Sexual Pleasure: A Roman Catholic Perspective on Women’s Delight

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Good sex bespeaks a rich complex of goods. While all these are important, I am concerned in this essay to highlight the goodness of women’s sexual delight. In brief, I argue that the discernment of women’s sexual pleasure as morally good must be communally nurtured and sustained. At least in North America, the fact that most women enjoy sexual activity cannot be presumed true; indeed reliable social scientific data from a variety of studies suggests that many do not. Silence within the church about the absence of such delight for many women is problematic. For the church to teach with credibility and consistency about the goodness of the unitive function of human sexuality requires that this silence be broken. Church teachings about the moral significance of sexual delight need further development. In short, I establish that the nurture of mutual pleasure should be commended as a morally significant component of every good sexual relationship on the basis of a traditional Roman Catholic ground: the wisdom of the body.1

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1. This concern to highlight the value of sexual pleasure in general, and women’s sexual pleasure in particular, in the framework of Roman Catholic moral theology stands in a long tradition. The shift away from an Augustinian ethic of sexual shame began long ago. In the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas argued that there was no venial sin attached to the pleasure produced by marital coitus. Developing this trajectory based in natural law further, Alphonsus Liguori in the eighteenth century declared that such pleasure was not only permissible but to be recommended. Nature does nothing in vain, he pointed out. A wife’s orgasm
Many women in North America do not routinely enjoy sex. Amazingly there is very little attention to this absence of pleasure in the sexual experience of so many women. This reflects a disregard for their delight. This lack of concern has been socially constructed. People, at least in North America, have been scripted to treat the absence of joy as merely a personal problem. Yet the devaluation of women’s pleasure has deep cultural roots. It is reinforced at certain decisive junctures by Christian, especially Roman Catholic, teaching on sexuality.

While there is certainly more affirmation of the value of sexual pleasure among heterosexual married people in contemporary Roman Catholic teaching, the church continues to prescribe only vaginal-penile intercourse. Christine E. Gudorf notes in her ground-breaking book, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*, that every other sexual activity is either ‘foreplay’ or perverse (1994: 30). To be precise the Roman Catholic Church teaches that *only conjugal coitus can be good*. Furthermore, even though the procreative purpose of the marital act no longer has primacy over its unitive end, official church teaching continues to emphasize as the *only* elements necessary for the completion of the marital act: (1) penile penetration; (2) the semination of the vagina; and since it is requisite for ejaculation (3) male pleasure and orgasm.

What John C. Ford, SJ and Gerald Kelly, SJ pointed out decades ago in *Contemporary Moral Theology: Marriage Questions* is as true today of church teachings as it was in the early 1960s: the *wife’s only essential part consists in her willingness to receive semen* (1963: 211). Though viewed as permissible, even desirable, *the wife’s sexual pleasure is not seen as essential to the marriage act*. In sum, as the Roman Catholic during coitus, he argued, probably would benefit any child so conceived. (Still, digital and oral stimulation of the clitoris or vagina, even as ‘foreplay’, remained strictly forbidden because they might trigger an orgasm apart from coitus, which alone was potentially procreative.) In the nineteenth century the Bishop of Philadelphia, Patrick Kenrick, taught that there was a positive obligation to pursue the wife’s orgasm. According to Kenrick, a husband sinned venially (by omission) if he failed to remain sexually active until his wife climaxed. Most remarkably, he argued, that if she had not experienced orgasm during coitus, she had the right to bring herself to orgasm ‘by touches’ afterward (Gardella 1985: 9). The Second Vatican Council recognized the goodness of sexual pleasure within marriage, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, Philip S. Keane and Margaret Farley all worked at tracing the moral implications of that teaching. To my knowledge though, the first serious effort to defend at length the moral goodness of women’s sexual delight and to explore some of the ethical implications of that goodness developed by a Roman Catholic theologian was made by Christine E. Gudorf in her 1994 seminal book, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*. 
Church prescribes it, sex can be morally good apart from a women’s delight. My point is simple: this conflicts with what many women of faith judge makes for truly good sex.

One probable assumption behind such teaching is the mistaken notion that most women take delight in coitus. Gudorf notes that 56–70 per cent of women cannot reach orgasm as a result of penile-vaginal intercourse alone (1994: 32). This makes the current affirmation of venereal pleasure for many women merely theoretical. What the exclusive prescription of coitus teaches is that a woman’s pleasure is not essential to good sex. Her delight not only does not warrant devotion; it does not even deserve attention.

