

Sexy Theology: The Role of Evolution in the Formation of a
Theological Concept of the Value of Sexuality
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Introduction

In the past, sexual desire was defined in Freudian terms as a drive or instinct that needed to be satisfied. Current research in evolutionary psychology has modified this understanding of sexual instinct in terms of mate choice and preference. However, human sexuality is not just a product of individual preferences but also involves social factors as well. Under certain circumstances, evolutionary selection occurs at the group level as well as at the individual level. Aspects of the evolution of sexual moral values can be explained as a consequence of the evolution of social mechanisms that enhance group cooperation and cohesion. However, this does not necessarily reduce or rule out the role of divine action in the formation of sexual values. A conceptualization of the value of sexuality arises as a result of evolutionary factors and different religious expressions that mirror the reality of a transcendent God. In the case of sexuality, the primary divine expression is in terms of relationality, which presents sexuality as a component of personal relationships between partners that enhances vulnerability and intimacy, not just as a means of individual gratification.

Sexual Desire and Evolutionary Psychology

Evolutionary psychology is an emerging field in psychology that attempts to understand the role of evolutionary adaptations in formation of different aspects of

human psychology.¹ One of the primary areas of research in evolutionary psychology is the investigation of the evolutionary factors that contributed to the formation of human sexuality including mating strategies, jealousy, and different forms of attraction. Evolutionary psychology works under the assumption that particular psychological adaptations must have evolved to solve the adaptive problems of successful mating among our early human ancestors. Thus, human sexual desire is at least partially constituted by psychological propensities or preferences in mate selection that constrain human concepts of beauty and sexual attraction.

For example, the hip-to-waist ratio (WHR) specifies a male sexual preference for women with a particular body shape comprised of a ratio of the waist of a woman to her hip size.² Men showed a preference for a WHR between .67 and .80. The psychological adaptation may have been a result of discriminating between potential sexual partners and their reproductive potential. Thus, males would be able to distinguish between a younger girl who was not sexually mature enough to be able to conceive a child and an older woman who could conceive. To illustrate in a very simplistic way, if two males each have an equal chance of procreating with several different women but one has a preference for women who are actually able to conceive while the other male is not discriminating in his choices for a sexual partner, the male with a preference for sexually mature women will increase his chances of actually impregnating a woman while the nondiscriminating male will

¹ David Buss, ed., *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005).

² Devendra Singh, "Adaptive Significance of Female Physical Attractiveness: Role of Waist-to-Hip Ratio," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65, no. 2 (1993).

waste a significant amount of time copulating with women who could never conceive a child.

Recent research has also shown that lower-body fat in women may have a positive effect on the supply of fatty acids that play an essential role in the neural development of offspring.³ Women with lower WHR scores and their children score higher on tests for cognitive ability when other factors are controlled. Thus, the WHR may not just indicate sexual maturity but also health and good genes. Sexual selection theory in evolution assumes that many different forms of sexual display are proxies for the selection of good genes, which obviously increases the possibility of survival and reproduction in subsequent generations of a species.⁴ Besides WHR, several different psychological adaptations have contributed to male sexual psychology and what men indicate as attractive. Many of these have to do with indicators of youth such as clear and smooth skin, muscle tone, and energy level.⁵

Male preferences in mates should not be taken as an indication that men are the ones who are typically doing the choosing throughout evolutionary history. In fact, for most species females are the ones who do the choosing and males are the ones who are trying to grab the attention of the females.⁶ However, female preferences are still slightly different from males. Females still favor some aspects of physical attractiveness similar to males such as facial symmetry. Both males and

³ William D. Lassek and Steven J. C. Gaulin, "Waist-Hip Ratio and Cognitive Ability: Is Gluteofemoral Fat a Privileged Store of Neurodevelopmental Resources?," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 29 (2008).

⁴ Geoffrey Miller, *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000).

⁵ David Buss, *The Evolution of Desire*, Revised ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

⁶ Miller, *Mating Mind*, 88.

females favor facial symmetry in a potential long-term mate when compared to faces with less symmetry using computer-generated faces (although symmetry affected male preference to a greater degree).⁷ Although women use physical attractiveness as a proxy for fitness, their overall preferences reflect different factors in the assessment of a potential mate.

