



Policing Bodies 2

Heterosexuality

This week, we are continuing to look at how religions police people's bodies and shape their sexual lives. In last week's lectures, we focused on the various *proscriptions* around having sex (through religious understandings of sexual purity). But now we turn our attention to the religious teachings that inform people's *engagement with, practice of, and understanding of* heterosexuality. While we tend to think that religious communities are primarily obsessed with *homosexuality*, they typically have far more rules and regulations about heterosexuality. Specifically, heterosexuality may be permitted, but only in certain circumstances, at certain times, and in certain ways. As Dag Ølstein Endsjø notes:

It is not just the general hostility to sex found in some religious traditions that complicates heterosexuality. There are certain religions that constantly try to impose their understanding of correct heterosexuality on society as a whole. People who desire to practise their heterosexuality in ways that this or that religion do not believe to be proper can easily find themselves with problems. (*Sex and Religion*, 51-52)

What is more, as Endsjø reminds us, religious demands and teachings about how to practice heterosexuality 'correctly' do not only impact members of religious communities – some religious groups also seek to impose their beliefs about heterosexuality on wider secular culture, lobbying secular authorities to make certain religious rules and proscription applicable to all. Things get even more complicated when we consider the huge variation in religious understandings of what 'correct' heterosexuality actually entails.

So, our main question for this week is: How do religious traditions attempt to prescribe and proscribe bodies and behaviours, regarding issues of heterosex, sexual desire, and reproductive choices?

The week 4 module will have all the resources you need – this handout, reading list, and a short video that Marina will post later in the week. There is also a link to an interesting documentary (on fundamentalist Mormon polygamy).

The main reading for week 4 is a chapter from *Sex and Religion* by Dag Ølstein Endsjø – it is quite long, but imminently readable (and he covers the issue of purity at the start of the chapter, so useful for last week too). The reading by Linda Woodhead (in the 'Further Reading' list) is also really interesting.

Don't forget to keep our usual questions in mind when looking at this week's topic:

- Who is speaking? And who is silent?
- Who is being addressed? Who is absent/excluded from the audience?
- What rhetoric is being used? [I.e. how are the audience being persuaded?]
- What/whose interests are being protected/promoted? And whose interests are being challenged/threatened?
- What are the consequences – what religious **and** cultural functions are being served?
- Who wins, and who loses? In other words, who has the power in this relationship?

Are religions anti-heterosex?

There's a bit of a myth that religion as a whole is anti-heterosex, or regards sex as something that is unwholesome or sinful. That is not strictly true, but for sex to be deemed religiously acceptable, it has to be 'done' according to various rules and regulations. In other words:

- Only some kinds of heterosex are acceptable – who you have sex with, when, how often, with how many people, where ... the rules are endless. And unacceptable forms of heterosex typically have an immoral label attached to them (remember Gayle Rubin's charmed circle – see below)
- Sex is only acceptable for certain groups and individuals – linked to the point above, heterosex may not be deemed appropriate or moral for particular people (e.g. unmarried people, lower castes/classes, priests and other 'holy' individuals).
- Prescriptions and rules about heterosex are typically **gendered** – rules for men and women will vary, and what is acceptable for men (e.g. more than one spouse, premarital sex) may not be acceptable for women. This also takes us back to the sexual double standards I mentioned in week 3 – men may be permitted (or even expected) to have sex with multiple partners, or before marriage, but women will be judged as immoral if they do the same.
- These attitudes towards heterosex are in constant flux – they are not transhistorical, not fixed or stable. Even if we think back 100 years, ideas about acceptable heterosex were very different than they are today. And different cultures and religious communities around the world will vary in their beliefs about heterosex, or how strictly they choose to follow religious guidelines. E.g. some orthodox Jewish communities may have strict guidelines about marrying someone who is not a member of the faith community, while Reform Jewish groups may not see this as an issue at all.
- Religious rules 'on paper' may be very different to how members of a religious community choose to behave. E.g. Endsjø offers the example of premarital sex – while this is technically prohibited (or at least discouraged) in many religious groups, the reality is that many adherents to these groups have sex outside of marriage – and don't feel terribly bad about doing so!