The many activities which are more likely to prove pleasurable for women—such as the direct stimulation of their genitals by hand and mouth and other forms of rubbing—do not get identified in official magisterial teachings except when they are proscribed as ‘polluting’. Sadly this is frequently all that many Catholic men and women learn about these activities. To be fair many Catholic theologians commonly teach ‘that when the husband has his orgasm during coitus, stimulation of the wife may continue until she has orgasm’ (Ford and Kelly 1963: 196, my emphasis). Similarly wives might take delight in foreplay to coitus, even have an orgasm, though multiple orgasms on her part are traditionally viewed as morally suspect (Ford and Kelly 1963: 224ff). Female delight in such ‘foreplay’ to coitus and as ‘after play’ were permitted, because they were interpreted as having a moral unity with the coital act that preceded or would follow it. Such activities were to be clearly distinguished from the engagement in those same activities apart from coitus; such stimulation of the genitals to orgasm would clearly be ‘perverse’. According to this line of reasoning, such mutual ‘masturbatory’ (as it is officially labeled) activity even when shared by spouses trivializes the procreative value of sexuality (see Lawler, Boyle and May 1993). What few Catholic theologians recognize—and what is not evidenced at all in official Roman Catholic teaching—is that coitus alone is not a source of pleasure for all, not even most, women. Yet conjugal activity cannot be bonding or love-making apart from shared pleasures and mutual delight. Thus the exclusive prescription of coitus trivializes the unitive value of sexuality for women. Since the Roman Catholic church now teaches that the procreative and unitive meanings associated with sexuality are inseparably linked, they must both be considered essential to good sex. By its own logic the traditional Catholic sexual prescription of coitus alone needs to be abandoned, on the grounds that it fails to take seriously the unitive end essential to well-ordered sexuality activity. Fur-
thermore, when pleasure is taken seriously as an additional good linked to sexuality, then the failure to share it (in otherwise responsible ways) is, as Gudorf puts it, ‘a violation of the Christian obligation to love the neighbor’ (1994: 139).

As Marie M. Fortune notes in Love Does No Harm: Sexual Ethics for the Rest of Us, when a husband rolls over and falls asleep immediately following his ‘release’ night after night, in the eyes of most Christian ethicists—Protestant and Catholic alike—he may not be the ideal lover, indeed he may be an insensitive lout, but his behavior is not judged perverse, criminal, objectively disordered or immoral. The sharing of pleasure is not widely seen as requisite to good sex (Fortune 1995: 120). Under present Catholic catechetical teaching about the main ‘offenses against marriage’, nothing is said about the need to share pleasure or even to avoid causing pain during intercourse. Yet Gudorf notes ‘even apart from outright sexual violence, sex can be not only devoid of pleasure but actually painful, especially for women’ (1994: 108). This is not just a problem on the honeymoon or after childbirth or for a few isolated individuals, as at least some theologians presumed (Ford and Kelly 1963: 199). In her book Women’s Bodies, Women’s Wisdom, Christine Northrup reports that 25 per cent of women say they have painful sexual intercourse virtually all the time and another 33 per cent report dyspareunia some of the time (1994: 246). It does not take a great deal of moral imagination to recognize that sexual activity not aimed at mutual pleasure will not serve the marital bond, certainly not be lovemaking, and if repeated, might well prove destructive not only of the relationship but of the self-esteem of the partner whose delight is so devalued (Gudorf 1994: 142).

Despite its recent emphasis on the importance of the unitive function of sexuality, the Roman Catholic Church continues to prescribe coitus as the only form of good sex. This should not prove surprising. How can we expect the celibate men who reiterate such teachings to know what pleases women, when many married men and women do not know that the stimulation afforded by penile-vaginal intercourse is not sufficient to bring most women to orgasm (Gudorf 1994: 149)? Indeed many medical professionals still (mistakenly) presume the frequency of coitus to be an accurate indicator of the quality of a heterosexual couple’s sexual relationship.

While the effort in this article to reconstruct church teachings to include more appreciation of the sharing of pleasure can be applauded, it is important to note that there is a danger here. This effort to valorize women’s sexual pleasure might just be one more
expression of Western decadence. When we value women’s sexual
delight, do we do so only at the expense of much needed attention to
the other problems women face, and to the public policies that engen-
der them? Does this focus feed rather than challenge the growing
sense of the privatization of sexual and reproductive matters, so that
in the end the pleasures enjoyed by some women will be purchased at
the expense of the well-being, indeed even the survival, of others?
Every focus keeps us from seeing what recedes into its background.
But it is wrong to dismiss carte blanche all concern about the devalua-
tion of pleasure because as shall be detailed later in this article, shared
delight is one way we are connected to, rather than distracted from,
precisely these other concerns.

The Problem

As one might expect, there is a range of views among contemporary
Christians about the goodness of sexual pleasure. Even among conser-
ervative moral theologians sexual pleasure has enjoyed an upgrading.
Most concede that the instrumental value of pleasure was overlooked
in the tradition.2 They now judge sexual pleasure an acceptable (and
generally presume it to be an automatic!) consequence of coitus, and
counsel that it is not wicked—indeed it is proper—for spouses to seek
this pleasure because of its service to both the procreative and unitive
ends of marriage.

Still conservatives warn that this appreciation of pleasure should be
seriously qualified. Perhaps more than any other ‘good’, sexual
pleasure has the capacity to enslave and lead humans astray. Our
sexual desires can clearly exceed what is necessary for the service of
the unitive and procreative ends of marriage. This, they argue, has
resulted in the tendency in the West to overestimate the goodness of
pleasure as exemplified in the philosophical doctrine of hedonism.
But as Beverly Wildung Harrison and Carter Heyward point out in
their essay on ‘Pain and Pleasure: Avoiding the Confusions of Chris-
tian Tradition in Feminist Theory’, it is not necessary to endorse a
conception of pleasure as the only basic good in order to embrace

2. For example, for Augustine pleasure was linked only with concupiscence.
As the ‘driver’ for potentially reproductive activity in men, it clearly exceeded the
parameters of that requirement and hence acquired a reputation as unruly. While
Thomas Aquinas noted in the Summa Contra Gentiles (3.123) that sweet bonds of
mutual affection sometimes developed between spouses as a result of the
pleasures of copulation, the gifts of such mutual delight and love were not viewed
as morally normative.
sexual pleasure positively as central to human fulfillment or even essential to human well-being (1994: 142).

