Learning, Living, and Sexing: Three Crucial Encounters in Religious Sexuality Education

Abstract

This essay explores three encounters that young adult women identified as crucial to understanding how their religious sexuality education succeeded or failed in helping them connect sexual decision-making to their values and religious beliefs. Based on qualitative interviews with 15 young adult women who were raised Catholic, this paper privileges the voices of participants in describing the environment that shaped their lived theologies of sexuality; that is, whether they understood sexuality as life-giving and positive, or frightening and risky.

Much conversation around sexuality education in Christian spaces has to do with the “rightest” theology, or the theology that best critiques official theologies in our church spheres. These conversations are valuable, and I believe can be even more so when put into context with what people actually believe and how they make decisions as regards their sexuality. This is where pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring’s concept of lived theology is especially helpful; she draws from the theologians who talk about the distinction between embedded theologies (those that we learn when we are young, which maintain a sense of “feeling right” even when someone has overtly rejected them)\(^1\) and deliberated theologies (the theologies that a person chooses and comes to believe as an adult, which are affected by embedded theologies).\(^2\) Those two types of theologies together help create what she calls “lived theologies,” which are theologies that are embodied\(^3\) and lived out.\(^4\) These theologies may or may not coincide in obvious ways with a person’s espoused, deliberated theologies; to use an example in the world of sexual morality, a person might claim that their religious commitments forbid them from premarital sex but might engage in such sex when they are inebriated at a party where such hooking up is considered normative; that person’s deliberated theology is one of disapproval for such behavior, but their lived theology puts that disapproval in a cultural and social context that affects it to the point where the person’s decision is that they are really against such sexual encounters, but that they aren’t really harmful every once in awhile or if they don’t mean anything. Such equivocating is not understood as hypocrisy when using the lived theology framework; rather, it is expected that one’s religious values or beliefs will dynamically interact with one’s broader context and


\(^2\) Ibid., 18.


produce choices that do not always easily align. This framework allows for a person to be “figuring out” what they really believe even while they espouse specific beliefs, and expects that values with beliefs will shift with experience, choices, joys, regrets, and the general process of growing and learning.

Using this framework of lived theology, I bring the analyzed data from a small-scale qualitative research study of young adult women regarding their sexuality education. I interviewed fifteen women, aged 18-25, about their Roman Catholic upbringing, education about sex and sexuality, and how they believed the religious context and lessons of their youth about sex affected their decisions and choices as young adults. Of the fifteen, six had stopped affiliating with the Roman Catholic tradition (some converting to other forms of Christianity, others affiliating with no religion or choosing labels such as “agnostic); twelve of the women were Caucasian/white, two were Asian, and one identified as Tejano/Mexican; and two identified non-heterosexual orientations, one calling herself queer and the other using both the terms queer and bisexual. These women came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and from rural, suburban, and urban contexts, but all were in higher education at the time of the interview. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were audiorecorded, fully transcribed, coded, and analyzed for themes.

From this data, I pull three crucial educational encounters that were experienced by a majority of participants that had long-lasting impacts on how they understood Catholic theologies of sexuality and how they decided to integrate or segregate their own values and choices about sex and sexuality – their lived theologies – from that Catholic contextual upbringing. These encounters were recursive, and sometimes happened several times in a single individual’s life and had a new impact on them each time. However, these three encounters are arranged in a timeline format to help draw the line from childhood through young adulthood as I trace the development of lived theologies. I label these three moments as 1. Scanty Information, 2. Secret Lessons, and 3. The Comfort Standard.

In order to better situate the reader in the dominant narratives of this study, it will be helpful to explain upfront that a majority of participants could not recall more than one or two experiences that they identified as sexuality education. Parents often provided information on certain biological realities, but not always. Participants who had been in parochial school often had a unit about sexual morality in religion class in either middle or high school, and sometimes a “health science” unit on reproduction. Some had memories of retreat talks or homilies on the subject, but most had a difficult time recalling exactly where or how they had “figured it all out.” When asked to articulate what they knew of Roman Catholic theologies of sexuality, participants were quick to rattle off a list of rules; “no premarital sex,” “no contraception,” “no homosexual sex,” and so on. Sexuality education, in this context, refers less to formal courses on reproduction and safe sex and more to a constellation of encounters with peers, teachers, parents, and media that shaped the participants’ concept of what sex is and whether it is good and worthwhile or scary and risky. The ramifications of these educational encounters – and the takeaways that Christian religious educators might consider as they examine sexuality education of young people in their own context – are ultimately the focus of this essay.

