on marriage and sex featured other types of gender differentials, in addition to the characteristic intensity of insistence on female purity before marriage. (While in principle Islam stipulated consent for marriage, in fact in many Muslim societies women were often committed to marriage very young.) Men with sufficient means could take more than one wife, and concubinage was also permitted. Gradually also, the custom of veiling respectable women in public also gained ground in the Middle East, to help protect women's virtue and shield them from unwanted attention – with no comparable restrictions on men.

Birth control. While Islam stressed the duty of having children when possible, the focus on reproductive sex was less intense than with Christianity. As one result, traditional Islam took a fairly tolerant stance toward abortion and birth control (the Prophet Muhammed believed that a soul was involved only in the final stages of fetal development). Laws recognized that economic conditions or other factors might cause a need for birth control, and since sexual pleasure was a valid goal in itself there was no need for interference. Birth control options were of course imperfect, but herbal concoctions were available for some, and the practice of *coitus interruptus* could also be utilized. And while masturbation was regarded as a sin, it was not a major offense.

Adultery. On the other hand, opposition to adultery was intense, with both men and women subject to harsh punishment sometimes including death. The *Qur'an* made it clear: “the fornicatress and the fornicator – scourge each of them with a hundred stripes.” Technically, proof of adultery required several witnesses, and Islamic authorities also urged the importance of forgiveness. But husbands often took it upon themselves to punish real or imagined offenses by wives or daughters.

Homosexuality. Views toward homosexuality were complex. Anal sex was definitely proscribed. The *Qur'an* also included more general passages that urged home confinement for homosexual activity unless there was repentance, and some Islamic scholars recommended a death penalty. Others argued, however, that the Prophet never specified a death penalty and in fact, given traditions in the Middle East and a thriving urban culture, considerable homosexual activity did occur during the early centuries of Islam in the Middle East. Cross-dressing was also a popular form of entertainment in some circles, and some male prostitution flourished. Some visions of heaven included access to boys, “white as snow”. Lesbian contacts drew less attention than male behavior, and there were rumors of considerable lesbian activity amid member of royal harems.

Public culture. Islam proscribed representational art in principle, though not primarily for sexual reasons. But written materials frequently tackled sexuality, particularly during the Arab “Golden Age” of the 8th-11th centuries; and while most authors were male, there were some contributions by women. A variety of sexual manuals circulated, some offering a variety of suggestions about increasing male potency or penis size. Love poetry flourished, and while some stressed ethereal passions, other references were more explicit: “You spread out her legs and go into her.” The famous *1001 Nights* included many sexual themes, including stories of women’s infidelity that emphasized how the gender was dominated by passion. Homosexual pleasure might also be praised.

Impact. As with Christianity, the Islamic approach to sexuality was not fully translated into reality. Most obviously, rulers and other wealthy men often kept substantial harems, importing consorts from various conquered territories or simply utilizing enslaved women. Prostitution was technically banned, but flourished in fact. Some prostitutes, both slave and free, also served as entertainers, and could win considerable prestige. And some Islamic references granted the utility of prostitutes in curbing male lust.

Conclusion As with the other world religions, Islam confirmed many of the core features of sexuality in the Agricultural Age, interacting with earlier precedents in a number of ways. At the same time, a number of emphases were distinctive, and some would persist into modern times. The wide geographical spread of Islam also brought the religion into contact with different regional traditions. Islamic rulers in India accepted a number of Hindu patterns of sexual enjoyment, and there was little effort to interfere with sexual standards among the Hindu majority – including artistic expression. On the other hand, Islam encouraged considerable domestic seclusion of respectable women, and this practice – *pardah* – gained ground among Hindus as well. On the other hand as Islam spread to parts of West Africa, it did not immediately impose Middle Eastern customs concerning sexuality; women behaved more freely and they did not always cover their breasts – all of which shocked Middle-Eastern visitors.

Overall, the “religious age” in world history saw the development of a number of innovations in sexual culture and practice, amid important variations with the three major religions involved. None of the religions had the full impact on sexuality that their leaders hoped, but they did create significant change – and new kinds of concerns even when behaviors did not measure up. And while religious attitudes might shift further in subsequent centuries, a serious legacy remains visible today. Finally the differences among the religions, could promote a variety of sharp moral critiques when there were mutual interactions – another theme that echoes still.

Study questions:

1. What were the major complexities in the Islamic approach toward sexuality in women?
2. How did Islamic and Christian attitudes toward sexual pleasure compare?
3. Why was adultery singled out so vigorously?
4. What were the main ambiguities in the approach toward homosexuality?
5. Did the major religions have any impact on prostitution? Why, or why not?

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SECTION III EARLY MODERN PERIOD SEXUALITY 1450-1750

Overview

No sweeping changes like a set of new religious doctrines reshaped sexuality on a global basis during the early modern period. And a number of regions largely confirmed the existing framework in dealing with sexual issues. However, in some individual regions fundamental changes occurred, some of which might ultimately have wider influence.

Exploitation and local consorts. Probably the most important overall development was the increased opportunity for sexual exploitation associated with Europe's military and commercial expansion. European traders and conquerors were mostly men, and they often took on local sexual consorts (whether or not they were married back home). This pattern developed early in places like India and some African port cities.

Latin America. The pattern became far more general in Latin America, where gender imbalance combined with power imbalance to give Spanish and Portuguese adventurers both reason and opportunity for informal liaisons. Some were probably voluntary, with women who sought advantage or developed genuine attachments, but more were forced. The result was a rapidly growing mixed-blood population and a durable pattern, in Latin America, of high rates of illegitimate births.

Christian impact. Latin American sexuality was also shaped of course by Christian missionaries, who found many faults with existing sexual patterns. Particular energy went into ending a traditional tolerance for "third sex" people, whom Europeans condemned as homosexuals. Other pressures were applied against premarital sex. Latin America emerged with something of two sexual cultures: one, concentrated in the largely European upper class, defended Christian values and attacked the real or imagined habits of ordinary people; the other, the mixed populations particularly, developed their own sexual approach.

Atlantic slavery. The final major locus of sexual exploitation involved Atlantic slavery. Within Africa, the slave trade promoted higher rate of polygamy, for 63% of the slaves exported were male. But among slaves themselves, exploitation by planters, or their offspring, was widespread. Some slaves were also used as breeders. This was yet another major category of sexual disruption in the early modern period. Whites combined exploitation with exaggerated anxieties and images of Black sexuality, portraying women as naturally wanton, men as lustful, sometimes with unusually large sexual organs: these fears would affect race relations along with the actual behaviors.

Regional developments

Western Europe. Three developments within the West (Europe but also the British colonies of North America) introduced significant change. Protestantism renounced the Catholic valuation of chastity, urging marriage and sexual pleasure within marriage. At the same time a European-style family took shape, with unusually later ages of marriage and, therefore, the need for considerable sexual restraint in early adulthood. Finally, toward the middle of the 18th century, the Western system simply broke down for some young people, as premarital sexual activity increased in what has sometimes been called the first modern sexual revolution.

China and Japan. This was not a major period of sexual change in China, though on the whole the Confucian impulse toward moderation gained greater attention. The final Qin dynasty also sought new regulations over sexuality, even trying to ban homosexuality in the 18th century, though without much effect. Actual patterns, including concubinage in the upper classes, continued much as before.

Japan was another matter. Japanese Confucianism did not highlight sexual restraint. As Japan became more urban and commercial under the Tokugawa shogunate, erotic art and theater gained ground. The use of geisha houses expanded, and while these mainly featured entertainment individual geisha might form sexual relationships with a patron. Homosexuality was widely tolerated.

Mughal India. Mughal rulers, Muslim and initially fairly tolerant, professed some shock at Hindu erotic art, and there was some destruction. On the whole, however, Mughals accommodated to traditional Indian

sexuality, among other things building elaborate harems designed to provide sexual pleasure; officials kept track of the women who had proved particularly pleasing. Among ordinary people, in contrast, Muslim traditions combined with Hindu in developing an increasingly protective approach toward respectable women, expected to remain in *pardah*, confined to activities in and around the house.

The Ottomans. Ottoman rulers, similarly, largely maintained prior traditions. Earlier erotic literature in Arabic or Persian continued to circulate widely. Homosexuality was tolerated. Sultans themselves developed elaborate harems, broadly similar to those in India, taking advantage of military expansion to recruit women from various regions.

European critiques. As Europeans gained greater contact with places like India and the Middle East (and even as they often enjoyed their local consorts), they generated a growing literature lamenting the sexual decadence of Asian societies. Harems came in for particular comment, as a sign of depravity, but so did homosexuality. This was a theme – however misguided or hypocritical – that would gain growing importance as European power increased.

CHAPTER 10: SEXUALITY IN EARLY MODERN WESTERN EUROPE

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 bride 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 frequently 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?

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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).

CHAPTER 11: COLONIAL LATIN AMERICA

In terms of global sexual patterns, probably the most important overall change in the early modern period involved the growing, and often forcible, intrusion of Europeans into other parts of the world, bringing new sexual appetites and new moralism in a confusing combination. And nowhere was this more significant than in Latin America as it came increasingly under Spanish and Portuguese control.

Exploitation. A pattern of sexual exploitation began with Columbus, who, while praising certain qualities in the natives he encountered, also found them inferior in many ways – including their near-nakedness. He seized some Caribe women in the West Indies as slaves, giving one to a friend who later wrote: “I captured a very beautiful Caribe woman...when I had taken her to my cabin, she was naked, as was their custom. I was filled with my desire to take my pleasure with her. She was unwilling, and so treated me with her nails that I wished I had never begun...I then took a piece of rope and whipped her soundly...She seemed to have been brought up in a school for harlots.”

It is unclear whether Columbus exported some natives as sex slaves, but without question the use of force or disproportionate power continued on the part of European settlers for many decades. The practice was exacerbated by the fact that Spanish conquerors were predominantly male, and it would take some time for a more normal gender balance to develop. Exploitation was also encouraged by a European belief that the natives themselves were licentious. It was true that some sexual activity before marriage was accepted among some indigenous groups, as a means of deciding if a possible partner was suitable for the long term; but Europeans greatly exaggerated their claims. The common image involved a mixture of moral condescension and a tendency to eroticize indigenous women – a potent mixture. Thus a Portuguese adventurer claimed that native women readily allowed him to inspect their “private parts” while displaying no embarrassment. Obviously, some unions formed out of genuine mutual attachment, but there was no guarantee. One Spanish adventurer may have sired as many as 30 children, with a number of women, during a 7-year stay. Some Europeans boasted of their sexual conquests, like the Spanish conqueror Cortes, in Mexico, who quickly took a native mistress and became known as the “fucker” (*shingon*) with “golden balls” (*huevos d’oro*).

Illegitimacy. One result of this sexual pattern was the rapid expansion of a mixed indigenous-Spanish, or *mestizo*, population, which ultimately outnumbered any other sector. Another was a high percentage of illegitimate births, that endured well beyond the colonial period, though force was no longer necessarily involved in the coupling. Sex and marriage had a looser relationship among many Latin Americans that was true in most other cultures.

Despite efforts by missionaries and others, concerned about European behavior, outright sexual violence remained a common problem. Efforts to take rapists to court rarely succeeded, and often simply brought greater shame to the victim – a problem in many societies, to be sure.

Moral regulation. At the same time, Europeans also sought to impose their version of morality on indigenous peoples, though clearly with mixed results. The widespread native custom of tolerated “two-spirit” peoples was widely distorted as indulgence of homosexuality – described by one Spaniard as “a devilish thing”, and the practice was widely suppressed. Clothing styles were another target, and though many indigenous people did not fully adopt European dress they were pressed to cover themselves more completely. A common European belief held that native Americans had no shame, and the new overlords were eager to correct this.

Marriage habits caused great concern, ironically, given the exploitative behavior of many colonists. Conventional Catholic standards combined with the sometimes distorted beliefs about indigenous habits. Some indigenous groups had allowed women to leave their husbands fairly readily if dissatisfied for any reason, but new colonial laws sought to end this practice. The behavior of girls was carefully watched. A girl simply found in a cabin with a man, however innocently, might be punished. Missionaries’ emphasis on sin could leave a deep mark on the young, as with one woman who wept after a man had simply touched her hand, worried that she had lost her virginity.

A social/cultural gap. Ultimately, a durable divide opened up, in a highly stratified society, between the upper classes, largely of European origin, and the rest of the population. Beliefs in native licentiousness

combined with awareness of high rates of illegitimacy to create a widespread sense that lower-class sexual behavior was out of control. The fact that upper-class men continued frequently to sire illegitimate offspring did nothing to dent the bias. Recurrent moral reform efforts would dot Latin American history, with mixed results beyond reinforcing established prejudices.