Predictably many liberal moral theologians are less suspicious of sexual delight and, while not naive about the potential of any good to be corrupted, celebrate pleasure more wholeheartedly. Still, as Harrison and Heyward point out, for liberal Christians sexual pleasure remains only instrumentally good. While few liberals mandate that it serves a procreative good (except perhaps in debates about the validity of heterosexism), according to this way of thinking sexual pleasure is good only insofar as it serves the “‘unitive’ and “communicative” values’ essential to sexual intimacy (1994: 147).

Some contemporary theologians—whether conservative or liberal—presume that the cultural shackles stemming from the debasing and vilification of women’s sexual pleasure have been adequately identified and addressed. Of this I am not at all convinced. With Gudorf I would argue that ‘one of the major tasks of Christian morality in the present age is to claim sexual pleasure as a good’ (1994: 89). One reason for this disagreement among theological ethicists is that the devaluation of sexual pleasure is significantly gendered.

The Gendered Devaluation of Pleasure
For many women in North America genital sexuality is simply not any fun. It is not sensuous, joyful, playful or orgasmic. In their 1999 report entitled ‘Sexual Dysfunction in the United States: Prevalence and Predictors’, University of Chicago sociologist Edward O. Laumann and colleagues explored the gendered pattern of sexual dysfunction in the United States (Laumann, Paik and Rosen 1999). They note that 32 per cent of the women they interviewed reported a lack of

3. While appreciating her work I disagree with Lisa Sowle Cahill when she writes that ‘Christian sexual ethics today...has been quite effective in addressing the human suffering caused by legacies of negativity and even oppression concerning sex’ (1996: 10). Cahill’s assumption that an appreciation for the goodness of women’s sexual pleasure has been adequately integrated into our cultural ethos is mistaken. Furthermore, it is too simplistic to claim that ‘it is only when the reading of experience is individualistic—even adolescent—that the discovery of sex is the discovery of pleasure [alone]’ (1996: 111, addition mine, implied by context). Such a remark—even when interpreted as primarily against a reductionistic, exclusive focus on pleasure—remains problematic. It implies that (1) the experience of sexual pleasure arrives unbidden, like the routine onset of menses, for most women during their adolescence; (2) pleasure is normally a private, individual, rather than say personal, possibly mutual, and certainly socially constructed, experience; and (3) the (re)discovery of pleasure by women is regressive or developmentally arrested behavior.
interest in sex (whereas only 14 per cent of the men interviewed made a similar claim); 26 per cent of the women surveyed said they regularly did not have orgasms and 23 per cent said sex was not pleasurable (as compared with only 8 per cent of the men). Researchers and the general public alike found these results regarding women and sexual dysfunction ‘stunning’, but what is important to understand is that this lack of pleasure is not only socially generated and organized, but continues to be religiously sanctified.

Sexual delight is not only biologically but also culturally grounded and sustained. In their book, *The Gender of Sexuality*, Pepper Schwartz and Virginia Rutter note that ‘women often learn to have orgasms much later in life’ than do men and that ‘a minority have trouble ever becoming orgasmic’ (1998: 56). The extent of such anorgasmia notes Mary D. Pellauer in her essay, ‘The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm: Toward Sexual Ethics that Celebrates Women’s Sexuality’ may be great. She cites the 1990 Kinsey Institute *New Report on Sex* claim that 10 per cent of all women suffer from ‘total anorgasmia’. In the 1994 National Opinion Research Center survey 24 per cent of the female respondents (compared to 8 per cent of the male respondents) reported having difficulty having an orgasm in the last 12 months. Perhaps more revealing is the consistency of this difference in sexual experience: 75 per cent of men, but only 29 per cent of women reported always having an orgasm during sex with their partner (Laumann *et al.* reported in Hyde and DeLamater 1997: 116). In the NORC survey 19 per cent of the female respondents noted that they had difficulty becoming aroused (whereas only 10 per cent of the males reported erectile disorders); similarly twice as many women as men (33 per cent compared to 16 per cent) reported that they had experienced a significant lack of interest in sex altogether.

Women in North America cannot take the experience of sexual pleasure (including, but not epitomized by, orgasm) for granted. We have been schooled to believe (mistakenly) that such sexual dysfunction is not the proper concern of the church. It is a private, perhaps medical or mental health problem—a tragic but ‘accidental’ reality affecting isolated individuals whose personal problem deserves our pity. It is my conviction that this incapacity on the part of so many women to enjoy sex is also a moral problem, originating in part from

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4. These findings were based on the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey of a randomly selected sample of 1749 women and 1410 men, regarded by researchers in this field as the most comprehensive study of sex in the US since the Kinsey reports of the early 1950s.
and significantly reinforced by many religiously blessed, cultural scripts. The absence of sexual joy in so many women’s lives is in part a consequence of the way ‘good sex’ has been constructed in Christian moral traditions. While there is some room for women’s sexual delight along the fringes of this sacred canopy, it is not highlighted under the big tent.

While many presume that such may have been the case even as late as the middle of this century, many people believe the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s in the West dismantled the last vestiges in our culture of such nineteenth-century Victorian attitudes towards women’s pleasure, complex and ambivalent though they may have been. But as a matter of fact, it did not. Instead, the call to deconstruct these cultural messages on the not-so-revolutionary grounds that sexuality is a purely private affair, left individual women blind to and powerless before these social messages about their sexuality that remained fully intact and quite powerful, even if underground.