Before we carry on, can you make a list of all the rules about heterosex that you can think of (both religious and secular) – there will be some overlap between religious rules and state laws, as both do inform the other (we'll come back to that point later).



Sex before marriage

Read Endsjø, pp. 52-67.

As we saw last week, premarital heterosex is frowned upon in many religions. And this is particularly true for women. While a man may be expected to 'sow his wild oats' before he ties the knot, a woman most certainly is not – and if she does, she is likely to face moral opprobrium, public shaming, or even violence.

As Endsjø notes, “generally speaking, a man with many female sexual partners does not present a moral problem to many faiths, whereas a woman who has sex with men other than her husband presents a major challenge to many – and often the very same – religions” (p.55).



The **religious** justifications for this gendered prohibition of premarital sex, particularly for women, include purity doctrines, religious texts and teachings, and conformity to divinely mandated gender relations. Men’s engagement in premarital heterosex may be justified as something that is divinely-ordained, or at least not proscribed in official religious teachings.

But if we think about the **cultural** function of these rules, we could suggest that they help grant authority to cultural ideologies, including patriarchal understandings of women’s sexuality as a commodity or ‘property’ that belongs to her male kin – something that men have a right to control. They also preserve traditional notions of masculinity, with men viewed as naturally ‘hardwired’ to have sex. And the fact that most religions typically endow men with higher status than women allows men to justify their control over women’s sexuality.

Of course, as I indicated on the previous page, there will be a lot of variety within religious groups as to how seriously these rules around premarital sex are taken – more orthodox or conservative groups may apply them very strictly, and anyone caught breaking them might face serious consequences (particularly in honour-shame cultures – see Endsjø, pp. 63-64).



However, some members of these groups might find creative ways to get around the rules – including ‘redefining’ what heterosex actually means (see Endsjø, p.59). So we can’t imagine for a moment that unmarried people in even the strictest religious communities will **never** have any form of heterosex until they are married.

Let’s move on now, and think about the various rules and regulations that still exist around heterosex *after* someone gets married.

Sex within marriage



Read Endsjø, pp. 67-72.

Once a couple are married, the rules about sex don't stop – in fact, they get even more complicated. And there are many different rules about heterosex during marriage, which vary considerably between and within religious communities.

These rules are not fixed or unchanging – and it would be wrong to say that religious understandings of marriage have always been the same. E.g. while many Christian communities claim that marriage has always been ordained as a union between 'one man and one woman' (insisting that this is 'biblically based'), biblical marriage could include marriage between one man and multiple women, or one man, a woman, and one or more secondary wives, or concubines.

Culture or religion?

There is a dialectical relationship between religion and culture when it comes to marriage:

- Cultural norms around marriage and sexual relationships may influence and shape religious beliefs about these issues.
- Religious teachings and beliefs may also influence cultural norms around marriage and sexual relationships.

In other words, cultural beliefs about heterosex during marriage may overlap with religious beliefs because both belief systems influence each other. It's not always easy to discern whether a particular rule or expectation about heterosex in marriage evolved from cultural or religious belief systems – or both.

As Endsjø (pp. 67-72) notes, different religious communities also have different understandings of what marriage 'means':

- If it is lifelong or temporary
- It is available to everyone or prohibited for certain people
- If it is a sacred obligation or an undesirable necessity
- If it is consensual or arranged (or forced)
- If it is monogamous or polygamous
- If it is procreative or chaste
- If it is a marriage of equals or a hierarchy (with one partner in charge and the other subordinate)

Sex within marriage

Marriage and sex within marriage may be seen as a sacred duty within some religious traditions (see Endsjø, pp. 72-78). Others view it as a less than ideal necessity. But however it is viewed, regulations abound as to **whom** you can marry, and **why** you should marry.

Who to marry/not marry

Marriage between people of different races, castes, and religions have been (or remain) prohibited in certain religious traditions:

Christianity and Judaism:

- Biblical basis – inter-racial marriage posed a threat to religious fidelity and community ‘purity’ (see e.g. book of Ezra in the Old Testament). But, there were exceptions – Jewish Bible/Old Testament is multivocal on intermarriage, and important biblical figures, including Moses and Joseph, married foreign wives.
- Interfaith marriages are prohibited according to official Roman Catholic doctrine.
- Biblical arguments of racial/religious purity have been used to justify prohibitions of mixed marriage in the US, Nazi Germany, and South Africa.