Finally, in various social groups, a culture of virility developed that placed high premium on male sexual prowess – as basic element in *machismo*. Boast of sexual adventures were common, regardless of their accuracy.

Study questions:

1. Why were rates of illegitimacy so high in colonial Latin America?
2. What traditional practices elicited particular criticism from Spanish colonists?
3. What was the basis of ongoing criticism of lower-class sexual patterns?

Further reading:

Sex and Sexuality in Latin America: an interdisciplinary reader. Ed. By Daniel Balderston and Dorina Guy (New York University Press, 1997).

Sexuality and the Unnatural in Colonial Latin America. Ed. By Zeb Torotici (University of California Press, 2016).

Sex and Sexuality in Early America. Ed. M.D. Smith (New York University Press, 1998).

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CHAPTER 12: NORTH AMERICA IN THE COLONIAL ERA

The entry of French and British colonists into North America bore many similarities to what was happening to the south, particularly in terms of moral critique of native practices. But interbreeding was more limited in the north, in part because the indigenous populations were smaller, and while there were undoubtedly cases of sexual exploitation the longer-term legacy was limited. At the same time, along the Atlantic coast, British colonists established communities that replicated many of the patterns that had been taking shape in Western Europe, including a version of the European-style family and an intense Protestant sexual morality.

Indigenous contacts. Among some early colonists, particularly trappers and traders who moved into the interior, liaisons with native women were common. One Englishman wrote that “the English traders are seldom without an Indian female for his Bedfellow, alleging these Reasons as sufficient...First...that it preserve their Friendship with the Heathens...and this Correspondence makes them learn the Indian Tongue much the sooner.” A French missionary lamented that his colleagues who had relations with local women “all became libertines”, regarding indigenous women as fair game.

Some of these relationships were surely forced. But some indigenous leaders gave women as gifts to the intruders. Some women simply complied out of hopes for gain or from genuine attachment. But many native Americans were truly shocked by Europeans’ aggressive sexual behavior, which made European moralism seem all the more strange and inappropriate. Again, these complexities closely resembled those in Latin America, with the key difference that the numbers of Europeans and indigenous people involved was much smaller, and the demographic impact therefore far less great.

Critiques. Moral condemnations also paralleled patterns to the south. French missionaries played a leading role in attacking indigenous acceptance of a “Third Sex”, again assuming that this was simply homosexuality, and deeply wrong. Styles of dress were a problem, though in colder latitudes the issue loomed less large. Other commentators deplored what they saw as widespread premarital sex among the

indigenous peoples: “a most evil custom among the savages.” Perceived differences in sexual behavior contributed to the general sense of native peoples as inferior and suspect.

In the British colonies, however, missionary interest and activity were far lower than in Latin America (or French Canada), so active efforts to interfere with indigenous customs loomed less large. In many cases, the populations tried to avoid too much contact. Interference would become a greater issue in the 19th century, when United States and Canadian authorities took it upon themselves to impose “civilization” on native peoples through compulsory schooling and other means.

Colonial families. Along with colonial-indigenous interaction, the formation of larger communities of Europeans in the English colonies along the Atlantic coast began to import sexual values and behaviors that set the basis for a well-defined sexual culture that would generate a significant legacy for American and Canadian culture going forward. Here was where the importation of patterns established across the ocean had the most lasting impact in North America.

In the first place, the colonists assumed that the family patterns in which they had grown up continued to make sense in the new locale. The European-style family was widely reproduced, with one modification: marriage age, particularly for women, could be lowered a bit (probably to an average of about 23), simply because, with more abundant land, the need to guard against too many children was less pressing. And indeed, American families into the later 18th century had somewhat higher birth rates than their European counterparts, and the emphasis on the importance of reproduction certainly ran high – among other things because, in the new society, children’s labor was so important. Only in the later 18th century, with greater crowding along the seaboard, was this pattern reconsidered.

American Protestantism. Protestant sexual morality was the other leading import. New England Puritans, bringing over the British version of Calvinism, issued the most severe warnings about sexual morality, that would ultimately resonate well beyond their region. To be sure, Puritan severity has often been exaggerated: like Protestants generally, Puritans had no compunctions about sexual pleasure within marriage, at least in moderation and usually in association with efforts at reproduction. It is also important to note that other coastal regions, less touched by Puritanism, developed other approaches. Southern planters, mainly Anglican, felt freer to indulge in sex, at least with women below their social class – including enslaved people. The scion of one leading Virginia family thus wrote in his diary that he had abused a maid but that, after brief regret, he forgave himself.

Punishments. Puritans unquestionably established vigorous efforts to regulate sex outside of marriage, combining dire moral preachments with legal penalties – most obviously for adultery, but also premarital sex and other acts. Adulterers could be placed in stocks for public shaming, and required to wear an identifying scarlet letter for some time (A for adulterer, more commonly F for fornicator), to denote their offense. But young people were also urged to keep their impulses in check. Courting couples were closely watched, and though for convenience they might sleep together when visiting, they were supposed to remain fully clothed, with the notorious “bundling board” placed between them to assure continence.

Behaviors. Along with striking rules and penalties, the noteworthy aspect of the Puritan hold was the infrequency with which penalties had to be levied. Of course in some cases this surely reflected successful concealment; but community members kept a careful eye on each other, so in all probability the low level reflected widespread self-discipline and compliance. This, after all, was what shame was for, to prevent more than to punish. Thus imposition of the dreaded adultery letter was actually quite rare.

Few punishments were levied for homosexuality, suggesting perhaps a level of informal tolerance for discreet behavior. Bestiality was another matter. In 1677 a Massachusetts man was executed for having sex with a horse, and there were scattered other examples. On a milder note, in 1660 one Samuel Stearns of Cambridge, Massachusetts, was charged because he “had Sarah Bronson on his lap and did kiss her,” though he was later released. Overall, the big deterrent was shaming (directed particularly but not exclusively at women both before and during marriage), and it was probably effective in most cases.

Puritanism also encouraged a fairly restrained public culture, beginning with deliberately somber dress. While informal materials about sex did circulate, the overall tone was controlled.

Validity of desire. Again, however, Puritanism was open to the importance of sex and passion within marriage; the most extreme stereotypes are off the mark. They spoke of a “duty to desire”, and while this certainly included the importance of reproduction it extended to satisfaction as well. Some people in New England were actually censured by their church for having deprived their partners of sex for three months or more. And even some of the sternest leaders could write love letters to their wives with phrases like “being filled with the joy of thy love” (John Winthrop, 1618). As in Europe in the same early modern period, the pattern – in terms both of values and behaviors – was complex.

Finally, during the late 18th century, some Americans began to participate in the same kind of sexual revolution that was occurring in Europe. In a society that was becoming more urban and commercial, some of the old controls loosened, and some young people began to indulge in sex at a somewhat earlier age, and in advance of marriage.

Study questions:

1. What were some of the common criticisms of native American sexual habits?
2. Why might indigenous women partner with European colonists?
3. What were the differences between sexual patterns in the Atlantic colonies from those in Western Europe?
4. Why could shaming prove widely effective?
5. What were the main differences, in sexual patterns, between most of North America and Latin America during the colonial period?

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

The Protestant Temperament: patterns of child-rearing, religious experience and the self in early America. By Philip Greven (University of Chicago Press, 1977).

CHAPTER 13: AFRICA AND THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

Africa, and the millions of people seized in Africa and sent to the Americas, constituted the final major instance of European impact on sexuality during the early modern period. European religious involvement in Africa was slight at this point, involving only a few conversions in coastal towns. There was little critique of indigenous African sexual habits in the early modern period, and no direct interference with established customs. European men who did operate in the coastal towns did frequently take local lovers and sometimes sired children with them, even though in some cases they had wives back home. This was of course becoming a familiar European pattern, but the numbers involved were not large and there was no major repercussion beyond the coastal enclaves.

The slave trade did however affect marriage patterns in West Africa. And sexuality was undoubtedly one of many areas where brutal conditions deeply influenced the sexual experience of slaves themselves, while generating some complex stereotypes among the users of slaves.

Polygamy. Within Africa, the main result of the slave trade was a rapid expansion of polygamy, though this was not entirely new. At least 63% of all the slaves seized were young and male, valued for their labor potential, and given the numbers involved this created a massive gender imbalance in West Africa itself. Polygamy was a widespread response, creating family economic units that could utilize and support the excess women. The main focus was economic, but obviously there could be sexual implications as well, including a greater male need to demonstrate dominance.

Sex by force. For enslaved Africans in the Americas, and particularly women, sexual exploitation became common. White masters assumed that they had full rights over their female property. Some of the women involved might acquiesce in hopes for better treatment for themselves and their children, but outright force was common. And while attention centered on unmarried younger women, wives of slaves were occasionally coerced as well. Rape of enslaved women, sometimes in front of family members, was a means of demonstrating dominance. At least in a few cases, female slaves were also forced into prostitution to make money for their owners.

Motivations. Some male planters kept records of the number of slaves with whom they had sex, taking pride in their overall rates. Exploitation in some cases was enhanced by the familiar gender imbalance among colonial Whites. In French Louisiana, for example, young White men, unable to marry until they came into property, routinely took one or more Black mistresses, making no secret of their liaisons. Some planters explicitly organized the sexual initiation of their sons through use of enslaved women. In other cases, as with Thomas Jefferson, a White planter might take an enslaved mistress after the death of their own wife. Among many owners, enslaved women were seen as a particular source of pleasure. A common motto among Whites in colonial Brazil intoned, "White women for children, mulatto women for sex, Black women for work."

In North America, exploitation of enslaved women was also motivated by a simple desire to expand the labor force, particularly after the effective end of the Atlantic slave trade early in the 19th century. Women were forced into frequent childbearing, with both White masters and selected enslaved men (compelled, in this case) participating essentially as breeders.

New imagery. The sexual context of Atlantic slavery gave rise to potent imagery concerning the sexuality of African Americans themselves, the product of a mixture of appetite and fear. African American women were seen as inherently lustful, or as one description held, "hot constitution'd". They "made no scruple to prostitute themselves to the Europeans." This imagery perversely reflected the result of coerced sex – and the contrast with the rules protecting the virtue of respectable White women -- and also the fact that, in slave auctions, women for sale were often stripped for inspection. In some cases, White women, resentful of what they saw as temptation of their husbands and sons, contributed to the critique as well.

Imagery extended to enslaved men, in complex ways. On the one hand, the fact of slavery could seem to emasculate the men involved, particularly when they could not defend their women. On the other hand, there were active fears of African American male sexuality, including stories about the exceptional size of their sexual organs. This imagery prompted characteristically violent punishments for real or imagined assaults against the purity of White women – a theme that would carry on well after slavery itself was

abolished. The imagery also prompted explicit efforts at further emasculations. On some of the larger plantations in the American South, for example, young adult males were not allowed to wear trousers, given a skirt instead as a means of emphasizing their sexual inferiority.

Perceptions of those enslaved. Sexual tensions within the enslaved community ran high. Men sometimes sought to punish their wives when they had been assaulted by White “masters”; this may have been the most common reason for domestic violence within enslaved families. Many women themselves lived in fear. As Bethany Veney, an escaped slave, put it: “My dear white lady, in your pleasant home made joyous by the tender love of husband and children all your own, you can never understand the slave mother’s emotions as she clasps her newborn children...and when that child is a girl...from her own experience she sees its almost certain doom is to minister to the unbridled lust of the slave owner.”

Disease. One other feature of the sexual results of Atlantic slavery and colonialism deserves attention: the spread of higher rates of venereal disease, readily transmitted back to Europe by sailors and military troops (where for a time it was known as the “French pox”). The term “venereal disease” was introduced in the 16th century, as doctors, particularly in France, began to study the problem more closely. Sexually transmitted diseases were not entirely new, but from the early modern period onward they became an increasing concomitant to certain kinds of sexual activity.

Study questions:

1. What were the effects of the gender ratio among those seized as slaves – both in Africa and in the Americas?
2. What were the various motives for the sexual exploitation of enslaved women?
3. Why were there so many contradictory elements in the imagery applied to enslaved men? How might this affect men themselves?

Further reading:

The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation. By W. H. Dunaway (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Many Thousands Gone: the first two centuries of slavery in North America. By I. Berlin (Harvard University Press, 1998).

Slavery Unseen: sex, power, and violence in Brazilian history. By Lamonte Aidoo (Duke University Press, 2018).

CHAPTER 14: EAST ASIA: CHINA

Major parts of Asia, though heavily involved in the trade patterns of the early modern period, were not substantially affected by global influences when it came to sexuality. This was certainly true for China, which carefully limited contacts with European traders and missionaries. Several important developments affected Chinese sexuality at this point, but they were internally generated, particularly from efforts to expand the functions of the imperial state.