For women, reproduction is much more costly. They have fewer eggs with the potential for being fertilized, so they are much more conservative in their choices for a potential mate. Once they are pregnant, they have to carry the child to term and care for the child once they are born. Thus, women have evolved sexual preferences for men who are more likely to contribute to the pregnancy and help to raise the children. Women often prefer mates who have a higher perceived status based on their likelihood of success in a career, education and degrees, level of maturity, and ambition.⁸ David Buss and Todd Shackelford suggest that women have an evolved adaptation that is able to raise or lower their standards for a potential mate based on their own mate value.⁹ Standards for a potential mate were clustered into four basic categories: (1) fitness or good-gene indicators (i.e. physical attractiveness); (2) investment indicators (i.e. potential income) (3) good parenting; and (4) good partner indicators (i.e. being able to express love). Higher levels in individual mate value, assessed through correlation with levels of attractiveness

⁷ Randy Thornhill and Steven W. Gangestad, "Facial Attractiveness," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 3, no. 12 (1999).

⁸ Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 25; 28-31.

⁹ David Buss and Todd K. Shackelford, "Attractive Women Want It All: Good Genes, Economic Investment, Parenting Proclivities, and Emotional Commitment," *Evolutionary Psychology* 6, no. 1 (2008).

assigned by observers, lead to increased expectations in all four categories for potential mates.

Sociality and Sexuality

Male and female sexual preference obviously has an important effect on mate selection, but sexuality, especially in primates, is a very social process. In our closest primate relatives, sexuality is not just a means for procreation, but also serves an important role in social functions. For bonobo females, mutual clitoral stimulation or “GG-rubbing” is a part of female bonding and a regular part of social interactions.¹⁰ Males often participate in similar acts, mutually stimulating the penis of their partner. Although this does not usually lead to ejaculation, it does seem to be a normal part of their social life; bonobos seem to include “genital handshakes” as a form of social communication.¹¹ Sexual intercourse may be used as a bargaining chip in social exchanges, such as offering sex for food.¹² Sexuality is used as a way to ease social tensions in the group and is often the appetizer offered before a large meal; it can be used to initiate sex, appeasement for anger, and as a sign of affection.

Attempting to copulate with a female in a chimpanzee troop is a highly social affair. Gorillas tend to have one dominant male who controls reproductive access to the females in a troop, while chimpanzee troops have several males in a particular

¹⁰ Frans de Waal, *Our Inner Ape: A Leading Primatologist Explains Why We Are Who We Are* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 104.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹² S. Kuroda, "Interactions over Food among Pigny Chimpanzees," in *The Pygmy Chimpanzee*, ed. R. Susman (New York: Plenum, 1984).

group, with one dominant male. Although the dominant male has greater sexual access to the females, this does not necessarily hinder the other males from gaining sexual access. If a female is willing to copulate with a lower-ranking male, the male can find different ways to get around the defenses of the dominant male. Over time the alpha male can simply be worn out from having to monitor the advances of a lower-ranking male.¹³ Males have been known to hide their erections from other higher-ranking males when they come close as a chimpanzee couple are preparing for sex.¹⁴ Males will often groom the dominant male to try and soothe him to allow for copulation and male grooming is often highest when sexual tension is high among the troop.

Sexual mating is greatly constrained by the social situations that exist in both human and nonhuman primate cultures. Humans are a highly cooperative species and any sexual preferences must have been exercised within a particular group. Sexual selection occurs mainly between individuals as both males and females use particular strategies to enhance their reproductive potential both in terms of their chances for mating and the quality of potential mates. However, these strategies must have been exercised in particular groups and the strategies could not have been isolated from corresponding issues such as coalitions, economy, and food. Thus, it seems highly probable that at the group level those social structures that could help to effectively manage sexual selection among its members would have a slight advantage over other groups lacking those resources.

¹³ De Wall, *Our Inner Ape*, 122-123.

¹⁴ Frans de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 77.

Group Selection, Religion, and Sexual Morality

Until recently, the primary component of evolutionary change was assumed to be at the level of individual differences, which were the result of differences in phenotypes that lead to relative fitness. Thus, the term “selfish gene” became a common phrase indicating the genetic factors that cause the formation of a particular phenotype, which enhances survival and reproduction in competition with other organisms.¹⁵ However, in the history of the theory of evolution, groups were thought to be possible candidates as potential loci of evolutionary adaptation, but poor theoretical and empirical development lead many biologists to discredit this view, especially in the work of G. C. Williams.¹⁶ Recently, there has been a revival of sorts in looking to groups and multiple levels of possible evolutionary change rather than focusing solely on the individual differences between and within species.