**Scanty Information**

We begin our chain by recognizing that for a majority of our participants, information about sex and sexuality was scant from their earliest memories until a specific age, usually just
before puberty. Nora, a 21-year-old senior who identified as agnostic after separating herself from her parent’s highly traditional Catholic culture, spoke about needing to look up the word “sex” in the dictionary. Their schools did not directly address physical, biological differences between boys and girls until about 4th or 5th grade, and this was typically in context of “the talk” that delivers information on menstruation, at least to the girls, and may not include anything more detailed on sex and reproduction. Rose, a 19-year-old who had turned Evangelical in her teenage years, related that she learned what sex was in middle school, when a classmate called her a slut and she asked her mother what the word meant. While houses with mixed-gender siblings had some natural education about sex differences, most authority figures seemed in silent agreement that sex and sexuality were topics that should not be broached until absolutely necessary—that is, at puberty or immediately before.

This context of scanty information runs up against the very concept of sexuality as defined in the Catholic catechism. That definition describes sexuality as the core part of every human person that calls us into relationship with one another, the inborn drive we have to connect, create community, and intimately know others in many senses. With this in mind, one would expect sexuality to be addressed early and often with children as they form friendships, learn to share, and are taught how to treat others with affection, respect, and boundaries. Indeed, these topics are ubiquitous in raising children, except that they are typically not classified as sexuality education. These lessons would ideally become the bedrock for explaining reproductive function, desire, and romantic relationships, especially as children become adolescents and experience their sexuality taking on a new and more noticeable form. When these participants relayed their experiences of sexuality education, few could connect sexuality to friendship, or “the talk” to bodily respect. Because of the lack of information, sex and sexuality were taught as isolated subjects, not in the wider context of human relationships.

Religious education expert Thomas Groome dedicates much time to exploring the type of environment that is conducive to formative religious education, and explicitly states that “an environment of intellectual hospitality is free of ossified positions or knowledge control.” The sheer dearth of natural information about sex and sexuality available to the participants as they grew up suggests that careful knowledge control—that is, an active prevention of availability—was at work. This explains why the drama of “the talk” around puberty was so immediately recalled and well-remembered by participants. Educational theorist Elliott Eisner is also relevant here due to his exploration of the “null curriculum,” that which is taught by explicitly not being taught. From this exclusion, learners absorb the idea that this information is not as important to learn as that which is directly taught in schools, or that this information is hidden or made unavailable for other reasons. Eisner highlights that what is not taught also limits how the learner will learn in the future: “It has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives that one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation

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or problems."\(^8\) When information and values around sexuality are introduced later in adolescence, learners lose out on years of curiosity and the chance to practice critical thinking around the subject.

Because of this context of scanty information, participants’ lived theologies tended to understand sexuality as a subject set apart from everything else they knew about values and morality. They could not easily articulate the connections between sexual morality and friendship, or even romantic relationships, for example. This scanty information also provided the groundwork for later discomfort with the topic of sex that leads into our next encounter: Secret Lessons.

**Secret Lessons**

When these young women had, as children, sought out more information about sex and sexuality, they were often met with the uncomfortable reactions of adults who communicated (mostly nonverbally) that it was inappropriate for these young girls to be wondering about sexual topics. Valerie, a 20-year-old, related a story of an anonymous question box at school where she and her classmates were encouraged to ask any questions about sex that they were uncomfortable asking aloud:

> They wanted us to ask questions, but wouldn't necessarily answer them. They would have this kind of open forum like, if you didn't want to ask it out loud you could write it down on a piece of paper kind of thing and hand it in so it was anonymous, but some of the questions they wouldn't answer.