Key traditions. Several characteristic sexual patterns had already been established, and simply expanded during the early modern period. This included the extensive array of concubines available for use by the emperors – to assure the production of sons as well as to provide pleasure – and, at more modest levels, for other upper-class men as well. The expansion of Chinese cities had also furthered the development of houses of pleasure, some of which provided a variety of entertainments as well as sexual services. As before, some courtesans could gain considerable prestige. The emphasis on footbinding as a feature of female beauty also continued to gain ground particularly in the cities, affecting the preparation of girls for marriage and sexual attraction.

Greater moral emphasis: chaste women. Confucian morality won growing attention in a number of ways, though the impact on actual behavior is hard to estimate. A growing literature assessed the periodic decline of imperial dynasties in sexual terms: a dynasty began to falter when the emperors themselves abandoned discipline and became increasingly licentious. The same could occur within families. This admonitory approach extended to increasing praise for “chaste” women (less attention was given to male behavior). Thousands of women were given public commendations by the state for their strict morality, through court testimonials (*jingbiao*) and even government-financed plaques and stone archways: “faithful maidens” and chaste widows gained the greatest honors. Correspondingly, attacks on widows who tried to remarry increased, for they were not remaining faithful to their husbands. Criticism of other women who failed to measure up became more intense.

Rape. The Qing dynasty attempted to refine some of the legal framework for sexuality. Definitions of rape and the evidence needed to prove it became more precise, making it in fact more difficult for women to press charges because it would require public admission of loss of virtue and because the punishments for false accusation became more severe. It was often argued that suicide was the best recourse for raped women, and the government began to cover funeral expenses and even establish plaques to commemorate the devotion to honor.

Over the span of several dynasties laws concerning same-sex male behavior were also refined, mainly to assure that liaisons would not involve violations of social boundaries or lower the status of upper-class men. There was no disapproval of same-sex activity in itself – another earlier tradition maintained.

Adjustments, not major change, describe the main features of Chinese sexuality in the early modern period. Despite the array of actual behaviors and arrangements, the rather stern Confucian tone was noteworthy, along with the various signs of gender differentiation in moral commentary. There is little question that the imperial state took more interest in sexual issues than any other premodern government.

Study questions:

1. How did Confucianism encourage commentary on sexual behaviors?
2. What were the main ways the imperial state became involved in sexual matters? What might the motives have been?

Further reading:

Sexualities in China: histories of power and pleasure. Ed. By Howard Chiang (University of Washington Press, 2018).

Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History. By Susan Mann (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

CHAPTER 15: EAST ASIA: JAPAN

Historical work on sexuality in Japan usually emphasizes the extent to which Confucianism, though increasingly important in political culture and education, had less impact on sexual behavior and public culture than was the case in China. Under the Tokugawa shogunate, after 1600, some new regulatory steps were taken, but they were less sweeping than in China; and while women's behaviors drew scrutiny, the emphasis on chastity was less elaborate.

Concubines. As in China, many earlier traditions persisted. Emperors and other men in the upper classes continued to deploy a number of concubines, as elsewhere both for sexual purposes and to assure the generation of sons. The complex approach of Japanese Buddhism persisted as well, in some cases linking sexual and spiritual expression.

Theater and art. The most striking changes during the early modern period overall involved public culture, often reflecting the growth of cities. New theater forms, including Kabuki, emerged in the 16th century, frequently emphasizing bawdy scenes. Many plays were organized by former prostitutes seeking to leave the profession. Ultimately the government banned female performers, but males, sometimes portraying women, maintained many of the same themes, including representations of sexual passion and "love-suicides". From the 17th century onward, erotic art burgeoned – known as *shunga*. These woodblock prints, produced in the thousands, won a wide audience, and though they were banned by the government as obscene, in 1772, they continued to circulate underground. Here was a Japanese tradition that would persist into modern times. The presence of children in *shunga* art suggests a strikingly uninhibited quality in sexual culture.

Geishas. The geisha tradition became more elaborate. Here, women became skilled in various performance arts, not usually involving sexuality; their talents in music and dance, however, greatly exceeded the training of the respectable wives whose roles centered on motherhood. Some geisha would develop a sexual relationship with a male patron, but the institution overall differed considerably from outright prostitution.

Prostitution. Government measures to regulate, and tax, actual prostitution expanded. Prostitutes were confined to particular urban districts, forbidden to leave except for ceremonies when a family member died. Their activities were rigorously controlled, with little individual freedom. The official organization of Japanese prostitution was another tradition that would persist into later periods. In relevant port cities during the early modern period, prostitutes did service Chinese and European traders – resulting in the arrival of syphilis into Japan early in the 16th century. Here too, regulation intruded: specific brothels were designated for foreign use (and with higher rates established for the Europeans).

Public Baths. The tradition of public baths, often steam baths, had started earlier in Japanese history, sometimes associated with Buddhist monasteries and often aimed at medical treatments. The institution expanded in the early modern period, reflecting a degree of comfort with nudity. The Tokugawa government tried to make sure that the two sexes were separated in public bathing, but many houses set up only a board between the designated areas, which allowed considerable voyeurism.

Social divisions. Pronounced divisions opened up between the strict sexual codes applied to the samurai warrior class, as part of military discipline, and the behaviors of groups both above and below them. Samurai might be executed if caught in adultery. Here, Confucian morality was brought to bear. Among other groups, in contrast, extramarital affairs were more common, and even illegitimate children might be accepted.

Study questions:

1. What were some differences between Japanese and Chinese sexuality in the early modern period?
2. Why have foreign (particularly Western) observers often had trouble interpreting practices like the geisha houses and public baths?
3. Why and how did erotic art gain particular currency in Japan?

Further reading:

Geisha. By Liza Dalby (University of California Press, 1998).

Forbidden Art: erotic images from Japan's Edo period. By Helsinki City Art Museum (Helsinki City Art Museum, 2002).

Selling Women: prostitution, markets and the household in early modern Japan. By Amy Stanley (University of California Press, 2012).

Sex and the Floating World: erotic images in Japan, 1700-1820. By Thomas Screech (Reaktion Books, 2009).

CHAPTER 16: SOUTH ASIA: THE MUGHAL EMPIRE

The Mughal period, beginning in the 16th century, introduced some new developments into Indian sexual history, though almost entirely at the upper-class level. The sexual practices of the emperors and their families drew wide attention, but ultimately the most important theme involved the interaction between the new Muslim rulers and India's established public culture.

Hindu art. Early Mughal rulers, firmly Muslim, though tolerant in most respects, were shocked by the open eroticism of some Indian art. Several major statues were defaced or destroyed. At the same time, both Hindus and Muslims largely agreed on the importance of sexual pleasure within the family, and women might use a variety of perfumes and cosmetics to make themselves attractive within the home.

Hindu erotic art continued to flourish despite some official concern, particularly in a new style of love poetry. The poet Upendra Bhnja (1670-1730) offered an ornate celebration of lovemaking. Songs in the Bengali languages celebrated lovemaking outside of marriage, and praise for beautiful women abounded. Older stories about lovemaking between gods and mortals were also revived and circulated. Paintings also reflected some of these themes. In other words, the imposition of Muslim rulers did not generate substantial change. Even for women, though limited in public interactions (true for both Muslims and Hindus), public marketplaces provided some opportunities for social contacts and flirtations: this is where the Emperor Jehangir met his great love, for whom he would ultimately build the Taj Mahal.

Same-sex linkages drew little comment, again in keeping with earlier tradition. Homoerotic art continued to flourish.

Imperial household. Mughal emperors themselves established elaborate harems with up to 5,000 women. However, most of these women were servants of various sorts or other members of the royal family. Only about 5% were sexual partners (admittedly, still a considerable number). Harems were carefully guarded by eunuchs. Doctors occasionally visited to oversee health conditions, but their contacts were scrupulously regulated. Emperors were the only males (eunuchs aside) who could freely enter a harem. Imperial sons were kept rigorously away.

Daughters of the emperor were carefully regulated in principle, destined for marriage only with other Mughals. Their portraits were painted using other women as models. On the other hand, several daughters were both talented and clever, and managed to arrange some liaisons – though lovers if caught could be punished severely. Officially, however, the image of chastity for women in the imperial family was vigorously maintained.

European comment. A growing number of European traders visited India during the period, and they were both intrigued and confused by what they saw. They characteristically exaggerated the sexuality of the emperors, failing to understand the varied duties of members of the harem. Their tales began to convince a European public of the sexual degeneracy of the subcontinent under Mughal rule, reflecting but fueling the European sense of moral superiority. Thus the Italian Niccolao Manucci wrote that "Muslims were very fond of women, who are their principal relaxation and almost their only pleasure." Or a British observer who noted more simply, the emperor "keepeth a thousand women for his own body."

Study questions:

1. Why did Muslim rule introduce so few changes to Indian sexual culture?

2. Why did imperial sexual practices confuse Europeans? Was their confusion historically important?
3. How and why were imperial harems so carefully guarded?

Further reading:

Sexual and Gender Representations in Mughal India. By Syed Zehra (Manak Publications, 2011).

CHAPTER 17: SOUTHWEST ASIA: THE OTTOMANS

The harem. The advent of the Ottoman Empire in part of the Middle East and southeastern Europe did not introduce major changes into sexual practices in the region. Ottoman sultans maintained elaborate harems, with women from many ethnic groups as military conquests expanded into far-flung regions. Individual women in the harem, guarded of course by eunuchs (numbering several hundred in all), could develop considerable informal political influence. A major section of the Topkapi palace, in Istanbul, was set aside for the harem, housing both the women and their offspring (while young). As in India, only a small fraction of harem women serviced the sultan, others performing various service duties – often destined later to marry other members of the Ottoman elite.

Same-sex relations. Ottoman discussions of sexuality made little distinction between women and boys as potential objects of desire. The key divide was between those who penetrated and those who were penetrated, the latter seen as slightly inferior. But whether men would choose women or boys was largely a matter of personal preference, much as, as one scholar has put it, deciding between beer or wine. Nor was it assumed that an individual man would always make the same choice. The current Western distinction between homosexual and heterosexual simply did not apply. The beauty of young men was widely discussed, disapproved by only the strictest Islamic scholars. One of these conservative authorities actually lamented the fact that men who lacked a younger partner were sometimes criticized as having no taste. (The boys involved, who might range into their 20s, were usually from a lower social class, sometimes outright slaves. As in classical Greece, it was upper-class men who most widely participated in this sexual culture.)

Public culture and regulations. Various erotic poems and other literature, often composed earlier, under the Arabs, continued to circulate widely. Overall, the Ottomans maintained the Islamic emphasis on the validity and importance of sexual pleasure, along however with regulations to guard against premarital sex (for women) or adultery. Punishments for adultery may have become harsher – there are records of death by stoning; but often the guilty were simply whipped, after which efforts were made to promote family reconciliation. Women who accused their husbands of infidelity but who could not prove their case were allowed to divorce, but were not supposed to remarry.

Western critiques. As with the Mughals, by the 18th century Western visitors began to increase in number and often widely attacked what they saw as the decadence of the Empire, and particularly the sultans themselves with their harems. This theme would increase later, in the 19th century, and would ultimately not only affect European perceptions but also prompt some internal change. It is also important to note that during the 18th century, south of the Empire, a new Wahabi sect and regime developed which held to a much stricter version of Islam and criticized both Sunni and Shi'a neighbors for their lax standards and behaviors.

Study questions:

1. How did the Ottoman approach to same-sex relationships compare with the classical Mediterranean?
2. Why did the harem attract so much attention from Western visitors?
3. What Islamic themes were particularly important in overall Ottoman sexuality?

Further reading:

Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800. By Khaled el-Rouayheb (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

The Imperial Harem: women and sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire. By Leslie Pierce (Oxford University Press, 1993).

SECTION IV THE LONG 19TH CENTURY SEXUALITY

Overview

Several significant new trends in sexuality emerged in the 19th century, particularly in rapidly-changing societies like the West, Russia and Japan – but they did not point in the same direction. Growing Western influence, especially through direct imperialism, shifted sexual regulations in several other parts of the world.

Sex and youth in the West. Western society was the first to industrialize, and the process placed a number of pressures on established sexual patterns. Rapid urbanization drew many young people away from customary parental controls. At the same time, men and women interacted in a number of new settings, such as factories. And outright prostitution increased. The result was increasing opportunity for sexual relationships before marriage – attested by the rising illegitimacy rate. The industrial context also drove down the average age of puberty, another new factor in young people's sexuality.

Similar trends emerged in Russia by the end of the century, as greater mobility loosened village and church controls and illegitimacy rates began to rise. Russia also featured a lively discussion of the importance of sexual pleasure, during the first decade of the 20th century.

