

What Might Teaching about Sex Gain from Christian Theologies?

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[REA plenary, 7/8/2021]

I am very sorry that I cannot be with you. I was honored to receive the invitation from Boyung Lee and much anticipating the chance to share time with Almeda Wright and all of you. But bodily life doesn't always conform to our fantasies. In fact, it never does. More on that as we go along.

Though we cannot gather in an on-line imitation of a classroom, I ask you to imagine, as circumstances allow, that this space—a scene of instruction, as I like to say—has been set apart from distractions, intrusions, and chores. We do not ignore the world. In fact, we try our best to understand it. Still, for a scene of instruction to begin, we must protect attention—especially if we hope to understand sex and gender, those volatile, inseparable, and still risky topics. Could I ask you to set aside some 40 or 50 minutes for this work? To read the paper well you will need to do a little writing. Some weeks from now, REA will schedule an online session for us to discuss it. In the interim, I'll be glad to read any written reactions you choose to send me at: [mjordan@hds.harvard.edu](mailto:mjordan@hds.harvard.edu)

My text is divided into two parts. They correspond to two courses I have taught in recent years. --The first is **an undergraduate course on sexual ethics**, set within a core curriculum. Because of demand, it has been offered as a large lecture (around 150 students). To my mind, its most important work occurs in the discussion sections, which never rise above 14. The guiding questions for this course are: Why might you seek a sexual ethics? What could it look like?

--The second course is a **divinity school elective**. It is taught either as a seminar or a small lecture with even smaller sections. This course asks future religious leaders to figure out what help, *if any*, Christianity can offer to ongoing controversies about sexual ethics.

I juxtapose the courses for pedagogical and theological reasons. Pedagogical: Christians sometimes behave as if their sexual ethics could be taught without regard for the supposedly “secular” culture around them. That’s a mistake. In all the examples we know, the sexual ethics of Christian groups reflect the cultures in which they originated. Even if you believe that you possess a purely Christian sexual ethics, you must still teach it to those around you in the present. Which pivots to the *theological* reason: Christian theological speech works best by pressing against other languages. Theology recalls limitations, fractures certainties, opens doors on marginalized experiences, and then gestures towards the inexhaustible Other that girdles every human language. We don’t want theology to replace human speech. (When that happens, it usually means that the “theology” is all too human ideology that has stolen some vestments.) We want theology to remind to remind us of what lies beyond human knowing. So, the second section will be shorter than the first.

For both kinds of reasons, I underline the *variety* of languages imposed on our sex/gender. One way to see this is by recalling *where* we learn to talk sex. We are given words for sex/gender in classrooms and churches, of course, but also in bedrooms, bathrooms, playgrounds, locker rooms, courtrooms, news stories, blogs, emails, sexts, videos, fan fiction, and many other places. Our speech about sex/gender is like an archeological site with dozens of layers, dating from different periods, preserving idiosyncratic images and affects. Or picture instead the variety of languages as a competition among various ‘disciplines’ for the right to

name sex/gender. Unfortunately, the disciplines refuse to stay put. They borrow from each other even as they quarrel, modifying terms, arguments, or evidence without acknowledgment.

In what follows, I too will move across disciplines as I pursue questions. I will also adjust terminology. Most notably, I use the fused term “sex/gender” rather than the older triplet, sex/sexuality/gender (which I used to teach decades back). I can no longer make a clean cut between sexual dispositions or acts and gender. More: I’m no longer believe that we know what we mean when we say either “sex” or “gender.” In some ways, I am trying to restore the rich confusions of the “sex.”

### **Course 1: “Sex and Ethical Reasoning”**

Within the core curriculum, “Sex and Ethical Reasoning” fits into a box originally constructed for philosophy. Hence the odd phrase, “ethical reasoning.” Ethics requires, of course, much more than reasoning. It is bodily pedagogy that cultivates habits of feeling and acting. Still, I am expected to talk about reasoning and to include several philosophical texts. I do, but I then add much more. For example, I insist from the first day that sexual ethics in the U.S. cannot be understood apart from dominant religious traditions. So, the syllabus assigns selections from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as well as influential Christian theologians. For some of those enrolled, the course is their first encounter with such writing.