Sadly the sexual revolution was in many important respects no real ‘revolution’ at all. Indeed, as a result of the loss of a sense of the political and institutional nature of our sexuality, many contemporary women experience efforts to celebrate the moral significance of their delight as burdensome. Contemporary accounts portray female sexual pleasure as if it were a purely private or individual matter; this legitimizes performance anxiety and the American tendency to turn sex into work. For women exhausted by the work associated with their double shift (on the job and at home), enjoying sex becomes ‘just one more damn thing to do’. Her woeful failure at it is simply one more indicator of her individual inadequacy and her marital and/or relational maladjustment.

Though I recognize that the changes my argument invites might be stressful, it is not my intention to add to any woman’s burden. 5 Such

5. I do not want to deny that for some women, in precisely such an unreformed, cultural context as ours, the non-pursuit and non-valuation of sexual pleasure may be necessary for their individual survival, and hence be personally a morally appropriate response. It must be said as well, however, that this response might also be rooted in a deep, theologically reinforced, suspicion of all that springs from ‘the flesh’. It would be silly to think of women as exempt from the morally formative power of this traditional, Christian hermeneutic. It cannot help but be shocking, and seem very dangerous, for women to associate grace and moral goodness with their bodies and its passions. Whatever might be said about the christological purposes of the doctrine of the Virgin birth, the Catholic emphasis on the perpetual virginity of Mary symbolizes the church’s ongoing inability to come to terms with the goodness of female sexual pleasure.
responses stem from the highly individualized connotations associated with words like ‘should’, ‘duty’ and ‘obligation’ in our culture. Just as we lack a clear sense of the way the sinful privation of this good has been and is socially structured and religiously reinforced, we lack a clear sense of the social dimensions of this grace—of the way such sexual pleasure could be communally nurtured, sustained and enhanced within divinely sanctioned scripts for women.

Some of the Reasons for the Problem

There are many reasons why women do not enjoy sex, and the connection between the absence of sexual pleasure in women’s lives and these other social factors is not always recognized. Hence the dire need to reform these institutional patterns and cultural messages is not recognized either. Our culture puts a dampener on female sexuality in many ways. For any given individual the operative configuration of these factors may vary. The point is that while the so-called sexual revolution gave more women in North America access to reliable contraception, it did not construct a culture wherein female sexual delight was valued and the nurture of such joy respected. Ironically, even though North America has a highly sexualized culture, women’s pleasure has not been prioritized; its maintenance and/or enhancement is not generally understood to be a significant moral or religious good.

It is very difficult to untangle the organic and social elements in women’s sexual experience. In her book entitled Promiscuities: The Secret Struggle for Womanhood, Naomi Wolf notes that for decades comparative anthropology has made it clear that the ‘capacity for orgasm in women is a learned response which a given culture can help or fail to help women develop’ (1997: xxiv). So integrated are social and biological factors in women’s experience of desire and pleasure that it is difficult to tease them apart. The point here is not to discount the importance of the physiology behind female sexual pleasure. The point is to establish that such joy, like its loss, is not only biologically but also culturally grounded and religiously sustained.

There are many indicators—other than their direct expression in various forms of individual, female sexual dysfunction detailed above—of our cultural ambivalence about sexual pleasure in general, and our negativity about women’s delight in particular. Let me briefly identify four.
Viagra (which sells for about $10 a pill at the time of writing in 1999) may prove to be the most profitable prescription drug ever legally produced. Estimates within the industry place its potential worth at between $600 million and $1 billion. While not disparaging efforts to address the problem of male impotence, I do want to compare them to the response to female erectile, libidinal and other sexual disorders. While no scientists dispute the evidence that many women are unhappy with their sex lives, they all agree that not much is known about women’s sexual response. Why is there little study of the primary sexual complaints of women? Neither the pharmaceutical companies nor various governmental agencies are as interested in women’s sexual response as they are in men’s. This is so, I contend, because many people still believe the only form of really ‘good sex’ is coital, and therefore the only sexual problem that is ‘legitimate’ to address is male impotence.

Instead of blushing when confronted with the facts about women’s (lack of) desire, imagine what kind of moral teaching would undergird its recognition as an important issue and conceive of its relief as a matter of genuine moral concern. A useful clue as to why we might find such imaginative work difficult is provided by sociologist Michael Kimmel in his book *Manhood in America* (1996). He notes that male impotence is rarely understood simply as men not getting enough pleasure. Male sexual potency is defined in such a way that its absence threatens the individual’s very sense of masculinity. It renders him less of a man. While this certainly has negative dimensions, such a gender construction does have the benefit of illuminating the fact that men suffer from sexual dysfunctions. In an interesting piece on ‘Women and Sex’, the *New York Times* reported in 1998 that a male CEO of a Wall Street investment firm privately donated $1 million to subsidize the distribution of Viagra to poor men, who might not otherwise have access to it. Again, my agenda here is not to discount such generosity, but to note that there is little evidence—of an analogous sort—of care for the many women who suffer from sexual dysfunction as well.