Birth control. However, industrial society also produced growing need for new levels of birth control. As child labor declined for some groups, and schooling increased, families realized that children could now be an economic liability, and gradually they sought to cut back. However, reliable birth control devices – though they did become more common with the vulcanization of rubber in the 1840s – remained hard to come by until later in the century. The result was a growing need for periods of abstinence.

Victorian morality. Middle-class families, concerned about the birth rate but also the apparent sexual license of the lower classes, sought to introduce a new moral code that would confine sexual activity to marriage. They reemphasized the importance of chastity before marriage, and also mounted an unprecedented campaign against masturbation to help introduce a new sense of guilt and control. Victorians also emphasized that respectable women had little or no sex drive, another new argument that could have repressive effects. Finally, the forces of respectability tried to insist as well on a controlled public culture, censoring sexual references in the theater and elsewhere. Their campaign had mixed results – pornography for example continued to expand thanks to better printing technology – but it developed considerable force.

Imperialism: India and Africa. European imperialism and growing missionary activity put pressure on some sexual practices in India. The presence of European women, who now joined husbands in colonial administration, also led to new criticisms of “native” sexuality. Results were mixed, but Western pressure did promote more concealing styles of dress and halting moves against child marriage. Both in India and Africa the application of British law, plus in Africa substantial Christian conversions, led to new but growing hostility to homosexuality. At the same time, the rise of new industries could shake up older sexual controls. In Africa, for example, young men returning to the village with some savings from work in mining or sugar refining could win sexual relationships outside conventional courtship patterns.

Ottoman Empire Western criticisms of traditional sexual habits had some impact in the remaining Asian empires. To be sure, some reformers in the Middle East, arguing against practices like veiling, pushed for some liberalization in gender roles. But Western scorn also encouraged growing disapproval of homosexuality, particularly in the Middle East – an important new development. Victorian morality, broadly construed, thus had a significant impact in many parts of the world, modifying traditional tolerance and in some cases obscuring awareness of past patterns.

Japan. Japan also felt Western pressure. Briefly the regime outlawed homosexuality, but this was soon repealed. More fundamental was a new requirement for monogamy, as formal concubinage was outlawed. On the other hand, early industrialization had its usual effects, particularly in greatly expanding prostitution in Japanese cities. Many rural families essentially sold a daughter into prostitution as a means of sustaining the other family members.

Conclusion. In many parts of the world a quiet conflict developed between new efforts to assert a family-centered morality and the several pressures toward loosening sexual habits. The morality was in some sense traditional, but it now included a greater emphasis on guilt – as in the West's hostility to masturbation – or on new regulations over practices like homosexuality. Some of this restrictive approach survives into the present day. On the other hand, the impulse toward greater pleasure seeking was strong as well. Late in the 19th century even elements of the middle class in the West began to welcome a more expressive public culture while displaying greater interest in sexual satisfaction – for both partners – in marriage. This was a rapidly-changing terrain.

CHAPTER 18: SEXUALITY IN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

Chapter 2 discussed the context for sexual rules and behaviors created by the rise of agriculture. Obviously, different regions developed a variety of sexual cultures during the long Agricultural Age, and there were significant changes over time as well, for example with the development of new religious norms. But the context remained important.

This chapter seeks to provide a similar analysis for industrial society, as it began to emerge from the later 18th century onward. The sketch will be more tentative, however, because the implications of industrialization for sexuality are still emerging – holdovers from earlier attitudes and practices remain strong. There are however a few clear points, applying to all the major world regions once they moved toward industrialization, and some other possibilities worth mentioning. The result will provide some guidelines for ensuing chapters, that deal more specifically with regional patterns and changes during the past two and a half centuries.

Industrialization. The industrial revolution centered on a rapid growth of manufacturing, around new technologies such as the steam engine. Increasing numbers of people began to live in cities. Rural populations receded in importance and the class structure was transformed, with the decline of the traditional aristocracy. Several of these changes had implications for sexuality.

Industrial conditions spread slowly – even in Western Europe, where the process began, and certainly globally, which suggests one complication in assessing the new context. Outright industrialization centered in the West (including the United States) until the later 19th century, when Japan and Russia began their own process. Pacific Rim industrialization began in the 1950s, with China, India, Brazil and other areas launching their transformations by the 1980s (a process still underway). By the early 21st century most of the world was industrialized to some degree; by 2010 for example over half the global population lived in cities for the first time. But the staggered chronology of industrialization obviously affected the implications for sexuality, which are still taking shape in many regions.

Yet despite the real complications, industrialization, or preparations for industrialization, ushered in at least three changes, two of them dramatic shifts away from the agricultural context; and a few other developments can be suggested as well, if somewhat more tentatively.

Birth rates. The unfolding of industrial conditions produced a dramatic decline in traditional birthrates, though adjustments were gradual and sometimes painful. Ultimately, children's work became less necessary, while the importance of schooling increased. This meant that children shifted from economic assets to liability. Further, industrialization (broadly construed) ultimately facilitated a huge decline in children's death rates, another reason to cut back on births.

This change required new measures to reduce reproductive sex. For some groups, at least initially, this meant longer periods of abstinence from sexual activity, or halfway measures like reliance on *coitus interruptus*. This could impose real burdens on sexuality. Ultimately, industrial products became available that might facilitate artificial birth control. The vulcanization of rubber, in the 1840s, led to better and more widely available condoms and diaphragms, though there was great resistance (and also issues of costs). This in turn *could* produce new opportunities for recreational sex and more open recognition of its validity – cutting the traditional emphasis on reproduction.

Birth rate decline and other developments could also encourage some new assessment of women's sexuality, though again this was not inevitable. Emphasis on female passivity could decline as women took on new work roles and gained more education. At least this became a new potential variable. Reconsideration of reproductive sex could also promote some rethinking of sexuality among older people, reducing older stigmas particularly where women were concerned.

Community supervision. Industrialization disrupted customary family and community controls over sexual behavior, particularly where young adults were concerned. It was the young who moved to cities, and while they might retain ties with parents and vividly remember older rules on sexuality, opportunities for innovation increased. To be sure, communities could and did re-form in the cities, reintroducing some supervision. But the norms might change in the process. For example, British urban working-class standards by 1900 tried to insist that a young man who got a girl pregnant should marry her. But they no longer pressed as hard for avoidance of sexual interaction before marriage – which, in any event, became harder to control in urban conditions.

Resistance. These various changes or potential changes could generate fierce moral pushback, by groups eager to defend more traditional norms but aware that they had to insist more strenuously. From Victorian morality in the 19th-century West, to some of the vigorous religious resistance to “modern sexuality” among certain Christian or Islamic groups – well into the 21st century – new levels of conflict over sexual behavior surfaced in many regions. Male resistance to changes in female sexual behavior could also be considerable, even violent. This, too, became part of the industrial history of sexuality at least for a long transitional period. And new efforts to control sexuality – for example, those associated with some aspects of modern feminism – fit into this picture as well, though in this case with new rather than purely traditional arguments.

Changes associated with the decline of reproductive sex; a quiet crisis in the traditional forms of supervision; and often angry resistance – these were the leading industrial forces introducing major innovations into the earlier agricultural context. But other relevant shifts occurred as well.

Decline of the aristocracy. The decline of the old upper class, sometimes spurred by outright revolution, cut into older traditions of distinctive sexual indulgence. A new upper class emerged, to be sure, and rich men could still seek special forms of sexual access. But earlier assumptions were challenged. Most obviously, formal harems largely disappeared, in the regions where these had previously been common. Here was another arena in which earlier behaviors had to be reconsidered at least in part.

Commercial sex. Cities had always been associated with the sale of sex. Now, this could become more important simply because urban conditions predominated. Furthermore, urban migration and other factors could make it harder for some women to find work – an old problem, now sometimes magnified. Industrialization would also facilitate the transportation of sex workers – voluntarily or involuntarily – to other regions.

Sexual pleasure. Did industrialization generate a new (though obviously not unprecedented) interest in sexual pleasure, particularly in the urban social classes? The decline of reproductive sex and, in some cases, the availability of new birth control options could certainly push in that direction. More broadly, industrial conditions definitely generated growing interest in, and opportunity for, recreational outlets of various sorts, including sports and professional entertainment – and, possibly, sex. As families saw their role as production units decline, efforts to win greater emotional and, at least in some cases, sexual satisfaction could increase, even serving as a more explicit basis for the choice of marriage partners. In some cases, however, heightened expectations for sexual satisfaction could lead to new disappointments. This line of analysis must be handled carefully, amid regional, social class and sometimes gender differences, but it is worth keeping in mind.

Conclusion. The idea of the “industrialization of sexuality” tosses up a number of possibilities for further analysis, that can generate useful questions about specific regional experiences – beginning with the very odd history of Western sexuality in the 19th century but easily extending to developments in our own time. Regional responses varied – in part of course because of differences in industrialization's timing, but also because regional traditions differed considerably – but some common elements ultimately emerged as well. This was no longer, sexually speaking, the Agricultural Age.

Study questions:

1. What were the main reasons for changes in sexuality with industrialization?
2. Controlling the sexual behavior of young people was not a new issue; did it change significantly?
3. What are the implications of the decline of formal or informal harems? Have there been efforts to replace them?
4. What kinds of arguments support the claim that interest in sexual pleasure increases with industrialization? Why is there need for caution in pursuing this line of analysis?

Further reading:

The Industrial Turn in World History. By Peter N. Stearns (Routledge, 2018).

The Modernization of Sex: Havelock Ellis, Alfred Kinsey, William Masters and Virginia Johnson. By Paul Robinson (Cornell University Press, 1989).

CHAPTER 19: SEXUALITY AND MORALITY IN THE 19TH CENTURY WEST

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 possibly with 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 see 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 than 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).

CHAPTER 20: SEXUALITY IN IMPERIAL INDIA

India, increasingly under British political and economic control in the 19th century, was one of the first places where European standards played out against regional traditions. Interactions built on some of the shock Westerners had already expressed about this aspect of Indian culture, but with fuller involvement and with Victorian standards in mind, potential tensions grew. At the same time, British impulses were constrained by the challenges of ruling this vast realm, and many compromises and some outright benign neglect were essential.

Imperial wives. British reactions were affected by another intriguing innovation: the increasing presence of English wives, now able to participate with their husbands as the latter served as imperial officials or business representatives. Previously, many British adventurers, male and single or at least free from marital control, actively took local consorts, a behavior widely familiar during the previous colonial era. Now, however, wives sought to exercise direct control, aware that their husbands might be tempted. Two obvious results were, first, a greater social separation between the British and most of the Indian people; and second, a further enhancement to the drumbeat of criticism of native eroticism.

Critiques. Western observers claimed to find rampant sexuality everywhere they looked. A Scotsman described the typical Indian man as “a living Priapus,” constantly lusting after sex. Even Indian prostitutes were described as distinctive, for actually enjoying sex: “they are sumptuously dressed, they wear the most costly jewels in profusion, they are well educated and sing sweetly.” A Mrs. Colin summed up a common opinion in 1857: “You may imagine the degraded condition of the people here, when I tell you we constantly pass women in the open street bare down to the hips...They do not seem to have the least sense of decency.” Male commentary was similar, though often reflecting a more complicated combination of shock and envy.

The challenge of course is to determine if these condemnations actually had much impact on their local targets. The answer is: not as much as the British would have liked, but enough to reshape some Indian traditions.

Homosexuality. British officials vigorously attacked apparent Indian tolerance of homosexuality, and while this involved some exaggeration, the Indian tradition did differ from its Western counterpart. A few arrests were made for same-sex behavior or even crossdressing as early as the 1840s. Then in the early 1860s, an overhaul of the Indian legal system included application of the British law against sodomy. In fact, actual prosecutions for same-sex activity remained fairly rare, but there was no question about a heightened official concern.

British disapproval promoted similar legal changes in other parts of South Asia, even territories not directly under colonial control. Some traditional ambivalence about same-sex activity combined with a clear effort to respond to the imperialist sense that only Western sexual standards counted as truly civilized.

South and Southeast Asia formed one of several cases where Western (particularly British) concern about homosexuality had particular impact – even though, in the West itself, the issue was not at the top of the agenda during most of the 19th century. . The role of Christian standards might seem salient in an age of active missionary outreach. More to the point, Western hostility usually combined with some traditional hesitance about same-sex practices within regions like South Asia, and as a result a focus on attacking homosexuality constituted a particularly attractive target in responding to more general Western criticism.

Early marriage. British observers frequently lamented arranged marriages involving children, particularly female children. Criticism mounted in the later 19th century, when some British feminists began to agitate for gender reforms on the subcontinent. Definitive action came only in 1929, with a new law outlawing the practice. By this point, Indian feminists themselves provided considerable support. However the reform failed significantly to dent the practice, as many Hindus and Muslims alike hewed to tradition.