Beyond philosophical and religious texts, the course ranges widely—from scientific papers and legal arguments through political manifestos and sociological studies to literature, film, music. Topics are also diverse. At various times, in various places, an ethics of sex has meant regulating births, preventing disease, controlling pleasure, policing gender, protecting consent, creating privacy, or defending romance from commerce—to name only a few topics.

The ethics of sex also asks us to consider how these topics have been taught. Sex/gender ethics is usually *not* presented as an inquiry shared among equals. It is accompanied more often by threats of exile, bodily punishment, and public denunciation. In many societies, the most frequent moral panics are sex panics, and sex panics kill.

We try, in the course, to sample debates on expected topics such as masturbation, rape, adultery, polyamory, “perversions,” prostitution or sex-work, and pornography. But we look just as hard at emerging debates. For example, we discuss asexuality and gender-blur, the endless commercialization of sex online, sexual rights for children or adolescents, the ethics of fantasy, and rape in cyberspace. Each semester, I poll the class for topics to be discussed at the end. Over recent years, the topics at the top of the poll were hooking-up through apps and race.

I never claim to be expert in this range of topics. The course can only move forward as an inquiry shared by everyone in the room. So, I hand over the microphone as often as I responsibly can. I also do my best to model generous attention to all the opinions expressed and to all the authors read or cited. Sometimes I fail—and then I convert my failure into a teaching example. If I find it hard to talk about something—whether because of rage, shame, or unresolved pain—I acknowledge that as well. But you recognize these practices. They are what we do as teachers. Still, they are especially important in this course because its members are tempted to a particular vice.

From the first semester, I noticed how compulsively those enrolled performed sexual *knowingness*.<sup>1</sup> No matter how unusual or arcane the sexual taste mentioned, many heads in the lecture hall would nod knowingly. As if to say, “Oh, that? Of course. I was doing it last night—and will observe my roommate doing it later today.” But I knew from surveys of our new

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<sup>1</sup> When using this word, I have in mind the psychoanalytic writer, Adam Phillips. A few pages from now, you will see that I am remembering particular Christian contexts.

students that their reported sexual experience was limited. In the Harvard class of 2020, to single them out, almost *two-thirds* labelled themselves as “virgins” at enrollment. Yet, if I mentioned polyamorous mystical societies devoted to wordless play in silvery animal costumes, heads would bob vigorously.

You might reply that this is just adolescent boasting—or the reflex reaction of students who feel that they can’t safely admit ignorance on *any* topic. I would agree. But I still think that there is something more specific here. Many students who have little or no sexual experience in their own bodies have logged hundreds of hours of ‘sexual experience’ online. For many students, sex is originally and perhaps increasingly virtual.

A lot has been said about the effects of the mass consumption of pornography by adolescents. I won’t pretend to survey or summarize it. I also acknowledge that there are complicated questions lurking here about fantasy in embodied sexual encounters. My point is only to ask about the effects on ethical pedagogy of so much virtuality. At very least, it might seem to dissociate the bodily experiences of sexual episodes from their representations, privileging representation. Much online porn (whether filmed, animated, or described) obeys genre conventions that distort human bodies, stereotype persons, and glamorize violence. I worry when some members of my class speak as if watching porn videos yields sufficient knowledge of sexuality. I worry more when this ‘knowledge’ spills over into further claims: “You can know *with certainty* your own sex/gender at 18 or 20 by choosing from an authorized list of options. You can know *in advance* the plots of your best sexual experiences. You can set now the future course of your sex/gender selfhood.” This kind of knowingness is more than boasting about your acquaintance with sexual variations. This knowingness is an imperative to categorize all the sexual lives that can be and then to interpret whatever happens back into those

types. It is a compulsory taxonomy, and the more compulsory it becomes the more harm it can cause. So, I focus the course increasingly on contesting ready-made labels or narratives for sex/gender.