Hinduism:

- Marriage across castes is strictly prohibited in some Hindu communities.
- This has been a significant source of violence for those who choose to disobey.

Islam:

- There are stipulations for Muslims to marry other Muslims (or Muslim converts) in the Koran and Islamic Hadiths.

Endsjø discusses these various rules and regulations in chapter 6 of *Sex and Religion* (linked to as a ‘further reading’ in your reading list). The **religious function** of these rules may vary, but they often attempt to maintain the ‘purity’ of a faith community, or prevent negative ‘outside’ influences from diluting or changing religious orthodoxy, or tempting people to turn away from their God/gods or their faith.

But what about their **cultural function**? Stripped of their religious significance, what do rules such as these listed above achieve, and why do they often persevere? We could suggest that these rules attempt to control group membership by rendering outsiders as “other” – undesirable, dangerous, different, and therefore requiring to be kept ‘out’. According to Endsjø:

The religious rules defining who may have sex with whom, whether based on gender, colour, ethnicity, caste or religion, all have one thing in common: they reinforce the fundamental rule, important to many religions, that there are differences between people, that there should be differences between people, and that a different value is attached to different people depending on who they are (or are defined as being). Gender, colour, ethnicity, caste and religion are all factors that define people’s worth within a religious world view. Sex rules contribute to the upholding of these definitions.

Endsjø, *Sex and Religion*, p. 196.

Do you agree? What other cultural functions might be served by these rules?



How many is too many?

Read Endsjø, pp. 85-94

Not all sacred texts or traditions insist on monogamy (for men). The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, the Kamasutra, and the Koran all give permission (or speak unproblematically about) polygyny – a man may have more than one wife. The opposite (polyandry – one wife, several husbands) is not entirely unheard of, but far rarer. Again, rules around heterosex in marriage are encoded for gender.

The question of ‘culture or religion?’ can be asked here again – certainly, it is likely that both influence the other. Endsjø offers a good example of the Christian rule of monogamy, which was established very early on in the history of the church. He points out that the Christian Bible does not explicitly state anywhere that polygyny is outright wrong (neither Jesus nor Paul mention it in the New Testament texts, and the Old Testament texts have no problem with it). However, the church grew up in two co-existing cultures (Greco-Roman and Palestinian Judaism) that both practiced monogamy, so it is likely early Church teachings on monogamy were influenced by this.

Nevertheless, clashes can exist between culture and religion when it comes to polygamy – Endsjø mentions some examples of this, particularly historical and contemporary Mormon churches who have fallen foul of US governments in their insistence that Mormon men can (or even should) take multiple wives. What are your thoughts on this? To what extent should religious communities be exempt from following state laws in matters of marriage or sex? There are religious exemption laws around same-sex marriage (so religious communities are not obliged to perform same-sex marriage services) – should these exemption laws cover issues of heterosex too? Can you think of any such exemptions currently in existence? Or do governments need to get rid of all exemptions, and compel religious communities to toe the state line, even in such private spheres as marriage and sex? You can watch an interesting documentary on polygamy in the Mormon church – the link is under the week 4 module.

While polygyny still exists in some cultures and communities, it is not some wonderful ‘free-for-all’ that men can take advantage of – the major religions that still permit it (or at least, their sacred texts and traditions permit it in theory), lay out strict regulations about how many wives men can take, in what circumstances, and how he must treat them. There seems to be a concern that wives are treated equally and fairly – and some Islamic laws around polygyny frame the practice as a means of caring for vulnerable women (e.g. widows). What do you think? Might there be other cultural functions of religious polygamy rules?