Group selection can be defined as a form of selection that occurs along a particular vector that includes multiple processes working at various levels of selection.¹⁷ Thus, individual vs. group selection is not a zero sum game between two competing processes; both contribute, in varying degrees, to the evolution of some

¹⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹⁶ G. C. Williams, *Adaptation and Natural Selection: A Critique of Some Current Evolutionary Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966); David Sloan Wilson, "Human Groups as Adaptive Units: Toward a Permanent Consensus," in *The Innate Mind: Culture and Cognition*, ed. Peter Carruthers, Stephen Laurence, and Stephen Stich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁷ David Sloan Wilson, "Group-Level Evolutionary Processes," in *The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, ed. Robin Dunbar and Louise Barrett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

particular trait. The difficulty that arises in defining group selection is that any apparent trait that benefits the group is seemingly a deficit for the individual. In the case of a sentinel (an animal that warns a group of potential danger), it would seem to be a deficit to the sentinel to warn others because it also singles out the warning caller as potential prey.¹⁸

It would seem that at the individual level foragers would have a higher level of fitness in comparison to the sentinels; the fitness of the foragers (who benefit from the calls, yet do not inherit the same level of danger) would be slightly higher than the sentinels over time. Yet, P. A. Bednekoff found that over time the absolute level of fitness for both sentinels and foragers was actually the same, yet he referred to this as “selfish” or “safe” behavior for sentinels. As David Sloan Wilson points out, what is clearly an example of group-level selection becomes reinterpreted according to the constraints of individual-level selection, reflecting an apparent bias in empirical interpretation.¹⁹ To counter this form of bias, Wilson and Elliott Sober attempted a working definition of group selection. For group selection to occur there must be different groups in a population and those groups must vary in regard to the presence of a particular trait. The trait enables a difference in fitness in comparison to other groups in that the trait makes the group more likely to survive

¹⁸ P. A. Bednekoff, "Mutualism among Safe, Selfish Sentinels: A Dynamic Game," *American Naturalist* 150 (1997); Wilson, "Human Groups as Adaptive Units: Toward a Permanent Consensus," 85.

¹⁹ Wilson, "Group-Level Evolutionary Processes," 86.

and reproduce.²⁰ Additionally, the trait that makes one group more fit than others must be able to override the potential differences in traits at work within the group.

The seeds for human sexual morality, promoted in some form or another by most religions, evolved as a consequence of both individual and group-level selection. This is not so say that sexuality or religion is reducible to these two forms of selection, but that many of the initial processes in the formation of these aspects of human nature required both forms of selection. In fact, it is probably the case that there was a highly complex interaction between several different factors in the evolution of sexual morality and religion including cultural evolution.²¹ The foundations for the emergence of sexual morality obviously included individual differences in sexual selection that occurred throughout the evolution of the human species. Cognitive adaptations such as WHR, facial symmetry, and perceived status obviously inform aspects of human sexuality, but one of the most distinctive aspects of primate behavior is social and hierarchical relationships. Thus, human sexual preferences must have been exercised primarily in social groupings.

Therefore, at the group level, those social norms that benefit the group by managing individual sexual preferences and relationships would most likely lead to a higher level of fitness in comparison to groups that did not manage sexual preferences well. The early appearance of religion in human history makes is a very likely candidate for a special role in the formation of such social norms. And, in fact, religion may have evolved as a consequence of the need to manage human

²⁰ Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 26.

²¹ Robert Boyd and Peter J. Richerson, *The Origin and Evolution of Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

relationships through social norms, of which religion has always played an important role. Many of the functions of the human brain and cognition evolved as a consequence of problems posed by complex social relationships.²²

Morality evolved at the group level as a system of beliefs and practices that regulated behavior in early hunter-gather societies.²³ Religion can be defined as a set of sacred symbols that motivates different forms of behavior in terms of both regulation and encouragement of behaviors that benefit the group.²⁴ In terms of sexuality, religion has obviously played an important role in regulating the sexual behavior of humans living in groups. Religious doctrines often target marriage and sexuality as primary locations of behavioral regulation and many competing interests including mate preference, the possibility of mate poaching and retention, and certainty of paternity have shaped human sexual desire.²⁵ However, religion is certainly not an exclusively positive influence on sexual behavior; there are several indications that suggest that religious leaders use their power and prestige as a way to gain sexual access to a wider variety of partners.²⁶ Religion and sexuality have a complex relationship between each other that includes both positive and negative outcomes.