Public culture and legacy. The British made no secret of their official distaste for Indian erotic art, though as in other areas they treaded carefully in fact, eager to avoid rousing local opposition. One measure even created an exception to British pornography rules, allowing some representations of Hindu statues

to appear on postage stamps. But the new public buildings and statues promoted by the British moved away from the older artistic traditions, driving many erotic expressions underground.

And the long colonial experience left a lasting mark on Indian officialdom, even though the changes in actual popular behaviors had been rather modest. Well into the 21st century many leading officials either ignored the erotic elements in Indian cultural traditions, or actually denied them, as in claiming that Hinduism had always firmly opposed homosexuality. A partial redefinition of respectability was hard to shake off.

Study questions:

1. Why were the British so critical of Indian sexuality?
2. Did significant changes in Indian sexual culture or behavior result from the colonial experience?
3. What were the major limitations in British impact?

Further reading:

Imperial Bodies: the physical experience of the Raj. By E.M. Collingham (Blackwell, 2001).

The Courtesan's Arts: cross-cultural perspectives. Ed. M. Feldman and B. Gordon (Oxford University Press, 2006).

CHAPTER 21: SEXUALITY IN IMPERIAL AFRICA

European characterizations of sexuality in Africa, as imperialist conquests expanded in the 19th century, overlapped with those in India in many ways. Western assumptions of moral superiority combined with some genuine shock; the concerns of colonial wives, eager to keep their husbands under control, similarly amplified the attacks.

Western presence in Africa did differ from that in India in one crucial way: here, colonial political controls were joined with increasingly successful Christian missionary activity in a number of regions – Catholic and Protestant alike. For many Africans, Christian sexual strictures were more significant than any legal changes imposed by imperial governments. In other parts of Africa (also under colonial control), Islamic missionary efforts gained ground impressively, here too promoting changes in relevant traditions including styles of dress.

Limitations remained important, as in India. Colonial officials did not want to provoke local resistance, and hesitancy often trumped moral concerns. For example, in northeastern Africa, both British and French officials encountered a widespread practice of female circumcision, imposed on young adolescent girls as a mark of respectability and clearly aimed a controlling female sexual desire. Westerners uniformly disapproved, as they became aware of the practice; but official efforts to intervene only began after World War II, and then rather tentatively.

Critiques. Attacks on real or imagined African sexual habits ranged widely. One European noted blasted Africans for their “hot temperament, their fickle and licentious personalities.” “They can only restrain themselves with great difficulty, and once launched on debauchery, they maintain the most execrable voluptuousness.” Native dress, frequently involving bare breasts for women, drew wide comment. As in other regions, African men were attacked both for being effeminate and for being oversexed.

There were some distinctive themes, often reflecting and reinforcing a particularly vicious racism. A number of observers claimed that Africans frequently engaged in sex with animals, particularly monkeys. Belief that African men had unusually large, even animal-like sexual organs were matched by occasional claims that African women lacked hymens, which was said to account for their inordinate sexuality. On the other hand, blasts against homosexuality were less prominent than in India – though colonial regimes and missionaries alike sought to inculcate more explicit opposition to any same-sex practice.

As in other regions, Western critiques often involved considerable outright hypocrisy. The presence of Western military forces brought increasing reports of rape, particularly during the middle decades of the 19th century, as well as widespread use of prostitutes. These behaviors did not prevent vigorous

assertions of Western moral superiority, supplemented later in the century both by suspicious colonial wives and the growing ranks of missionaries.

Finally, relevant European impact in Africa varied greatly with region. British efforts at sexual regulation in southern Africa, for example, were much more intense than in West Africa, where legal changes were more limited.

Impacts. In several colonies, Western officials tried to limit the practice of child marriage, with varying degrees of success – though Christian missionaries helped in some cases. Some African officials also pressed for change. Around 1900, for example, one local man appealed to colonial officials to help a young girl who was being compelled to marry against her will. “I hope you will help her in the matter...She should not be forced to marry anyone.”

Missionaries also worked to introduce new patterns of dress. Traditions of polygamy were also attacked in the Christianizing regions, though actual change came slowly even when, officially, religious conversions gained ground.

Colonial pressures could generate both compliance and opposition. Many Africans came to share a deep resistance to potential same-sex behaviors – particularly where Christian missionary activity was strong. On the other hand, other local leaders could defend earlier customs as a matter of incipient national pride – even defending female circumcision as a valued tradition.

Economic change. In many parts of Africa, economic changes had more impact on sexual behaviors than colonial controls did. The rise of mining and other industries recruited a growing male labor force. In turn, when the workers returned to their villages, even for visit, flush with cash wages, they often pressed local girls into sexual activity. And young women who did move to cities, like their sisters in other regions, might have to resort to prostitution to support themselves.

Changes of this sort, along with the European criticisms of African sexuality, prompted a number of local efforts to impose new controls on female behavior, from the early 20th century onward. In Ghana in the 1920s, for example, local African officials increasingly arrested young women on suspicion of prostitution. One leader actually issued an edict requiring all young girls to marry. While colonial officials occasionally attempted legal reform aimed at assisting women – as in making it easier for them to divorce – quite commonly they joined in the effort to promote male family control.

Imagery in the West. One other feature of colonial sexuality is worth noting, though it involves the West itself: discussions of “native” sexuality, and even photographs of traditional dress, could intrude on Victorian respectability in Europe and America. Even when framed in terms of Western moral superiority, the images could, for some Western readers, suggest other opportunities.

Study questions:

1. What were the main similarities in Western commentaries on African and Indian sexualities? Were there significant differences?
2. How was colonial economic activity sexually disruptive? How were gender relations affected?
3. Why were colonial officials often more hesitant than missionaries in seeking to change established sexual patterns?

Further reading:

Imperial Leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial context. By Anne McClintock (Routledge, 1995).

“Wicked Women” and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa. Ed. By D.L. Hodgson and S.A. McCurdy (Heinemann, 2001).

Lords of Humankind: European attitudes to other cultures in the imperial age. By V. Kiernan (Serif, 1995).

Queering Colonial Natal: indigeneity and the violence of belonging in southern Africa. By T.J. Tillie (University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

CHAPTER 22: SOUTHWEST ASIA: OTTOMAN REACTIONS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Neither the Ottoman Empire nor China (discussed in the next chapter) came under full imperialist control in the 19th century, but both experienced growing Western political, economic and cultural pressure – including the striking impact of the West's claims to civilizational superiority.

Critique and resistance. Increasing encounters between Westerners and the Middle East and North Africa generated the familiar Western laments about decadence and immorality, a pattern already established by the 18th century. In this case, however, Islamic moralists might repay in kind: the Western women that traveled to the Middle East seemed far too unrestrained in public, too unconcerned with their sexual honor. (In one classic confrontation, a Western woman visiting the sultan's harem was punched in the jaw by one of the leading consorts for her inappropriate attitude.)

By 1900, debates about Western patterns were incorporated in vigorous local discussions about practices such as women's veiling. Many Egyptian reformers began to argue that veiling must be reconsidered in adjusting to modernity, while others insisted it was a vital defense of female modesty and regional tradition alike. A number of Middle Eastern authors, including some women writing in French or English, tried to push back against Western exaggerations while also insisting that some reforms were possible in women's conditions.

Homosexuality. Huge tension focused on homosexuality. Western eagerness to use evidence of same-sex practices as another sign of the region's sexual corruption in this case combined by a growing interest (late 19th/early 20th century) among some Western homosexuals in visiting parts of the Middle East and North Africa in hopes of finding greater tolerance. A good bit of Western criticism seized on same-sex themes in literature, as in the *Thousand and One Nights*, attacked as "absolute obscenity utterly repugnant to English readers." But several writers, including Oscar Wilde, and a number of painters also traveled to the region to explore this aspect of Middle Eastern culture – an early example of modern sex tourism.

Both these developments – the unexpected tourist interest but even more the drumbeat of criticism – prompted increasing hostility to same-sex practices within the Arab and Ottoman world. As in other regions, the response built on some traditional concern about homosexuality, as in Islamic prohibitions of sodomy, as well as the newer sensitivity to external reputation. As early as the 1830s Islamic writers began to urge greater control over literary praise for the joys of same-sex love. A Lebanese writer in the 1880s denounced homosexuality, particularly with young boys, as "one of the ugliest forms of debauchery." One scholar has aptly termed the new concern a regional "civilizational anxiety".

The new concern was not a matter for intellectual debate alone. Censorship of homoerotic literature became increasingly rigid under the late Ottomans, and older works, like the *Arabian Nights*, were revised to purge offensive passages. Tolerance for homosexuality among Ottoman bureaucrats and military leaders, once considerable, now disappeared. A few prominent homosexuals managed to survive by hiding their proclivities to prevent both Western and internal attack. On the legal front, interpretations of Islamic law increasingly emphasized the strand that viewed same-sex acts as punishable offenses.

All this added up to a major transformation of regional traditions. What began as a defensive reaction to the West became a deeply-rooted response throughout the area, one that has lasted into the 21st century.

Other changes. During the Ottoman period many other sexual traditions survived with less debate, including polygamy for those men who had sufficient resources. (However, the gradual decline of slavery had some impact on sexual options available to men.) Abortion and birth control remained permissible. Islamic rules of divorce continued to prevail, with differential access for men and women. After the fall of the Ottoman empire, however, other reforms might pressed forward. The Atatürk regime in Turkey thus outlawed polygamy and equalized divorce law, while also attacking practices such as female veiling. (However, homosexuality was not criminalized.) The reforms were not intended to unseat the family as the center of legitimate sexual activity: the goal was adjustment to Western criticism, not a new level of permissiveness.

Study questions:

1. Why did such substantial changes occur in the official approach to homosexuality in the Middle East?
2. What were some leading counterattacks against Western criticism of Ottoman sexual practices? Why did it become increasingly important to highlight sexual laxity in the West?
3. Why was it so difficult simply to ignore Western opinion about regional traditions?

Further reading:

Sex and the Citadel: intimate life in a changing Arab world. By Shereen El Feki (Chatto and Windus, 2013).

Slavery and abolition in the Ottoman Middle East. By E.R. Toledano (University of Washington Press, 1998).

CHAPTER 23: CHINA

The 19th century featured huge upheavals in Chinese history, due in large part to growing Western interference. In sexuality, however, while Western criticisms included some of the now-familiar staples, perspectives were somewhat more moderate than was the case for places like India or the Middle East, and Chinese adjustments were less disruptive as well. The Confucian framework had already generated a cautious strand in discussions of sexuality, and this could now be carried further.

Two related factors suggest a partially distinctive context. First, many Western observers were more concerned about undue submissiveness in Chinese women than about excessive sexuality, and this highlighted a different set of targets. Second, Chinese traditions already included high levels of concern about regulating sexual passions, and the Qing dynasty had been trying to heighten the emphasis on family-based, reproductive sexuality since the 18th century. It may also have been significant that while Chinese imperial traditions included an assortment of concubines, nothing quite as elaborate as a harem existed to provide a target for foreign comment.

Criticism and reform. Westerners certainly noted what they saw as the effeminacy of Chinese men, along with their indulgence in sexual pursuits. But while foreigners were certainly aware of prostitution (not infrequently taking advantage), they offered fewer sweeping criticisms of female sexuality. Rather, attention focused on the unfairness of practices like footbinding. Indeed, the efforts of Protestant missionaries soon combined with internal Chinese reform efforts, and this traditional practice began gradually to ease – a major change in gender relations but not centered primarily on sexuality. On another front: while average Chinese marriage ages were lower than their counterparts in the West, at 21 for men, 17 for women, they were actually rising a bit in the 19th century due to population pressure, and blatant practices such as extensive child marriage were less salient. Missionaries, but again also local reformers, did attack the tradition of concubinage, which like footbinding began to recede.

Public culture. The Qing dynasty increasingly attempted to regulate public culture, banning a large number of books that dealt with sexual themes. Over 150 titles were outlawed in the 18th century, the books burned along with the printing blocks used to produce them; and stiff penalties were threatened for anyone selling erotic materials. The measures were not terribly effective, particularly because the government itself steadily declined in capacity; but the efforts did unintentionally help limit Western criticisms of this aspect of Chinese culture.

Homosexuality. The Qing also moved against homosexuality, again beginning in the 18th century. The new regulations on publications included homoerotic materials, but the government also outlawed homosexuality in practice, for the first time in Chinese history – not only to discipline morality but to emphasize reproduction. This was another area where official steps muted Western complaint, though there was some additional pressure by the later 19th century. In practice, however, the measures had little impact on same-sex practice, which continued to be widespread, even within the imperial household. After the fall of the empire, these persistent patterns would however lead to a new debate during the 1920s and 1930s, with nationalist modernizers developing a new argument: that homosexuality was contrary to the needs of a vigorous, virile modern nation.