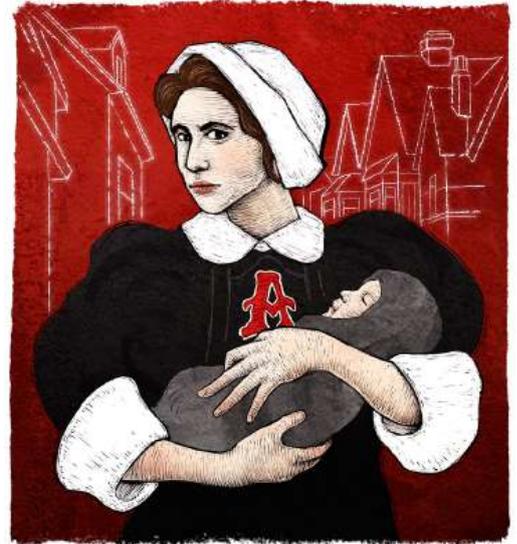
One possible cultural function of religious polygamy rules is to sustain patriarchal privilege and male control of women’s sexuality. These rules remind us once again that religion sees heterosex through a highly gendered lens. The fact that polygyny is permitted in some communities, but polyandry is not, taps into those same gendered ideologies that are rooted in male privilege and authority. As Endsjø notes, “It is absurd to talk of equal status for men and women within religion if absolute monogamy is demanded of women whereas men are allowed a number of wives” (p.94).

Adultery: The Great Taboo

Read Endsjø, pp. 94-103

Adultery is condemned in all the major world religions, though again, its definitions are deeply coded for gender. While some religious traditions stipulate that men and women may both be found guilty of adultery, in reality, it's not quite so simple.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines adultery as “voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than that person's current spouse or partner.” Yet how this is interpreted often depends on who is involved.



In a number of religious traditions, a married man will be found guilty of adultery if he has sex with another man's wife (or fiancé) – but if he has sex with an unmarried woman, or a sex-worker, it's less likely that this will be understood as 'adultery' per se, or it may be treated as a less serious offence. A married woman, however, will be branded an adulteress regardless of who she has sex with. In other words, the main concern about adultery is often centred around the status of the woman involved – if *she* is married or not.

These gendered understandings of adultery likely link back to the timeless idea that a woman's sexuality was the 'property' of her male guardian – first her father, then her husband. So sleeping with a man's daughter is a property 'theft' – the theft of her virginity – and her value is diminished. But it is not as serious a crime as adultery with another man's fiancé or wife – why do you think this is? What cultural function does these adultery laws serve? Why might a man want to ensure that he has sole sexual access to his wife/fiancé? [hint: think of issues of paternity]

E.g. Hebrew Bible laws of adultery (Deuteronomy 22:22-29 – see week 4 module) make very clear that the main concern is the status of the woman involved. A man who sleeps with another man's wife leads them to both face the death penalty. If he sleeps with another man's fiancé he also faces capital punishment – the woman's 'guilt' or 'innocence' is determined first, before any punishment is meted out to her. If a man has sex with an unmarried woman, this is regarded as a less serious offence – a property violation, as I mentioned above, which requires financial compensation. Interestingly, in these laws, the status of the man is not even mentioned – regardless of whether or not he is married, the crime of adultery is determined solely by the marital status of the woman he has sex with.

The sexual double standard of all this is also reflected in the way that sex workers have been (and still are) treated – throughout history, laws against sex work (and religious disapproval of it) have tended to target sex workers themselves, rather than their clients. A sex worker is not the 'sexual property' of any man, so married men can have sex with them without risking another man's property rights. That the man is committing adultery against his own wife may not even be considered (or at least not taken as seriously).

Sex within marriage: How, When, Where ... and Why

Read Endsjø, pp. 112-119.