²² Robin Dunbar, "The Social Brain Hypothesis," *Evolutionary Anthropology* 6 (1998).

²³ David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 227.

²⁵ David M. Buss, "Sex, Marriage, and Religion: What Adaptive Problems Do Religious Phenomena Solve?," *Psychological Inquiry* 13, no. 3 (2002).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

Towards a Theological Concept of Sexuality

A theological concept of sexuality emerged from a diverse set of resources. Individual sexual preferences, as discussed by evolutionary psychology, play an important role in describing aspects of human sexuality that are both encouraged and cautioned by theological doctrines. The social character of early human life, also supported by primatological research, demonstrates that sexual preferences were mainly employed in a group context, which adds additional factors that are addressed by theological concerns about sexuality. These processes constitute the evolutionary factors that form the basis for theological concepts of sexuality, both historically and currently. Because sexuality played such an important role in early human behavior, it must have greatly affected the types of theological revelation that occurred in early primal religions.

Keith Ward argues that theological revelation originated in primal traditions that do not have a written tradition, nor feel the need to have one.²⁷ Revelation about and from supernatural beings often revolved around natural concerns of the social group such as foraging for food, protection from enemies, and staying healthy. Revelations are dependent upon different characteristics of the environmental context in which they embedded.²⁸ The Inuit sea goddess Takanaluk expresses both the harshness and goodness of the sea and the people dependent upon it for their survival.²⁹ Early definitions of primitive religions focused on the way in which

²⁷ Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 58.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁹ K. Rasmussen, *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1929).

different aspects of the natural world take on a spiritual dimension. Edward Tylor originally came up with the term 'animism' to describe the ways in which primitive religions animate trees, animals, and storms in terms of spiritual entities that control different aspects of their lives.³⁰

In this sense, the environmental and social context of early humans was conceived within a spiritual framework, not just a natural one. There was not a strong distinction between religious and practical values; they were essentially one and the same. Thus, theological concepts of sexuality emerged very naturally out of the social contexts where sexual preferences were employed, probably in both positive and negative ways. On the positive side, theological concepts developed that encouraged procreation, married life, and faithfulness to partners. On the negative side, some theological concepts developed that included extreme forms of punishment for adultery (almost always against women), forms of sexual repression, and using religion as a means of coercion for sex.

Additionally, the issue remains to decipher what the divine may intend for a Christian theological concept of the value of human sexuality. Theological revelation is a form of persuasion in which God acts within the context and cognition of religious communities to generate values that more closely mirror the divine reality.³¹ God does not insert propositional statements into the human mind, but works within a particular environmental and cultural context to attune humanity to a divine transcendent reality. Thus, human sexuality has emerged in different religious traditions in a variety of ways according to the ways in which

³⁰ Edward B Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London: John Murray, 1873).

³¹ Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 24.

sexuality has been informed by the divine. From the perspective of Christian theology, what can be discerned as the divine influence on the formation of sexual values within Christian communities? How can we articulate a theology of human sexuality?

Theology and the Value of Sexuality

The work of Sigmund Freud strongly influenced the understanding of sexuality in Western Society. Freud not only brought human sexuality to the forefront of everyday behavior and thought (conscious or unconscious), but he also made sexuality a major component of human development throughout the lifespan.³² Throughout development, the libido acts as a drive for pleasure that is focused on certain objects in different stages.³³ For example, during the oral stage pleasure is derived from the mouth, which is connected to the pleasure received during nursing, and is manifested in infants constantly putting things into their mouths. The Oedipus complex occurred during the latency stage in which the libido is directed toward the mother as a sexual object, which needs to eventually be repressed and directed towards other females that can facilitate a mature sexual relationship during the genital stage.

³² Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Penguin Books, 1901/2002).

³³ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1905/1962).