*Heterocentrism*

Schwartz and Rutter note that many ‘public arguments against homosexuality are influenced by negative attitudes toward sex that is only an act of intimacy and pleasure’(1998: xv, emphasis mine; see also p. 190). In sum, the problem with ‘gay’ sex for many people is that it is so obviously (for) fun! It embodies a correlation that challenges what
many Catholic girls learn about their sexuality. Same-sex activity clearly reveals that sexual activity can and should be about mutual pleasure. Heterosexists argue that homosexual partnerships can never be really life-giving or lovemaking, and presume that ‘only’ mutual pleasure can be served in the homosexual unions they condemn. Even if one were to conclude that ‘gay’ sex is disordered because it is without procreative potential, logic demands only that these relationships be judged as falling short of a normative ideal. What becomes apparent, however, in heterosexist arguments is that the pleasure shared in gay relationships is not understood to be of any intrinsic value, nor is it interpreted as being of an instrumental, person-uniting value. From this heterosexist perspective homosexual activity can only be judged morally repugnant.

What I think gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered sex makes clear is that the pleasures of sexual activity are not always tied to the joys and responsibilities of baby-making. Some of the facts to which such ‘gay’ lifestyles testify are: (1) that genital activities can be potentially person-uniting only when they are mutually pleasurable; (2) that both pleasure and love (for self and/or another) can be had quite apart from potentially reproductive activity—that is, apart from vaginal-penile intercourse; and (3) that love-deepening sexual pleasure can be shared—though not necessarily maximized—under a variety of non-conjugal ‘terms of endearment’.

And what has this to do with the question of the goodness of women’s sexual delight in general? (1) ‘Gay’ sex underscores the fact that unless sexual activity is pleasurable, it will not express or foster love; (2) ‘gay’ sex highlights the fact that pleasures can be found in sexual activities morphologically not ‘open to the possibility of procreation’; (3) in some cases internalized homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality may contribute to sexual dysfunction. The fact is women’s sexual pleasure—including heterosexual women’s pleasure—has a quite serendipitous relationship to its reproductive potential.

Pleasure and Sex Education
The vitriolic response in the US to the suggestion in 1994 by then Surgeon-General M. Jocelyn Elders that the subject of masturbation be addressed in the sex education programs offered at US public high schools also indicates that there remains in place a powerful social taboo against sexual pleasure. Since boys usually teach each other how to masturbate during their early adolescence, the inclusion of masturbation in a sex education curriculum would primarily serve the educational needs of adolescent girls.
In a review of 177 studies of gender differences in sexuality Mary Beth Oliver and Janet Shibley Hyde found that

the largest gender difference was in the incidence of masturbation... Not only did fewer women masturbate, but in general, those who did masturbate had begun at a later age than the males. Virtually all males...masturbate before age 20 (most began between the ages of 13 and 15) but substantial numbers of women reported masturbating for the first time at age 25, 30 or 35 (Hyde and DeLamater 1997: 353).

In US culture, while masturbation is seen as immoral for all who practice it, it is judged particularly wrong for women. The fact is ‘more men masturbate more frequently’ than women because ‘nice girls don’t touch themselves’ (Schwartz and Rutter 1998: 44). This impacts on women’s very capacity for pleasure because unlike men, women need to learn in particular what pleases them. While this might be learned in relationship with another, such sexual self-knowledge is clearly requisite for clear communication about what is pleasurable (and hence potentially unitive as well). While a solid case could be made that we live in a culture that values sexual ignorance in general, there is overwhelming evidence that the world prizes the sexual ignorance of women.

*Pleasure and the (Re)discovery of the Clitoris*

Through her examination of the constant need to (re)discover the clitoris, Wolf provides additional evidence of the ambiguity surrounding women’s delight in the West. She demonstrates that the only role in our cultural script for women’s pleasure *per se* is serendipitous (1997: 143ff). Though scientifically ‘identified’ as early as 1559 by an Italian as ‘preeminently the seat of woman’s delight’, the clitoris was presumed at that time to be directly associated with, and at times declared requisite to, conception. As late as the eighteenth century, female titillation and orgasm were thought at least to help women conceive. Though recognized as the source of lasciviousness in women, the clitoris was also thought to foster procreation.6

Note, however, that by the end of the eighteenth century, the idea that white, middle and upper-class women were angelic creatures with less desire and capacity for sexual pleasure than men, took deep

6. Even today some evolutionary biologists theorize that women’s sexual desire must peak at ovulation, but ‘neat though this theory is, it doesn’t fit all the data... Some studies found no increase in sexual interest during ovulation, peaks well before ovulation, and no variation in interest at all’ (Schwartz and Rutter 1998: 7).
hold in the West. From this point on begins what Wolf calls ‘the great forgetting’, so that by the nineteenth century, ‘theories began to deny that it [the sex drive] even existed biologically in women’ except as pathological, predominantly in poor women of color and perhaps lesbians (Wolf 1997: 146, 149). ‘Normal’ women desired not sexual pleasure but to become mothers. Female delight was held suspect and thought debilitating; it was associated with madness, crime and ironically with infertility. By the public standards of the Victorian era, ‘normal’ sexual intercourse for married, white, upper- and middle-class women consisted of her fully clothed ‘submission’ to acts of vaginal penetration in the proper position (male on top!) leading directly and quickly to male gratification, and (so hoped the ideologues) to motherhood for her.