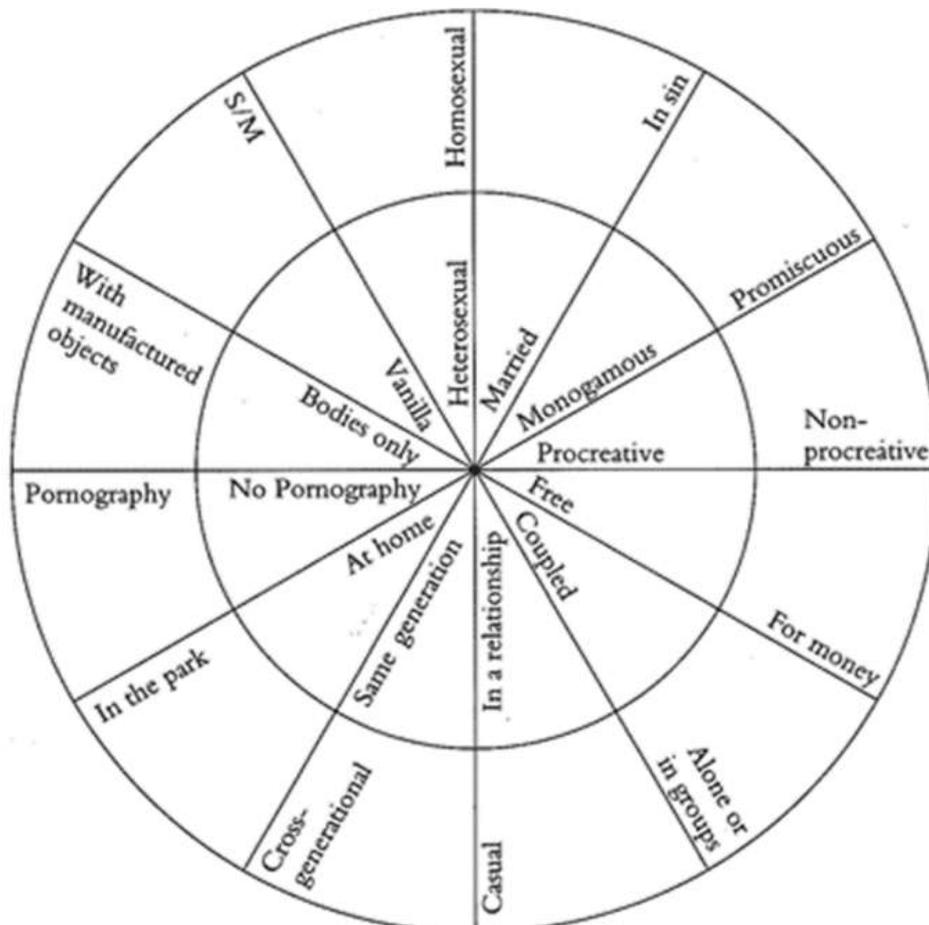
Even between a married couple, religious rules abound about how, where, and when they can have sex – and why.

- Sex may be prohibited in marriage at particular times – e.g. when a woman is menstruating
- ‘Sexpectations’ – the frequency of sex may be regulated
- Sex is prohibited in particular places (particularly sacred spaces)
- Certain sexual practices are forbidden (e.g. anal sex, oral sex, the use of pornography).
- Sex should only be for procreation, rather than for pleasure – birth control is therefore heavily regulated in some religious traditions.

Some of these rules have scriptural precedents, others arise in later traditions and may reflect cultural values and taboos.

Again, these rules are not fixed or stable, but subject to change over time and space. E.g. Endsjø mentions a bizarre seventh-century Christian rule that forbade sex on certain days of the week (why??). And many people in religious communities have no issues with different sexual practices, such as oral sex, or having sex for pleasure rather than procreation.

What do you think might be some of the cultural functions of these rules and regulations? And can you think of any others? Look at Rubin’s charmed circle again and see if you can map some of the things mentioned there as having some religious, as well as cultural, sanctions or rules.



Questions to ponder

In her chapter on Christianity and sex, Linda Woodhead notes that the Church has “colonized” the domestic sphere through creating various prescriptions and proscriptions around sex, marriage, and the family. We could take her argument and expand it to think about other religious communities too. The question to keep in mind is: why? Why are deeply personal things such as marriage and sex so heavily policed and controlled by religious institutions and doctrines?

Things to think about for the tutorial:

1. What is the religious function of these rules and regulations (i.e. what purpose do they serve/what advantage do they offer for the religious institutions themselves)?
2. And what might be some of their wider cultural functions, beyond their religious significance?
3. How much freedom should religious communities have in exercising these rules and regulations, particularly if they do not conform with wider cultural norms and practices (or even secular laws)?
4. If we cast our mind back to week 2 – that question of cultural relativism vs. universalism – how do we respond to religious rules or practices that we might find problematic (e.g. child marriage, prohibition of birth control, honour/shame murders)?
5. Given the highly gendered nature of the rules we have looked at, how do they contribute to perpetuating wider gender inequalities, or sustaining patriarchal privilege?
6. And how do they intersect with other identities (e.g. race, class) to create overlapping oppressions?