According to Freud, the human psyche consists of three parts, the id, ego, and super-ego.³⁴ The id is the impulsive, motivational aspect of the person that lives according to the pleasure principle. The ego tries to maintain balance between the id and the super-ego, while the super-ego acts as a moral constraint on the impulses of the id. This model views sexuality as a drive that must be satisfied and is always in direct conflict with the super-ego, which tries to repress this drive through moralizing and guilt. Freud's drive theory of sexuality views sexual desire as an impulse or need that builds up over time and then must be performed to bring the body back into homeostasis. The sexual drive creates tension in the person, which must be released for proper functioning.

This view of sexuality is in some ways unfortunate in that it seems to diminish the social and relational dimension of sexuality by reducing it to a drive. This view of sexuality has had a great influence on certain branches of Christianity that seem to reflect the work of the super ego trying to repress the expression of sexuality. Some conservative Christian views of sexuality often emphasize abstinence reflected in abstinence bands and father/daughter dances, while the secular view is supposed to emphasize promiscuity, which emphasizes having sex with several partners.³⁵ However, this dichotomy is somewhat misleading for what average students are looking for in a sexual relationship. In studies conducted on seven college campuses, students reported that although they were not interested in

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1923/1990).

³⁵ Lisa Miller, "Sexual Revolution Part 2," *Newsweek*, Nov. 16, 2009.

complete abstinence, they were not necessarily promiscuous either and many wanted to be in a sexual relationship with someone who was a partner/friend.³⁶

I propose that an emphasis on relationality may provide a better theological foundation from which to explore concepts of human sexuality. This emphasis on relationality is a product of two cooperative features: evolutionary factors that dealt with social issues involving sexuality in groups and the relational properties of the divine nature as demonstrated in several recent areas of theological discourse. These areas include Christian theological models that emphasize relationality such as kenotic versions of a self-emptying God, a metaphysical framework based on love, or the turn to relationality connected to developments in late modern philosophy.³⁷ Thus, a Christian theological interpretation of sexuality understands that the desire for sexual gratification cannot be divorced from the relationships in which sexuality occurs, primarily between partners but also in regard to larger social structures such as marriages and families. This is not the creation of a dichotomy between abstinence and promiscuity, but a realization that who we are sexually informs many aspects of our identity and cannot be defined simply as a biological drive that needs to be satisfied but as a pleasurable experience that unites persons into a bond of intimacy and vulnerability.

Understanding sexual value through the categories of either abstinence or promiscuity is too rigid to be helpful in constructing a theological concept of

³⁶ Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³⁷ Thomas J. Oord, "A Metaphysics for the Love-and-Science Symbiosis," *Contemporary Philosophy* 25, no. 5&6 (2005); John Polkinghorne, ed., *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001); F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005).

sexuality, but emphasizing the relational dimension of sexuality affirms both the theological importance of marriage relationships as well as the practical concerns of living in community. Defining sexuality as merely a drive that needs to be satisfied robs it of its relational significance and may lead to attitudes that foster satisfying that need at any cost. Placing the theological conception of sexuality in a relational context allows the behavior to be modified in terms of how it affects my relationships both toward my partners and children and to the community. As relationships increase in intimacy and commitment, sexuality is a natural expression of those relationships. This expression should be encouraged by theology as an important part of sexual desire. However, this is not the only relation that should be kept in mind in sexuality. As sexual expression increases it is important to think about long-term consequences in terms of marriage, family life, and commitments. A theological definition of sexuality must include multiple aspects and consequences of sexuality in community including marriage, but also the affects of adultery and providing resources for one's own children.

Conclusion

There is a complex relationship between human sexuality, evolution and religion. Evolution, at both the individual and group level, has played an important role in the formation of human sexual desire and religious concepts about sexuality. However, religion and sexuality are not necessarily reducible to evolutionary processes, nor does an evolutionary account rule out the possibility of divine action. Rather, theological concepts of human sexuality emerged as a result of both

evolutionary factors and the influence of concepts of the divine. Relationality, as expressed in several contemporary theological accounts, provides a helpful theological foundation for the formation of a contemporary ethic of human sexuality. Although religion and sexuality have had a tumultuous relationship throughout history, an emphasis on relationality can provide a helpful middle ground between pure abstinence and excessive promiscuity.

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