We know from the careful work of revisionist historians that even white, upper-class people’s private experience (happily!) did not always match this public ideology, but this cultural message about normative, female sexuality in the West remains noteworthy. ‘The passionate nature of women, taken for granted for millennia, had become a mystery’ (Wolf 1997: 148). Not only had the female ideal become sexless, but suddenly people began to debate whether ‘good’ women (that is, white, rich women) even had sexual feelings. If they existed at all, many argued, they were normally dormant. ‘Convoluted efforts were made to explain away the sensitivity of the clitoris’ notes Wolf; this led to the incredible ‘assertion that women may have orgasms, but they certainly cannot feel them’ (1997: 149)!

So powerful are the vestiges of these scripts that it remains difficult to disentangle the Victorian constructions of a ‘good woman’s’ sexuality from what might be the experience of women were it ‘constructed’ in accord with more pleasure-affirming scripts. Therefore some feminists, like Cahill, can ‘observe’ that ‘male sexual drives are more genitaly focused and urgent than those of most women… For women…sexual drives assume less importance on the landscape of identity. Although sexual pleasure may be a good and a goal, uncontrollability is rarely an issue’ (1996: 198). All of us need to ask critical questions about the roots or basis of what we ‘observe’, and presume to be the true or authentic sexual experience of women, given the way it is constructed in our culture.

Only when placed against this powerful cultural backdrop, Wolf argues, can we have some idea of what is at stake in the twentieth century’s repeated pattern of discovering, celebrating and promoting the female capacity and desire for sexual pleasure. In 1899 an English physician decried as false the Victorian script for ‘good’ women. An
American medical sociologist as early as 1902 noted that many ‘good’
women are not asexual. They simply do not particularly crave coitus.
Even though the thrusting associated with coitus can result in the
rhythmic pulling of the clitoral hood, and consequently provides
some stimulation of the clitoris, women desire instead ‘the love touch’
(by which this turn-of-the-century scholar most probably meant cun-
nilingus and/or digital stimulation of the clitoris). In its 1990 report
the Kinsey Institute confirmed that ‘between 50 per cent and 75 per
cent of women who have orgasm by other types of stimulation do not
have orgasm when the only form of stimulation is penile thrusting

Why did scientists have to ‘discover’ over (in 1910), over (in 1918),
over (in 1926) and over again (in 1930) that for many females penile-
vaginal penetration is either an altogether ineffective form of genital
stimulation or that it is not the easiest or fastest route to climax, and
that most women delight in extensive, slow clitoral stimulation by
hand and mouth? Wolf claims that each and every time ‘the prevail-
ing culture convinced us that the identification and celebration of
female desire was revolutionary’ (1997: 154). Obviously this is a suc-
cessful way of co-opting whatever challenges this ‘discovery’ might
pose to deeply embedded messages about what makes for good sex.
What is ‘new’ and ‘revolutionary’ can hardly be expected to have
made an impact on the routine.

What is so culturally dangerous, so politically incendiary about this
knowledge of the connection between ‘the love touch’ and women’s
delight? Why do we insist upon keeping it a ‘secret’ from our daugh-
ters and sons? Why must what it reveals be repeatedly erased, left for
‘the next generation’ to (re)discover for themselves, or be cloaked in
shame? As Pellauer put it: ‘what stirs in our orgasms, that there
should be so many obstacles around them?’ (1994: 154).

Paths toward a Solution

Official Tradition: Not Always a Usable Past

It has been amply documented that one will not find in the Christian
tradition much affirmation of the inherent value of sexual pleasure.7

7. See Miles (1988). For Augustine, even in marriage, sex was (mortally)
sinful, if sought for pleasure only. Only if engaged for procreative purposes, or
perhaps as a remedy for one’s spouse’s lustful desires, could sex be saved from sin.
As he saw it, sex was not fundamentally for love, because women were not equal
to men. There are, of course, notable qualifications of, if not true exceptions to, this
The human capacity for pleasure is not described as a gracious gift from God for which North American Catholic girls are taught to be grateful. Instead it is virginity—especially as a sign of being sexually unawakened—of not knowing the desires and attractions that draw us into one another’s arms—that is to be treasured. The enjoyment of ‘venereal pleasures’ (complete or incomplete!) outside of marriage is officially taught to be sinful. Their pursuit by ‘bad girls’ is shameful. Their desire by boys and men, while dangerous, is (1) to be expected, and (2) to be restrained, or at least controlled, by ‘good girls’ (Andolsen 1992: 56).

Despite the Christian affirmation of the goodness of creation, and the beauty of the body implied in the doctrine of the Incarnation, sexual pleasure even within marriage is not presumed good. It needs the justifications provided by (1) the openness to the possibility of procreation, and (2) its unitive function. This is not merely of theoretical concern. As early as 1953 in Sexual Behavior in the Human Female, Kinsey et al. reported that Christianity ‘definitely and consistently’ negatively impacted on women’s capacity for experiencing pleasure. The more intense their devotion, the fewer orgasms they reported enjoying (see the essays by Slowinski 1997 and Simpson and Ramberg 1997).

Historically, female physiology was not well understood nor was it taken seriously in the formation of the Roman Catholic moral tradition. Arguments based on the so-called order of nature were often based on what we now recognize to be the misunderstandings of ancient and medieval science, and they were by and large androcentric. Male sexual experience dominated the screen, and distorted the perception of what was human. Within the Christian tradition sexuality was described ‘overwhelmingly from the perspectives of men’, and with an attitude ‘overwhelmingly negative towards, as well as, ignorant of, women’s sexuality’ writes Susan A. Ross in her essay on ‘Extravagant Affections’ (1995: 109). ‘Take the issue of masturbation—almost always discussed in terms of male experience. Unlike the penis, the clitoris has one function only: exquisite female sexual pleasure. It is not at all connected with procreation’ (1995: 114).