Once I began to watch for knowingness, I realized that we met it along the span of the course. It appears, for example, whenever we construct ethical cases.<sup>2</sup> Cases don't write themselves. Someone has to decide what belongs in them. I ask the class to reflect on the construction of cases using the images of both border and scale. By "borders," I mean the decisions that mark off the case from the rest of a life or a community history. Does this case start with the first kiss, with a party the night before, with the first meeting in a busy hallway? Or should it begin years earlier, with the adolescence of each person involved, perhaps their childhood, perhaps birth-family dynamics from before they were born? And where does the sexual case stop? With orgasm, with the uprush of unexpected feelings in the hours afterward, with an awkward meeting two days later, with a lifetime together or apart?

There are other borders. Typically, sexual cases inform us about facts like a protagonist's age and social status, the articulation of any consent, and the exact physical contact. But cases just often expect us to assume much else—say, about physical and social health, race, class, relative economic standing, and even prevailing political conditions. Here I suggest to the class that we shift from the language of borders to that of scale. Typically, cases in sexual ethics unroll in high magnification, zoomed right in on two people. The description of the sexual act is about two bodies (maybe a few more) considered in isolation—not to say, in private—and over a very short period of time. At the center of the microscopic field are the desires, feelings, and action during a few hours, with a little essential background added for clarity. I call it the scale

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<sup>2</sup> Cases in ethics take many forms and have been used for millennia. The cases we consider in class have some analogies with "thought experiments" like the "runaway trolley problem," but I hope that our cases are both more concrete and more adequately complicated.

of the bedroom— and I immediately reassure class members that I am aware of sexual activity that happens outside of bedrooms. But a number of thinkers—in sociology, anthropology, psychology, and philosophy—have argued for decades that the scale of sexual ethics should be much larger. The anthropologist Gayle Rubin, for example, asks how and why a nation constructs a series of sexual condemnations or taboos: the scale of the current social system. Other thinkers about sex—notably Michel Foucault—argue that we have to think sex in relation to mutations of subject-constituting power over long periods of time: the scale of epochs. In sum, decisions about what to include and what to exclude in ethical cases are neither self-evident nor “natural.” We should beware the knowingness that declares how obvious sexual cases are.

Still, the course’s most important encounter with knowingness occurs in the middle, when we begin to talk together about sexual violence after half a semester’s preparation. We read together a philosophy teacher’s account of her violent rape or “sex murder.” “Murder,” because the author experienced the death of a *self* in the crime’s aftermath. We turn next to a Young Adult novel about the sexual abuse of an adolescent by his stepfather, who holds the threat of deportation over the boy’s mother. As we reflect, I ask course-members to consider two disconcerting suggestions: that much of human sex presses right up against violent aggression, and that systems of male supremacy often approve violence in relation to women and others stigmatized as effeminate.

Those taking the course recoil from these suggestions. I recoil with them. But then I ask them to consider whether it is enough to recoil from violence into fantasies of rational control. It is a fantasy to believe that ‘we’ could stop all sexual violence by adopting the right policy and then funding bureaucracies to enforce it. Realistic policies and humane bureaucracies must resist sexual violence, but they cannot vanquish it forever—not even on the small patch of a college

campus. I claim for policy victories over violence is, I believe, a particularly risky form of knowingness. It can also authorize more violence.

When I started teaching this undergraduate course, my campus was embroiled in public conversations about Title IX.<sup>3</sup> As a result, many students were focused on definitions of consent. They were especially interested in the so-called “Antioch model,” named after a sequence of policies enacted by Antioch College in the 1990s. On this model, consent to sexual activity must be prior, verbal, specific, gradual or graduated, time-limited, and revocable. In class, members argued back and forth about how realistic or practical such definitions were. (There are many of them, and some contain additional elements.) I tried to cut through the spiraling complications by asking them to judge a familiar case according to their own ethical commitments. An unusual silence followed. Then a brave volunteer began, “Well, according to Harvard’s rules...”