Study questions:

1. What distinctive factors affected Western commentary on Chinese sexuality?
2. Why did the Chinese government undertake new regulations even before significant Western influence?
3. Was the 19th century a period of much real change in Chinese sexual patterns?

Further reading:

Obsessions: male same-sex relations in China, 1900-1950. By Wenqing Kang (Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

Western images of China. By C. Mackerras (Oxford University Press, 1999).

CHAPTER 24: SEXUALITY IN LATIN AMERICA

Many features in Latin American sexuality persisted from the colonial period, when the intrusion of Western Christian standards had already occurred. Official disapproval of homosexuality, for example, remained intense. Upper-class representatives continued to defend the sanctity of the family, urging chastity before marriage (particularly for respectable young women) and discountenancing adultery. Lower-class behavior came in for intense criticism.

Illegitimacy and sexual violence. In fact, gaps between standards and actual behaviors loomed large, and not just in the lower classes; here too, many colonial trends were maintained. Rates of illegitimacy remained high. Many men maintained liaisons outside marriage. Until the abolition of slavery, which came late in many countries, sexual exploitation remained widespread. Efforts by slave women to protest rape were usually futile, because the burdens of proof were too great; and few even tried. Even aside from exploitation, many couples simply didn't bother with marriage, though Catholic campaigns did gradually drive the marriage rate up. False promises of marriage constituted another common problem (as was true in Western society as well), with some men pledging marriage to induce sexual compliance and then walking away. Women sometimes sued successfully, but more often the men involved managed to impugn their reputation by implying they had had previous relationships. Double standard sexuality clearly reduced women's latitude compared to men.

Reform pressures. Later in the 19th century several issues began to generate regulatory attention. Evidence of rising rates of venereal disease generated new efforts to regulate prostitution. During the first half of the 20th century Argentina actually tried to outlaw prostitution, while countries like Chile mandated blood tests before marriage. Some reformers also urged more explicit sex education, to help grapple with disease but also ease the pressures on women, but Catholic opposition usually limited actual programs.

Other battles occurred over abortion and birth control. Abortion was illegal throughout the region, though Argentina modified this in the 1920s for women who were raped or whose life was in danger; otherwise, penalties of four years in prison remained on the books. Underground, and even in some hospitals, rates of abortion probably increased, reflecting problems of regulating the birth rate by other means as well as sexual exploitation of women.

New voices. Thanks in part to a growing feminist movement and improvements in women's literacy, some magazines did begin to raise other issues. Thus an article in 1892 discussed the importance of sexuality to women's health and well-being – a rare comment that moved beyond the subject of exploitation and disease. Pressures for more access to birth control mounted by the 1920s: "a woman will never be the mistress of her own body if she cannot choose the moment she wants to become a mother." More feminists, however, worried about the double standard, focused more on seeking to reduce references to female sexuality in the media, seeing protection rather than expression or new rights as the key goal.

The "white slavery" crisis. Latin America was also deeply affected by a new Western campaign against so-called white slavery, that began to take shape in the 1870s and crested early in the 20th century. Both in Europe and the United States, anxiety grew about the seizure of young women for export to dens of iniquity elsewhere – particularly in Latin America. The crisis was probably blown out of proportion, in terms of the numbers involved, but some problems did exist. In 1877 women from seven Western countries formed the Friends of Young Women association to publicize the issue and insist on redress,

and an international bureau formed early in the 20th century to monitor compliance. The campaign expressed the deep stake in female respectability still dominant, in the West and globally, but also some xenophobic shock at the idea of foreigners molesting White women. The campaign explicitly expressed Western belief that sexual morals in other regions were uniformly remiss – one British leader referred to “the absence of any local public opinion on the moral question”.

Latin America was strongly targeted, and also extremely sensitive given concerns about prostitution and dismay at lower-class standards. Argentine leaders thus expressed great remorse that Buenos Aires was so widely regarded as the “worst of all centers of the immoral commerce on women”. The result fueled regulatory efforts in Argentina and other Latin American countries, as well as a massive propaganda campaign; but the issue lingered in the region until after World War II.

Study questions:

1. How did sexual issues in 19th-century Latin America compare to those in Asia and Africa?
2. How and why did sexuality become a social class issue in Latin America?
3. What kinds of new ideas began to circulate about sexuality and sexual problems, and why?
4. Why were Latin American leaders particularly sensitive to the “white slavery” campaign?

Further reading:

Sex & Danger in Buenos Aires: prostitution, family and nation. By Donna Guy (University of Nebraska Press, 1991).

Compromised Positions: prostitution, public health, and gender politics in revolutionary Mexico City. By Katherine Bliss (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

Life is Hard: machismo, danger and the intimacy of power in Nicaragua. By Roger Lancaster (University of California Press, 1992).

White Slave Crusades: race, gender, and anti-vice activism, 1887-1917. By Brian Donovan (University of Illinois Press, 2006).

CHAPTER 25: SEXUALITY IN RUSSIA

Sexual developments in Russia during the 19th century reflected some influence of Western standards, but population growth, land reform, and the early stages of industrialization were far more important in introducing significant changes in behavior patterns. Cultural commentary largely responded to these wider shifts.

Premarital sex. Following the somewhat convoluted reform of serfdom in 1861, labor mobility from the countryside steadily increased, fueled also by population pressure. Cities grew steadily. The overall results, in rural and urban areas alike, resembled the kind of popular “sexual revolution” that had occurred in Western Europe a century before. Premarital sex and illegitimacy rates both increased, as the controls of Orthodox Christianity, and village tradition, broke down to some extent. One writer claimed that many men sired several children with different women before marrying one of them, while “in most parts of the province, no one pays attention to women’s chastity.”

Prostitution and abortion. Urban prostitution expanded, as the government shifted from efforts at prohibition to granting official permits to “comfort houses”, complete with some medical inspection. By the 1890s it was estimated that there were 2500 brothels across the vast country.

Abortion rates accelerated apace, in the absence of wide access to other birth control measures. Despite being officially outlawed, the number of abortions in St. Petersburg may have increased tenfold during the turn of the century decades. But sales of condoms expanded as well.

Homosexuality. As part of the growing interest in sexual expression, homosexuality may have increased, particularly in schools and universities. Prohibitive laws were not enforced, and in 1903 official punishments were eased (without removing the ban in principle).

Criticisms. Many writers lamented the new trends, and not only on religious grounds. Conservative nationalists believed that the nation was succumbing to Western-style immorality, sapping Russian strength. (This was an important theme that would be picked up at various later points in Russian history.) Writers like Tolstoy railed against animal-like behavior – a focus on sex was “unworthy of human beings.”

Public culture. However, a full “Victorian” mood did not emerge. Other writers praised the quest for sexual pleasure. Magazines carried articles with titles like “How to quench your sexual thirst.” Many authors urged reform of laws on abortion, because of the risk of underground procedures. Poets and painters indulged in more erotic themes, and a number of openly gay and lesbian poets drew an audience. At another level, pornography also expanded. This was an interesting transitional moment, in behaviors and debates alike, on the eve of the great revolution.

Study questions:

1. What were the main causes of changes in sexual behavior in late-19th-century Russia?
2. How did public responses vary?
3. Why might the government have hesitated to enforce older sexual rules too strictly?

Further reading:

The Sexual Revolution in Russia from the Age of the Czars to Today. By I. Kon, tr. J. Riordan (Free Press, 1995).

Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia. By Laura Engelman (Cornell University Press, 1992).

CHAPTER 26: JAPAN

Like Russia, Japan entered a period of rapid change in the late 19th century, under the spur of massive political reforms in the Meiji era as well as the upheavals of early industrialization. But Japan also resembled other societies in Africa and Asia in terms of the potential impact of Western moral criticisms. Indeed, with a more varied and permissive sexual tradition than neighboring China, Japan was particularly vulnerable. Several important responses folded into the reform movement – without, however, transforming key traditions beyond recognition.

The Critiques. Western visitors, as Japan was pried open to international exchange, notoriously misunderstood key Japanese customs such as the geisha houses or the public baths. Christian missionaries, now flocking in, could be particularly harsh. In Western eyes, geishas seemed to be prostitutes, pure and simple. And Japanese art that had highlighted women in erotic poses was pornography, nothing more nor less. Japanese men, though effeminate in many ways, seemed hopelessly addicted to sex. Traditional tolerance for homosexuality, including the assumption that people could participate both in same-sex and heterosexual indulgence, was also widely attacked.

Reforms;

Homosexuality. The Japanese government in its reform mood was unusually sensitive to this kind of criticism and, without surrendering all tradition, proved eager to measure up to Western definitions of civilized behavior. Geisha houses were not abolished, but regulation increased. Erotic art was now banned as pornographic. Government ministers highlighted Confucian emphasis on the importance of family – a variety of measures tried to encourage a range of family activities, including dining together, and the campaign sought to bolster sexual respectability as well. In 1873 an unprecedented law sought to outlaw homosexuality. This turned out to go too far, and it was rescinded seven years later. However, official disapproval of same-sex behavior remained high, forcing greater concealment.

Monogamy. One measure that did stick was a law outlawing concubinage, a major blow against sexual traditions in the upper classes. Monogamy was now the legal norm. Another law, officially outlawing abortion, sought to emphasize the importance of reproductive sex, as did the “wise mother” image promoted for women by the Meiji government.

Family and courtship. However, these steps did not result in a fully Victorian-style family, in large part because gender differentials remained more pronounced. Mistresses were still widely tolerated. Arranged marriage continued to be the norm, with couples often not meeting until their parents had completed negotiations (and sometimes not until the ceremony itself). Parental permission was legally required for men under 30, women under 25. Courtship was also discouraged by the rigorous separation of the sexes in schools. When one westernizer proposed that the absence of love could be grounds to divorce, his measure was rejected. Chastity in marriage remained essential for respectable women, while a law allowing a husband to kill his wife and a lover was not repealed until 1908.

Despite some new regulations, Japanese public culture did not renounce discussions of sexuality. Sexual scandals of prominent people received wide attention. Sexual themes continued in art and poetry. As in the West, scientific findings about sexuality and sexual issues were widely publicized as well.

Urban sexuality. The complex adjustments in law and culture were accompanied by wide changes in sexual behavior in fact – often associated with urbanization. Here was a pattern broadly similar to what happened in the West and in Russia, a disjuncture between official commentary and actual practice. Exploitation of women in the factories was widespread, heightened by the low wages for female labor. Women in trades like waitressing were encouraged to flirt, and their styles of dress became more provocative. Large pleasure zones arose in cities, complete with brothels. Some families in the countryside deliberately sold a daughter into prostitution, in order to support the siblings. By the 1920s it was estimated that 50,000 prostitutes were servicing several men each day; and there was considerable export of Japanese women to other parts of Asia (where Japanese-run brothels often had special prestige).

The 1920s. Other changes began to affect even middle-class behavior by the 1920s. The idea of marrying for love gained ground, though it sometimes provoked bitter clashes with parents and, not infrequently, suicide – all widely publicized. Western fashions also drew new attention, prompting moralists to worry about the impact “frivolous Western influence” was having on Japanese youth.

The decades around the turn of the century showed a fascinating mixture of themes, with some of the standard impacts of early industrialization combining with government efforts to appease Western critics while at the same time many traditions survived with only minor modifications.

Study questions:

1. How did the Japanese seek to respond to Western criticisms of sexual patterns? Were the changes significant?
2. From the standpoint of sexuality, how did family patterns compare to those in the 19th-century West?
3. Why did prostitution expand so rapidly?

Further reading:

“Managing the Truth of Sex in Imperial Japan.” By Sabine Fruhstuck (*Journal of Asian Studies* 59:3, 2000).

“The World’s Oldest Debate: prostitution and the state in imperial Japan.” By Sheldon Garon (*American Historical Review* 98:3, 1993).

Sandaken Brothel No. 8; an episode in the history of lower-class Japanese women. By Y. Tomoko (tr. K. Taylor, M.E. Sharpe, 1999).

SECTION V 20TH CENTURY SEXUALITY

Overview

The central development in 20th century sexuality has been the steady decline of reproductive sex and the rise in the acceptability of and interest in recreational sex. The trend has been most pronounced in places like the West and Japan, but has some global applicability particularly after World War II, perhaps particularly in Latin America. Other developments add to or complicate the picture.

Birth control. Birth control devices steadily gained ground, fueling the equally steady decline of the birth rate with less need for periods of abstinence. Abortion rates were significant as well, but they tended to drop in the affluent countries. Some religious groups opposed the birth control trend, seeking to maintain the link between sex and reproduction, but even many faithful increasingly ignored their pressure. Introduction of the pill, in 1960, and then other technical improvements added to the momentum.