What we now recognize as androcentric claims were based on false generalizations which suppressed important differences between men

pattern. For Thomas Aquinas, sex for pleasure alone was sinful, but if conjugal and procreative, the enjoyment of pleasure was not sinful. Indeed, according to Thomas Aquinas, sexual pleasure was muted by original sin. In paradise, our increased rationality will actually enhance our pleasures. See Milhaven (1977).
and women and thereby contributed to the oppression of women. ‘Although orgasm and ejaculation are not synonymous for men, they are nearly equivalent. Most men who get excited and have an erection will experience orgasm with continued stimulation’ (Schwartz and Rutter 1998: 56.) Because in male experience orgasm is virtually identical with ejaculation, it was argued that for all humans the capacity for sexual pleasure was closely tied to reproductive activity.

From this ‘representative’ fact a norm was derived. Initially the purpose of sexual desire was said to be exclusively procreative; gradually over the centuries reproduction was seen as the primary purpose of sexuality. Now the Roman Catholic Church officially teaches that openness to the possibility of procreation in each and every sexual act is essential to morally good sex.

Such openness of course can be expressed only in vaginal-penile intercourse. Obviously this privileges heterosexual activity. And when sexuality is constructed as necessary for procreation, it is done so often at the expense of the health, and in some cases the very survival, of women and their children, as well as at the expense of the well-being of the rest of creation.

But my point in rehearsing this tradition at length is to make it clear that it is a sexual ethic served in many instances also at the expense of women’s pleasure, which unlike men’s cannot be presumed to accompany coitus. It privileges male sexual pleasure. For heterosexual men vaginal-penile intercourse is almost always somewhat pleasurable (though not necessarily orgasmic). Of this Pellauer writes:

> In almost all cases (before advanced age or specific dysfunctions such as retarded ejaculation), if a man is having sex, he is having an orgasm. Most men cannot imagine having sex regularly, let alone for years, without orgasms... Men are able to take pleasure for granted in sex...
> The progress from desire to pleasure to ecstasy is precisely what women cannot take for granted in our society (1994: 160-61).

In contrast women who seem to be sexually ‘active’ are often in truth really passive and without pleasure, even without desire, for years. Yet the absence of pleasure for a woman during intimate sexual

8. In its 20 January 1999 issue, in the middle of the controversy in the US about President Clinton’s narrow definition of sex, the editor of *JAMA* published a summary of the data from a 1991 Kinsey Institute survey of 599 undergraduates from a Midwestern state university most of whom described themselves as ‘conservative to moderate’. While virtually all the respondents to this survey defined penile-vaginal penetration as ‘having sex’, apparently like President Clinton only 40 per cent defined oral-genital contact as sex.
activities was rarely judged morally problematic from a Christian standpoint; indeed it was never even considered, so foreign was it to the experience of most men.

Deconstructing the androcentric foundation on which many of the world’s moral traditions have been based is clearly useful. There is indeed much cruelty hidden deep in them. Recognizing and naming what makes for bad sex is important work, but women must begin to (re)construct their theological and moral traditions offering society new accounts of what makes for good sex.

The Recovery of Women’s Bodily Experience: Toward a More Useful Moral Tradition
I do not intend the following account of women’s experience of sexual pleasure to substitute an equally rigid, sexual orthodoxy and praxis (albeit new) for the old. But one way to reform the cultural messages sent about women’s sexual delight in North America is to challenge the moral traditions that undergird them. Once these traditional underpinnings are reconstructed, this ‘new’ theological canon might challenge, if not subvert, the harmful messages sent to women about their sexuality. Religious convictions have the capacity not only to oppress but to liberate. Since mine is the Roman Catholic tradition, its reform shall be my focus. As noted above, one characteristically Catholic approach to the justification of sexual norms is to explore their basis in the body.

This is a methodological move not without its liabilities. Furthermore, while it would be counterintuitive to disassociate fact from value, wrestling moral wisdom from human physiological experience is no simple deduction. It is a complex, inductive process from which only tentative insights into value might spring. Other people’s bodies are not just like ours; even bodily experience varies. And it is always interpreted from a particular social location. So prudence requires that such glimpses be subject to communal and cross-cultural tests,

9. Historically, such a foundational modus operandi has been especially problematic for women, as noted above. Even when its focus is expanded, so as to include female experience, the dangers of physicalism loom large. The physical is always just one ingredient of human being. For both men and women, this turn to the body tends to eclipse other interpersonal and spiritual dimensions of human experience, historically associated with the ‘order of reason’. The more personalist approach, popular now with many Catholic moral theologians, aims to avoid the distortions associated with a physicalist reduction. Yet, as many revisionists themselves have pointed out, such ‘personalism’ runs the risk of ignoring the body.
resulting inevitably in the qualification, if not rejection, of what is discerned. The end result will be at best a process of incremental reform.

*The Wisdom of Women’s Bodies*

In ‘A Theology of Sexual Pleasure’, William R. Stayton treats the human body as a sacred text revelatory of the divine will for human females, who like their male counterparts, are designed to enjoy sexual pleasure. Consider his interpretation of the mind of God:

> While still *in utero*, females vaginally lubricate and males have erections. This phenomenon occurs while males and females are asleep, every 40–80 minutes, until death unless interrupted by disease... The Creator intends sexual pleasure for the human creature... Females have an organ, the clitoris, which has no other function than sexual pleasure (1996: 335).