When pressed for more details, Valerie admitted that what she remembers is a teacher pulling a piece of paper from the anonymous question box, opening it, stating that she would not answer the question, and putting it aside. She remarked during the interview, seemingly surprised by her own insight, that she did not know if it contained an actual question, a rude remark, or some personal inquiry that the teacher declined to comment upon—the possibility had not occurred to her before. The significant detail about this encounter is that Valerie perceived that her teachers were hiding information from her and her peers, failing to be as open and honest as they had claimed they would be. This suggests a serious lack of trust between herself and the authority figures that she looked to for guidance.

Similarly, Jessica, a 22-year-old senior in college, explained that questions were often met with pat answers:

> I remember that was always the question that would always get asked, like, 'How far is too far?' And then the answer would be, 'Well if you have to ask, then it's probably too far!' That was always the question response… it was basically saying if a kiss goes beyond anything, like, all those things that we say no to, you're asking because you want to do all those things that we're saying no to.

She had gotten the distinct impression that to ask questions was taken as a sign by her educators that she was planning to engage in some immoral sexual activity; this realization was enough to keep her from consulting adults when she wondered about sexual topics.

With this response from educators, a majority of these women began to keep their own counsel about their curiosities, sometimes turning to friends for information, but largely trying to learn what they wanted or needed to learn about sex and sexuality by themselves and secretly. Secret learning about sexuality became many of these women’s only recourse when information

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\(^8\) Ibid.
was limited and untrustworthy. Valerie spoke about looking up information on the internet while also needing to hide her internet searches from her mother—she needed further insight, but asking a trusted adult was not an option, and could have gotten her shamed or punished for her curiosity. A minority of participants sought new information by becoming sexually active in high school, leading to a pregnancy scare for one and a herpes diagnosis for another— their method of learning was effective in certain ways, but they also had not learned basic information they would have needed to keep their exploration from having difficult consequences.

Their lived theologies, then, were formed by the embodied reality that sex was not a topic that could be safely, openly discussed. This effect was obvious to me as several participants who had claimed they were excited to talk to me ended up seeming recalcitrant in person; after several repetitions, it became clear that they were trying to speak openly, but lacked practice talking about sex and sexuality (especially with an authority figure) and in some cases, simply did not have the vocabulary to express what they wanted to say. A majority of participants talked about the importance of honest communication in romantic relationships, for example, but few of those could offer examples of difficult conversations they had with their romantic partners; their deliberated theology or value supported communication, but when combined with the embedded value that sex should not be openly spoken about, their “lived theology” was one of very limited, awkward communication.

The Comfort Standard.

Regardless of their educational background (or lack thereof), sexual values were not theoretical concepts for these women. Of fifteen interviewed, only one participant said she was single and not actively dating, though she expected to in the future. The other fourteen were actively involved in relationships running the gamut from casual hook-ups and consensual non-monogamy to long-term relationships and engagement. Whether or not these women felt prepared to make decisions about their sexual values, they were actively doing so.

To get at their decision-making process, all participants were asked some variation of the question “How do you decide if it’s right or wrong to do a particular sexual act with a particular person?” Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of them had never attempted to articulate this process. What is more surprising is how similar the answers were among diverse participants.

Allison, for example, was a highly traditional Catholic who spoke at length about how her faith informed her sexual boundaries, but responded thusly:

Well, I feel like I would decide just by my comfort level. I like move on instinct a lot, so if I get a gut feeling where like, okay, that's not okay, that experience I had, in the past like I had a really bad gut feeling… So I think that whole comfort level thing...if I feel okay in my heart about it, then sure.

Samantha, by contrast, was a more casual Catholic, but echoed many of the same sentiments: “Definitely a gut feeling where I'm okay with, I'm ready for, like, it's something that I know I'm ready for.” Rose, an ex-Catholic with loose Evangelical affiliations, speaks similarly: “If this is what I want to do, it's what I want to do. And I think now, when I'm thinking of things, I try to keep things within the context of a relationship where I feel comfortable, everything's good.”