I held up my hand. “Not the rules, please, but your own judgment of right and wrong.”

Another silence.

You might attribute this to contemporary U.S. students’ notorious shyness in voicing public judgments on the particular sex/gender of other individuals. (There is much less shyness when it comes to blaming groups.) That is surely part of it. Still, the moment suggested to me that some students find it hard to distinguish institutional or social rules from individual ethical judgments. Let me turn that around: they find it hard to conceive an ethical space that is not governed by institutional rules. Reflecting on this moment and others like it, I concluded that one task for any teacher of ethics is to help people remember how important it is that we be able to speak of right and wrong apart from the prevailing rules or laws. When we forget this, when are in the grip of a powerful present knowingness.

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<sup>3</sup> Title IX is a U.S. law that has been interpreted to require that schools receiving tax funds establish procedures for preventing sexual assault and responding to it when it is committed.

Since I have spent so many words on my strategies, you may well wonder how the students assess the course. For the most part, the formal and informal evaluations have been kind. Of course, student contentment in the moment is not a reliable sign of long-term ethical effects. About those effects, it's probably too early to tell. A prior question: What should anyone—learner or teacher—expect a one-semester, college course to accomplish given the complexity of speeches, disciplines, and topics around sex/gender? The end of each semester found me repeating to the lecture hall: please *don't* believe that this is a conclusion.

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### **Writing cue 1**

*I'd like you to stop reading for a few minutes so that you can do some free-writing. Please find below two writing cues. Choose between them or invent a better one of your own. Write the first things that come into your head. Don't censor yourself and don't fuss over style. Just write—and then stop after a few minutes.*

**(1) We typically distinguish between “sex education” and “sexual ethics.” But how do you understand the distinction? Can instruction about the biology, psychology, and sociology of human sex be stripped of all ethical assumptions of implications? Mustn't an ethical account of human sex depend on understandings about what human sex is?**

**(2) Imagine that you have agreed to address a civic group on the topic, “Religion and Sex.” The group of adults has been meeting in a nearby neighborhood to learn more sources of social and political strains. As you think forward to the meeting, which prejudices or commitments do you foresee as most likely to prevent the group**

**from hearing what you have to say? What might you do quickly to move around those blocks? What would you most hope to accomplish then?**

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### **Course 2: “Christian Sex”**

I turn to the second course, entitled “Christian Sex” or (colloquially) “A Future for Christian Sex? Really?” The course is intended primarily for graduate students in the divinity school, many of whom go on to ordained ministry, school-teaching, or service in non-profit organizations. Students come from quite diverse religious backgrounds, Christian and non-Christian. They bring different amounts of experience with any kind of “church.” The course challenges its members to find some hope in Christian teaching about sex/gender. I leave it them to define “hopeful” for themselves, as I urge them to decide what gets to count as a “Christian” teaching. But then I remind them that Christian logic is not always the world’s logic. I urge the course’s members to allow for impossible healings, unkillable teachings, and a necessary *un*-knowingness in following the divine. They might look not for the “sign of the times” (which are scanned daily by every journalist) but the quiet possibilities of the moment. Finally, we promise not to be cynical about one another’s hopes.

We spend our first weeks together practicing the perception of the many moments in which we find ourselves. Most members have complex experiences of controversy and change in on religious setting or another, but few have been encouraged to conceive the depth of the changes in Christian churches. There have been astonishing changes in Christian teaching about sex/gender over the last two hundred years, but they are often minimized or disavowed. Many Christian groups reinforce authority by claiming perfect continuity in doctrine and pastoral

practice. In contrast, most historians note that all or almost all Christian groups have undergone fundamental shifts in teachings about sex/gender. The rapidity and scale of the change suggest to some historians that Christianity is undergoing a “second Reformation.” The students know that large Christian groups have split over sexual disputes. Where institutions appear to hold, there has still been significant loss of both leaders and members—though for every person who leaves a Christian group over sex/gender quarrels, several more can choose to dissent-in-place. There are also significant stories to be told about new Christian practices emerging around sex/gender, from Purity Balls or Silver Rings to same-sex weddings and trans\* rites of re-naming.