Though himself a Baptist, Stayton’s emphasis on the moral wisdom of the body is reminiscent of Roman Catholic methodological approaches. The turn to physiology as a source of wisdom for the development of an authentically human sexual ethic is a traditionally Catholic move. What is revealed in this bodily ‘text’—the clitoris? *The enjoyment of sexual pleasure is good.*\(^{10}\) It is intrinsically neither adolescent nor dangerous.

*Self-Love*

Let us return to Pellauer’s stark way of putting the question: ‘what stirs in our orgasms, that there should be so many obstacles around them?’ (1994: 154). What the experience of sexual pleasure can stir up in women, Audre Lorde suggests, is our sense of self-worth.\(^ {11}\) Her

\(^ {10}\) Of course, it is not the absolute good some flawed accounts claim it to be. It is just one of the many goods we ought to serve. As Thomas Aquinas noted, in reflections on pleasure apart from his discussion of sexuality, delight is requisite for human happiness, but accompanies human fulfillment in a much broader sense. Women know quite well that the pursuit of pleasure alone will not prove satisfying. Women know that sexual delight can be wrong in several ways: its pursuit can be situationally inappropriate; it can be enjoyed at the expense of the dignity and well-being of both ourselves and others; or what we experience as delightful can be warped by the way our sexual relationships are constructed. There is no question that the pursuit of sexual pleasure can be manipulative and harmful.

\(^ {11}\) In her essay, ‘Uses of the Thea(o)logian: Sex and Theodicy in Religious Feminism’, Kathleen M. Sands (1992) accuses such pro-sex feminists of being naive about society’s tremendous power to maintain its negative construction of sexuality in accord with the values of patriarchy.
point about the way sexuality might continue to be used as a weapon against women is well taken. Yet, apart from such alternative (re)visions of it, there is no hope of reforming the sexual practices and institutions that devalue women’s sexual delight. In her 1984 essay the ‘Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power’, Audre Lorde argued that once we taste such delight, women will demand ‘what is in accord with joy in other areas’ of our lives (1994: 77). Women will ‘begin to give up...being satisfied with suffering, and self-negation, and with the numbness’ (p. 78) that the culture demands of us.

If sexual pleasure is a source of self-respect for women, then erotic delight is one sort of energizing experience that both embodies and enables revolutionary challenges to many cultural assumptions about the place of women. Audre Lorde confirms that this is what is at stake in the suppression of women’s sexual delight. ‘In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women this has meant a suppression of the erotic’ (1994: 75). Pellauer summarizes: ‘to touch and be touched in ways that produce sweet delight affirms, magnifies, intensifies and redoubles the deep value of our existence’(1994: 162). We are awakened to our own loveliness and worth!

Making the Connections: The Other’s Delight as my Own

Women’s sexual pleasure embodies and enables not only self-love, but other-love as well. Arousal draws us toward others, and ignites their attraction to us; sexual desire helps to sustain relationships. Even the delights of solitary sex can enliven in us our sense of connection to life. Sexual pleasure inclines those who enjoy it not toward a state of selfish isolation but toward the world. Sexual activity is essentially boundary-blurring behavior. Pellauer describes the experience the French call jouissance this way: my ‘flesh has the capacity to burst me open to existence’ so that my ‘connections to the rest of the universe are felt...as pleasurable’ (1994: 160). Our sexuality draws us into one another’s arms, and consequently into an awareness of, and concern about, the needs of that other.

12. The point here is not to reduce sexual pleasure to a value only of instrumental worth. For example, I aim not to treat it as good because it serves to attract people into and cement relationships. Like self- and other-love, sexual enjoyment remains simultaneously both intrinsically worthwhile and linked to these other goods. The nature of the association among values need not be linear or hierarchical. One good need not be of value ‘merely’ because it supports another.
The experience of shared pleasure challenges the way self–other relations are constructed in our culture. Presently relationships are frequently organized as a zero-sum game; they presume we are basically created to be competitive with, if not downright antagonistic toward, one another (Harrison and Heyward 1994: 141). What the sharing of sexual pleasure illumines is that one person’s delight need not be purchased at the expense of another’s. Instead mutual sexual delight discloses the possibilities of creaturely interdependence and reciprocal enhancement. As Gudorf puts it, good sex reveals ‘that the overarching interests of individuals march together’ (1994: 115). Self-love and neighbor-love are ultimately congruent—we were made for communion. Should we reconstruct our relationships in light of such shared delight, a true sexual revolution might well be engendered.

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Possible Test Questions for

Patricia Beattie Jung, “Sexual Pleasure: A Roman Catholic Perspective on Women’s Delight.”

1. What is the view of the Roman Catholic Church regarding a wife’s sexual pleasure in regard to what is essential to the marriage act?

2. What function or “end” of human sexual activity does Jung identify as the basis for asserting that the sexual pleasure of both husband and wife is an essential part of morally good sexual activity?

3. What percentage of women report having painful intercourse virtually all the time?

4. On what basis does Jung contend that the incapacity on the part of so many women to enjoy sex is also a moral problem?

5. In a sentence or two each, indicate what Jung identifies as four indicators of our cultural ambivalence about sexual pleasure in general, and our negativity about women’s delight in particular.

6. What is the traditional natural-law type of argument proposed by Jung to support the importance sexual pleasure for women?