Disease. New treatments also became available for the most common sexually transmitted diseases. The rise of AIDS in the 1980s complicated the picture, but it too was ultimately brought under control, even in the parts of Africa that were hardest hit.

Public culture. Sexuality was an important part of consumer culture. Japan resumed its production of erotic materials. Sexual scenes increasingly entered into films and television, particularly from the 1960s onward. New sexual advice literature urged the importance and availability of pleasure, and reversed the old Victorian claim that women had no sex drive. Outright pornography expanded as well, becoming unprecedentedly available with the rise of the Internet.

Behavior. Studies showed a widespread increase in the importance of sex within marriage. Even more striking was a widespread drop in the age of first sex – part of the sexual revolution of the 1960s – particularly for young women. Premarital sex became increasingly common and, in the affluent societies, expectations of chastity at marriage increasingly disappeared. Even people in older age gained a new emphasis on sexual connections, a striking change particularly for postmenopausal women.

Homosexuality. Homosexual behavior was increasingly criticized in the West during the first half of the century, as many psychiatrists claimed it was a mental disorder. But growing assertiveness by gay groups, plus the wider commitment to sexual pleasure, rather rapidly cut into repression, as Western opinion shifted toward acceptance – even of gay marriage. And from 1989 onward gay couples were increasingly allowed to wed, and homosexuality also entered into acceptable media presentations.

Opposition. These various trends provoked considerable, and often passionate, opposition, particularly from conservative religious groups. The United States moved more slowly than Western Europe or Japan, for example in accepting nudity in the press or in beaches. But the overall trend persisted in many parts of the world.

Communist societies. Under Stalin, in the Soviet Union, and Mao Zedong in China, communist societies long held themselves in opposition to Western sexuality, seeing it as a major example of bourgeois decadence and a distraction from true socialist goals. Both governments sought to encourage reproductive sex, and claimed also to reduce prostitution; media representations were also chaste, particularly in China where even kissing was taboo. This interesting exception only eased in Russia with communist collapse, in China with the new population policy adopted in 1978. Russia in the 1990s quickly seemed to embrace a more permissive culture, and in China youth dating and other practices spread more widely.

Global disputes and homosexuality. The rise of a more permissive sexual environment provoked some interesting regional divisions. Many Islamic and some Hindu leaders decried Western sexual culture and sought to limit its impact, including insistence (in Islam) on traditionally concealing costumes for women. In South Asia, rates of rape may have risen as part of male efforts to use sexual violence to repress change among women.

Fascinating divisions accompanied the growing Western push for gay rights. African and Muslim regions largely rejected open homosexual behavior (in some cases, despite earlier traditions), sometimes

expanding police repression. Russia under Vladimir Putin claimed to be defending Christian culture against gays. Other regions were more mixed, with some changes developing in India and parts of East Asia.

Sex trafficking. Growing affluence and sexual interest in some parts of the world, poverty and dislocations in others, led to rising rates of sex trafficking and also sex tourism to places such as Thailand or Costa Rica.

21st century. Two developments around of the turn of the century suggested some modifications to leading 20th century trends. In the first place, women in several countries began to protest what they saw as abusive male sexual behavior, not only physical claims but also verbal innuendoes. The term sexual harassment was introduced as part of an effort to set new boundaries.

Several societies, including Japan, the US, and Britain, also reported declining rates of sexual activity, particularly among younger adults. In some cases access to pornography may have reduced more standard sexual interests, but other factors were debated as well. Clearly, change remained a vital part of the sexual history of the contemporary world.

CHAPTER 27: 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 use 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 intrauterine 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?

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CHAPTER 28 COMMUNIST SOCIETY : RUSSIA

Major communist societies offered a vivid contrast with patterns of sexuality in other parts of the world during much of the 20th century. The focus on building a revolutionary and industrial system prompted many efforts to discipline sex for the higher good. The desire to offer an alternative to Western bourgeois decadence pointed in the same direction. And finally, the goal of expanding the population focused attention, at least in principle, on reproductive sex.

Soviet Union in the 1920s. During the early Soviet years, an atmosphere of experiment, building on some of the trends in late tsarist Russia, encouraged innovative thinking, for example about the necessity of marriage. Church weddings yielded to simpler civil ceremonies, and divorce was liberalized, with rates soaring. Abortion was also legalized, a first in European history. Homosexuality was entirely decriminalized in 1917, another tribute – Soviet leaders claimed -- to modern, scientific thinking. At the same time, prostitution and venereal disease continued to increase. Many articles discussed the sheer physical pleasure of sex.

Repression. This mood was short-lived, particularly as Stalin took over and emphasis on industrialization intensified. Officials issued cautionary statements, as in “sexual life is permissible only insofar as it encourages the growth of collective feelings, class organization” Individual satisfaction was now seen as counter-revolutionary, and campaigns against “sexual depravity” mounted. New laws banned pornography and prostitution (and official data quickly were adjusted to show that this scourge was disappearing under Soviet rule, and visits to prostitutes may well have become less common, and certain more surreptitious). Homosexuality was again outlawed, in 1936, held to be decadent and contrary to revolutionary goals. Divorce laws became more complex, along with defense of marital, reproductive sex. Experts touted sublimation in interests of social progress. The similarities to earlier Western Victorianism were striking.

Behaviors. The campaign surely had results, but it faltered at least in some respects. Abortion rates remained high, for amid crowded cities many individuals and families sought to avoid unwanted children and indulge in some recreational sex. And the goal of rapid population increase also remained elusive. But the restrictive tone persisted. During the Cold War Soviet morality was held up in contrast to Western permissiveness. In a striking scene, a Soviet leader visited Hollywood in 1959 and was truly shocked by scantily-clad Can-Can dancers on a movie set.

Study questions:

1. What caused the repressive Communist approach to sexuality? Were some of the causes similar to those that had engendered Victorianism?
2. Why was homosexuality targeted?
3. What were some of the most important impacts of the Communist approach?

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CHAPTER 29 COMMUNIST SOCIETY : CHINA

Maoist China. Much the same scenario took shape after the communist revolution in China, and particularly during the 1960s Cultural Revolution phase. Communism did unseat parentally-arranged marriages, in favor of choice by young people themselves. But officials frowned on sexual dalliance and at points even banned dating in many settings. Even more than in the Soviet Union, Chinese communists touted standardized, rather drab styles of dress, another sign of the hope to avoid provocative behavior; one woman recalled that no choice was available, because “fashionable clothes...were regarded as bourgeois”. Girls were encouraged to cut their hair short, to avoid any emphasis on femininity. Even more than with the Soviets, outside Western influence was fiercely opposed. Sex was seen as a potentially disruptive force in many ways.

Public culture. Approved drama and fiction shunned romantic relationships and even much depiction of marriage. Government censors deleted any movie scenes that smacked of sex or love. No sex education was provided, and the topic was simply taboo. As one man recalled, “We did not have any knowledge about sexuality. Our parents never talked about it. Every kid around me experienced a frightening and confusing puberty.” Pre-marital sex was shameful – though of course it did sometimes occur as young people experimented despite, or sometimes because of, their lack of knowledge.

Homosexuality. Homosexuality was rigorously proscribed, despite earlier Chinese traditions. It was taken to represent the “decline and evil of Western civilization.” Severe punishments were levied for sodomy, particularly during the Cultural Revolution.

Reform. Only at the end of the 1970s, parallel to the huge change in population policy, did the Maoist influence ease. No longer was reproductive sex the only authorized form. A few Western movies were allowed, with even animated Disney films offering a startling contrast to previous fare – for after all, Sleeping Beauty is kissed on the lips, something many Chinese teenagers had never seen (a revelation that drew shocked comments from remaining Maoist purists).

The strictest communist approach to sexuality was, obviously, bounded in time, and by the 1990s seemed an increasingly distant memory. It stands however as an intriguing facet of 20th-century history, a reminder that the global history of sexuality remains varied and complex.

Study Questions

1. Were there any significant differences between the Maoist and Soviet approaches to sexuality?
2. Why did the change in population policy in the late 1970s shift the context for sexuality?

Further reading:

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CHAPTER 30 : SEXUALITY AND GLOBALIZATION

The combination of various forms of global communication and the increasing industrialization and urbanization of much of the world linked globalization and sexuality in many ways particularly during the later 20th century. Many of the basic sexual patterns that first took hold in the West and Japan spread more widely: for example, dramatic decreases in family size and the reduced focus on reproductive sex. Satellite television transmission, the spread of movies and animation, and ultimately the Internet provided growing awareness of the kind of public culture developed in the advanced industrial zone. For example, beauty pageants, including swimsuit competitions, became popular almost everywhere (though with some conservative and feminist lament).

But globalization also introduced some other themes, such as the often brutal international sex trade and sex tourism. Concern about the global transmission of sex-related diseases, though not a new subject, intensified.

Globalization also, finally, highlighted continued regional variations in sexual attitudes and expectations, and even some troubling regional distinctions in probable rates of sexual violence. Globalization generated new efforts to interfere with some regional patterns, usually on the basis of human rights values. The mixture of common trends and regional variations was predictable but complex.

Global patterns. Birth control measures, to control family populations but also facilitate recreational sex, spread widely. During the final decades of the Soviet Union abortion continued to be a widespread option, and fears of cancer limited the use of oral contraceptives. But in 1991 a new Family Planning Association emerged to promote alternative approaches, and condom use expanded. China's turn to birth control after 1978 dramatically altered family patterns, leading to more abortions (including some forced abortions), but also more use of artificial devices. In Hong Kong 65% of all families were using contraception by the 1990s, and reliance on female sterilization (after a first birth) also expanded. Contraception also spread in the Middle East, particularly among more secular families – 71% use for example in Turkey in the later 20th century. Birth control efforts also expanded in Latin America, despite Catholic opposition and also unusually fierce male objection to the use of condoms. Most governments supported birth control, including use of the pill, and many women joined in, sometimes taking the pill without the knowledge of their husbands or priests, often after they had had two children.

Public culture. Changes in public culture gained some common global resonance. In China, erotic materials, translations of Western books on sexuality, and suggestive scenes in movies and advertisements expanded rapidly after the end of the Mao regime, along with a flourishing pornographic industry. Discussions and portrayals of sex in Latin America, and in places like Brazil the growing popularity of revealing beachwear, introduced significant new themes. Latin American men also became enthusiastic users of Viagra, even before later age, in the enthusiasm for sexual performance. The fall of the Soviet Union ushered in a sea change in public culture, including the first movie sex scene in Russian history, in 1998.

Here, however, there were some important regional holdouts, most notably in the Middle East and North Korea, where tight religious and/or governmental controls limited cultural expression. Even here, however, access to Internet pornography could introduce new variety by the turn of the 21st century. And several Middle Eastern countries, eager for tourism, had to ease certain restrictions. Several nude beaches and pools opened in Turkey, and while this was not true in Dubai, scanty swim suits were acceptable. These concessions could introduce some confusing tensions in local culture, particularly male culture.

Behaviors. In several regions, premarital sexual activity increased. By the 1990s age of first sexual experience averaged 17 in Russia – a drop, but less dramatic than in the West. Teenage sexuality expanded in many parts of Latin America, though amid disapproval particularly where women were involved. A Brazilian magazine in 1995 proudly proclaimed, "Sex is no longer a sin.... Teenagers are freer to choose their own sexual initiation." Dating spread in post-Mao China, though at a later age than in the West and with fewer likely sexual partners. In behavioral category, while there were some common trends, regional variations remained considerable. In the Middle East and India, male oversight of female

sexuality remained pervasive, with family members frequently punishing daughters or sisters for misdeeds – sometimes including honor killings.

Sex for sale. Commercial sex remained important in many places, and undoubtedly gained ground with urbanization and its dislocations. In Africa, some women continued to serve as consorts for wealthy men, maintaining an older pattern. Rural poverty forced many women into prostitution in the cities, sometimes crossing borders to sell their services: there were 200,000 Nepalese prostitutes in India by the early 21st century, valued among other things for their light skin. The fall of communism and ensuing economic disruptions forced many East European women into prostitution, particularly during the 1990s: highways from Germany into Czechoslovakia were lined with women trying to sell their services to incoming motorists.

These general patterns increasingly bled into sexual tourism and heightened international sex trafficking. Hundreds of thousands of women from Ukraine and other parts of Eastern Europe were trafficked, often into centers in East or Southeast Asia, where they were regarded as exotic and highly sexed. By 2008 500,000 East European women were serving as prostitutes in the European Union. Many East African women were trafficked into other parts of Africa, sometimes promised jobs as nannies but then raped and drafted into prostitution. Worldwide, a 2005 report suggested that 600-800,000 women were being trafficked each year. Some were duped, some were simply struggling against poverty. Some even saw sexual service as a way to escape traditional family controls: in parts of West Africa, some prostitutes were simply known as “modern women”.