These statements are representative in the participant pool—the above participants all expressed particular boundaries that they had decided beforehand (aside from Allison, the hard line was typically sexual intercourse), but when it came to making choices in the moment, “gut feelings” and “comfort level” dominated their reasoning. Several participants explained how sophisticated thinking around sexual behavior is complicated by a college culture in which
drinking and hooking up often intertwine. Esther, a practicing Catholic who actively enjoyed hook-ups and friends-with-benefits arrangements on her Catholic university campus, admitted that she had not been sober for her last few sexual encounters and summarized one of the difficulties of relying on gut feelings:

I guess, I feel like in any type of intimacy situation, you're not thinking so much as you are just doing. Until it comes to actually having sex, I think a lot of times you're not really thinking "Oh, is this something I want to do?" until it becomes something you don't want to do.

Her statement conveys a defensive posture when it comes to sexual behavior—acts may not be reflectively considered until a boundary is crossed. Again, it is curious to note that participants who had strong religious convictions and those who had minimal convictions appeared to be equipped with the same tools when it came to on-the-ground decision-making. Their lived theologies did not draw upon distinct wisdom, some based on a religious tradition and some not, but on a fairly non-reflective internal sense of rightness or wrongness. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt calls this “moral intuition,” a near-automatic moral judgment that occurs without the agent consciously weighing evidence or reasoning their way to a conclusion.9

Discussion

The above three encounters strongly suggest that for as much importance the Roman Catholic tradition puts on sexual morality, the formative theologies of that tradition are not being taught to youth in such a way that equips them with a uniquely Catholic or Christian method of discernment. Because these young adults were taught to view sex as a subject set apart at an early age and were left to learn information and values on their own and from an assortment of sources, decision-making takes on a distinctly non-religious method.

For religious educators, each of these encounters may provide “food for thought” regarding how sexuality education is addressed in Christian homes and Christian places of worship. Is all discussion of sexuality entirely off the table, for example, or are parents and educators able to respond to inquiries about relationships and reproduction calmly and directly when they arise? Especially around adolescence, are questions about sexual topics welcome and answered, or do they elicit alarm and anxiety among educators because they fear adolescents only ask questions about sexual activities they intend to experiment with? Finally, are youth and young adults given the safe, non-judgmental opportunities they need to talk openly about sex, come to grips with their own values, and make plans for how they intend to live as sexual people and Christians?

While this is the case for the fifteen participants in this study, it is helpful to recall that qualitative research is meant to be indicative instead of generalizable; other Catholic communities might encourage and elicit very different lived values among their youth and young adults. However, this study should offer insight to a variety of religious communities who are unsure of how their approach to sex ed might have longer-term effects. Additional qualitative research in this area with young adults could contribute greater comprehension to why theologies of sexuality seem to be so far removed from lived values in this population. Research among young adults with other religious upbringings could help clarify whether this disconnect is more

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present among American women raised Catholic than American women raised in other traditions.

While the results of this study are not especially encouraging for parents and religious educators who have a stake in passing along their religiously-based values to future generations, it does suggest several concrete possibilities for improving the chance that those values will be formative. Talking about sex and sexuality with children in age-appropriate ways from an early age might help them integrate this part of their embodied lives with the morals and values of friendship, touch, and bodiliness that they are learning on a daily basis. Consistent and sincere assurance that one is willing to hear and answer questions that a young person may have – and, crucially, the follow-through of non-judgmental listening and responding – might help young people trust the adult authority figures more with this topic. Finally, young adults were eager for the chance to talk to someone about sex and sexuality when presented with the opportunity, and several of my participants appeared to gain new insight about their own values simply from the process of trying to articulate them to me; this suggests that safe, open forums for discussions about sex and sexuality with young adults could scaffold their ability to connect their deeply held values, religious or not, with their behavior as they explore and created their lived values.

The mere topic of sexuality in religious forums often sparks concern, both from those who maintain precise standards for appropriate sexual behavior and from those who take a more individualistic approach to sexual decision-making. It is my hope that hearing from those who are most affected by Catholic and Christian sexuality education can produce conversation that is compassionate, engaged, and ready to take the full complexity of lived theologies into account.
Bibliography