Sex tourism arose in many centers, as in several parts of Latin America, Thailand, Crimea, and elsewhere, where men from wealthier countries were able to combine a vacation with access to a variety of prostitutes. Sex tours to Thailand were openly billed under headings like “anything goes in this exotic country.” Some sex tourists paid a premium to be serviced by a virgin. On the user side, by 2000 Canadians were estimated to be spending \$400,000 a year on sex tourism, while figures for the United States, Germany and Japan were much higher

Disease. New and old sexual habits, both the continued vitality of prostitution and the expansion of sexual activity before marriage, generated growing concern about sexually transmitted disease. The surge of attention to AIDs, from the 1980s onward, introduced a host of global accusations. Indians widely blamed Nepalese women, Russians and Chinese blamed foreigners, many Americans blamed gays. A number of countries, such as Thailand, tried to place new limits on prostitution, often without much success, or at least to promote condom use. After the initial flurry problems proved most acute and stubborn in southern and eastern Africa, where heavy use of urban prostitutes combined with a widespread male reluctance to use condoms (along with male ability to convince female partners to acquiesce). Medical treatments and strong government programs did begin to curtail (but not eliminate) the problem by the early 21st century.

Sexual violence. Confusing changes in sexuality provided new reasons for sexual violence, particularly in certain regions. In some Islamic countries men might see violence as a means of keeping increasingly educated women in their place. In Pakistan, for example, women who wore Western dress risked male attack, even by other family members; and punishments for this violence were light to nonexistent. In India, young women walking to school risked sexual attack; in 1987 a book entitled *How to Rape*, was published in Mumbai – and it included advice on how to avoid punishment. Sexual violence was not new, of course, and it could occur anywhere, but it seemed particularly concentrated in regions like the Middle East and South Asia that had long emphasized women’s seclusion.

By the later 20th century globalization was clearly promoting a confusing mixture of common trends, new or intensified sexual problems, and varied regional reactions. Overall, global processes both expressed and promoted difficult confrontations between old and new sexual standards.

Study questions:

1. Can a “globalization pattern” of sexuality be defined, or are regional and individual variations predominant?
2. What were the conditions for the expansion of sex trafficking and sex tourism?

3. How did globalization both facilitate and complicate changes in gender sexual norms?

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CHAPTER 30: SEXUALITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Only two decades have passed so far in the new century, and it is obvious from the history of sexuality that crucial changes often emerge over a period of time – so any judgments about new patterns must be quite tentative. Further, many of the trends established during the 20th century clearly persist. Birth rates continue to drop globally – indeed in many regions, past the point of population replacement; there certainly is no surge of reproductive sex. In some settings, casual sexual arrangements became more common, as in the spread of what was called “hook up” culture on college campuses: brief sexual episodes with no emotional commitment, sometimes arranged on the Internet. A highly sexualized public culture remains widely current, including the massive expansion of the availability and use of pornography, while problems such as sex trafficking continue to be troubling despite a variety of national and international efforts. Regional differences continue to reflect earlier traditions, particularly religious prescriptions, leading to considerable disagreements within the global framework. Amid these important continuities, however, three or four developments could not have been fully anticipated as the century opened, and deserve attention as part of completing the history of sexuality to this point.

Islamic extremism and other cults. The rise of a militant extreme within Islam, and particularly the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), though most noteworthy for its promotion of terrorism, had a distinctive take on sexuality – part traditional, part simply vicious. ISIS leaders strongly objected to Western sexual culture, touting what they saw as Islamic purity. Muslim women in the group were pressed to have children, emphasizing the importance of reproductive sex. But the group also seized hundreds women of other denominations, including some of the Shi’a faith, treating them as sex slaves and subjecting them to repeated rape. Besides offering an inducement to ISIS men, leaders claimed this pattern was justified by original Islam, with sex used as a weapon against false beliefs. The women involved were carefully administered birth control pills and checked regularly, as ISIS honored an obscure passage in Islamic law which said that slaves used for sex must not be pregnant. While this

behavior aroused massive protest from most of the groups involved, and from human rights organizations, some Shi'a families, believing their women had been dishonored, stayed silent.

Smaller sex cults also developed in the late 20th and early 21st century, sometimes associated with religious claims of self-proclaimed Hindu or Christian prophets. In the United States a pseudo-business formed by Keith Raniere in 1998 recruited large numbers of women, purportedly for personal development including training in Extra Sensory Perception, subjecting many to intense psychological pressure including requirements of regular sex with the leader.

Hopefully, no large trend emerged with these developments, which did serve as a reminder of how various doctrines can still be distorted to serve male predators.

Global disputes over same-sex behaviors. Support for a variety of gay rights, from tolerance of open displays of affection in public from same-sex partners to the dramatic idea of gay marriage, rose with unusual rapidity throughout Western society, from the 1980s onward. Approving references in the media and television moved in the same direction. The trend reflected vigorous advocacy on the part of gay groups plus the changes in wider ideas about sexuality. Denmark became the first country effectively to legalize gay marriage, in 1989. Public opinion in the United States changed with startling rapidity: in the early 1980s only 32% of the population supported gay marriage, but by 2020 the figure had soared to 73%. Bitter conservative opposition remained, particularly among some Christian groups: official doctrine remained unchanged in Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism. But the overall transformation was impressive and seemingly solid.

On a global level, however, Western trends provoked widespread resistance – often most intense, ironically, in regions that had only converted to intolerance under Western pressure a century and a half before. Homosexuality was taken as another sign of Western sexual license, to be resisted as a foreign intrusion; or, in other Christian majority regions, such as Latin America and parts of Africa, adamant traditional hostilities simply persisted. Legal strictures shifted in only a few Latin American countries (communist Cuba also maintained tight restrictions), and in Africa only tolerant post-apartheid South Africa opened the door.

Some African countries, like Uganda, even threatened to stiffen dire penalties against same-sex behaviors. Resistance in the Middle East was widespread, and police treatment of known homosexuals, including foreigners, worsened in places like Dubai. One small Muslim country (Bhutan) threatened capital punishment, though it backed away from actual enforcement. Even Turkey became less tolerant officially. Under Vladimir Putin Russia held itself out as a great Orthodox bastion against homosexuality, with appeals to “cleanse” the country of the vice. Same-sex couples were harassed, and favorable public references were banned.

A few countries gradually shifted to at least somewhat greater openness: Indian courts ruled that homosexuality was a human right, and Taiwan took the lead on gay marriage in East Asia. Still, attitudes and policies toward same-sex behaviors, and people, shaped up to be one of the regional battlegrounds of contemporary sexuality.

New boundaries and the ambivalence of feminism. Several developments in the West suggested some serious reconsideration of the changes in sexual culture that had occurred in the 20th century. For example, while pornography became increasingly available, new levels of policing were directed against child pornography. Widespread publicity of sex scandals among groups like the Catholic clergy or boy scout leaders heightened a realization of the downsides of sexual drives.

Another and more novel tension arose over definitions of appropriate heterosexual behaviors, primarily by males. Trends in the 1960s had emphasized sexual opportunities for women, and the importance of seeking pleasure; but these had been accompanied by films, advertisements and even changes in dress styles that disproportionately stressed female sexual attractiveness. And these developments occurred as men and women were interacting more regularly in schools and the workplace. This combination led both to new problems and to new efforts to set boundary lines that would subject certain behaviors, primarily by men, to new legal penalties or to social shaming. Recalculations by feminists played a major role in this complex shift.

The term sexual harassment was coined, in North America (first, apparently, in Toronto), in the 1970s. The term date rape was introduced in the same decade, again in North America. The new vocabulary sought to identify and reprove sexual behaviors that were both very old and in some cases quite new. The terminology represented efforts to set new limitations on sexual activity, modifying the open-endedness of Western sexual culture.

Specific problems included office situations where coworkers, mainly male, ventured suggestive comments or behaviors (such as touching), sometimes using sex as a bargaining chip in promotions. Date rape reflected the rise of unchaperoned dating activity on college campuses, affected as well by growing sexual expectations by some male partners and an unwillingness to take no for an answer; high rates of alcohol consumption often complicated the transaction, with women realizing (or claiming) violation only after the fact.

In the larger sense, the new guidelines sought to revive shaming as a regulator of sexual behavior (though in the case of date rape, criminal prosecution was also involved). In deep contrast to traditional standards, the new wisdom tended to assume that women, rather than men, were to be credited in testimony.

Me/Too movement The effort was further extended by the rise of the Me/Too movement, first broached in 2006 and then taking off after 2017, in which large numbers of women reported past episodes of intimidation and abuse. This was an extension of the campaign against harassment, but now often directed at powerful men whose behaviors ranged from innuendo and exposure of body parts to physical assault. Here too, a much older practice – the ability of rich men to assemble a group of female sexual partners – was under attack, again through a combination of public shaming (often leading to job loss) and legal prosecution.

The movement began in the United States, but quickly echoed in much (though not all) of Western Europe. Individual echoes of Me/Too occurred almost everywhere, as courageous women stepped forward to report abuse. However, the overall campaign made less headway against more macho sexual cultures in places like Russia and Latin America. (and even in the West, the movement remained disproportionately upper middle class). But fledgling movements emerged amid new protests in East Asia and India, though it was not clear if a larger current would develop. In most of the West, however, the new, if informal, rules added an important complexity to the sexual standards of the 21st century.

A decline of sex? The most intriguing and unexpected innovation in sexual behavior in the 20th century, at least in a few countries like Japan and the United States, was an apparent decline of sexual activity of any sort, at least beyond pornographic titillation and masturbation. In the United States, careful surveys (on an admittedly difficult topic) suggested a drop in average frequency of sexual intercourse from 60 to 53 times per year in the age group 18-49. Studies of the college age population showed a marked decline in casual sex among both men and women (despite some persistence of hook-up sex). In Japan, recent polls among the age group 18-34 showed 28% of men, 23% of women had no interest in a sexual relationship, while over a quarter of all people aged 35-39 had no sexual experience at all. Many Japanese marriages also were termed “sexless”, with only occasional sexual activity. A 2019 study in the UK found a third of all adults reporting no sex in the past month, up from a quarter in 2001. And whereas previously 20% of both women and men had reported having sex at least 10 times a month, the 2019 figure stood at 13% (women) and 14% (men). It was not yet clear how many other advanced industrial countries were experiencing similar trends.

But the data are fascinating. Obviously the new trends relate to declining birth rates in these regions, but given the wide availability of birth control devices the behaviors are responding at least in part to other factors than a desire to avoid unwanted pregnancies.

Causes. Possibilities include: declining sperm counts due to pollution (a measurable phenomenon).

--The impact of control programs, for example on college campuses; young Americans are drinking less in part to avoid the circumstances of date rape. Wider publicity given to sexual misbehavior – by the Me/Too movement, by scandals in the Catholic priesthood – may also be having a daunting effect.

--Wide availability of Internet pornography, another measurable change as usage has soared since the 1990s. Here, two factors are involved: increased solitary masturbation but also self-doubts caused by the idealized bodies and sexual organs of the porn stars. (Denmark interestingly introduced a program showing normal naked bodies in sexual education classes, to help convince young people that they were not deficient.)

-Growing isolation and loneliness of many adults, in various age groups.

-Simply a sense, amid all the hype in public culture, that sexual relationships were too much trouble, emotionally burdensome.

-And finally, some authorities suggested, the fatigue and pace of modern life.

Unsurprisingly, finally, given fears of contagion, sexual activity dropped still further during the global pandemic (even though, theoretically, it could have been a recourse at least for cohabiting couples).

Conclusion. The new or heightened trends of the 21st century, particularly those that pushed against some of the sexual climate of the late 20th century, were fascinating, certainly important to monitor in the next few decades. At the same time, divisions in responses provided new evidence of the importance of regional conditions even in a global age.

Study questions:

1. What are some of the most important regional divisions around current sexual issues and behaviors?
2. Are some countries entering a major new period in their sexual history (compared to the late 20th century)? What are the key criteria?
3. Is contemporary pornography transforming sexual behaviors?
4. To what extent do modern sexual trends pose special dilemmas for feminism?

Further reading:

Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War: the case of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. By Sali Bitar (Masters thesis, Uppsala University, 2015).

"Why Are Fewer Young Adults Having Casual Sex?". By Scott South and Lei Lei. In *Socius: sociological research for a dynamic world* (Mar. 1, 2021).

"British People Having Less Sex Than Previously," *BBC News*, May 8, 2019.

Pornification: sex and sexuality in media culture. By K. Nikunen and L. Saarenmaa (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Pornified: how pornography is transforming our lives, our relationships, and our families. By Pamela Paul (Owl Books, 2005).