In the U.S., it is a habit to attribute these changes to the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s. Whatever one thinks about the 1960s (if one should think in terms of decades at all), attitudes towards extra-marital sex, dissolution of marriage, same-sex love, and gender-transition had been changing for many decades before those years. As so often in the history of sex/gender, people confuse *becoming widely visible* with *happening for the first time*. More parochially, they confuse “I never heard of that” with “It has never happened before in all of history.” It is also important to emphasize the *range* of church responses to the so-called “sexual revolution.” While some church groups dug in their heels, others lifted up the changes, including women’s and LGBTQ rights or racial justice movements, and fought hard on their behalf. More than ever during the last two centuries, it is deeply misleading to make claims about *the* Christian teaching on sex/gender—unless your point is to draw a line between real Christian and heretics or imposters.

How might someone attempting to write Christian ethics today understand this confusing and ongoing change? The consensus in seminar is usually that we need not one explanation but a number of narratives, intersecting or interacting, and that a bunch of narrative would still not

cover everything. But it can be useful to list narratives, if only to see the links that run from sexual ethics to other social formation. For example, the seminar returns frequently to the “emancipation” of women. “Emancipation” means not just gaining the vote but securing a basic set of rights. Emancipation in this sense has hardly been accomplished, especially in Christian churches. If the salient issue in churches is often women’s leadership, emancipation also requires the reinterpretation of doctrine, ethics, and pastoral practice in ways that affirm the full dignity of women before God. It even includes reconsidering a number of moral teachings that impose special hardships on women, such as divorce, contraception, and abortion, but also models for gender roles, and so on. Some members of the seminar are struck when they first realize that a church’s rules for sex depend directly on its view women—even though not all sex acts involve women.

You take the point, I’m sure, so I’ll skip over the rest of the seminar’s exploration of the enormous changes in recent church history. More important may be the assignment that concludes this section. Each member is asked to reflect on one or two specific episodes of change around sex/gender that they have experienced in religious communities. They are urged to select episodes of which they have direct experience, but they are free to include events they joined or observed as well as stories they were told first-hand. (The telling of a story about a change is often an agent of further change.) The members are also allowed to choose an inward experience. If they have undergone a conversion in their views of sex/gender, they may of course write about that. As you would expect, some of the most moving accounts concern these personal changes—which often enough lead to a change of religious affiliation.

After this practice in reading our moments, the seminar begins explicitly to search for present hope in Christian teachings on sex/gender. Given the character of my divinity school,

many students know more about social-justice movements related to sex/gender than about other Christian traditions, including their own denominational heritages. (I say, “other Christian,” because many of the ‘secular’ groups familiar to the seminar-members work are animated by Christian teachings.) By contrast, most of what they know about Christian teaching on sex/gender is negative. Their core commitment is often to repair the harm caused by violent enforcement of church rules. Almost without exception, they distrust church authority over sex/gender because they have seen too clearly its devastating effects. Unfortunately, a comprehensive mistrust of Christian traditions can leave them with limited resources for articulating new Christian hopes for sex/gender—because they can feel constrained just to repeat the familiar claims of social-justice organizations. finding plausibly Christian hope. hope in Christian limited ethical resources, mostly ‘secular’. Cutting away Christian traditions entirely, they shorten living religious memory to present readings of the scriptures, present worship, present controversies. To be stuck only in the present is to be trapped by the present structures of power for gender/sex. What if you also find those suffocating—or dangerous in different ways than the traditions have been? Or what if theologies that only echo social-justice analyses sound to you like bad imitations?

The seminar can reshape its guiding question for a final time: What might Christian theology offer to the current understanding of sex/gender that is not offered better by other teachers? You know that there are several ways to hear this question and at least as many directions to take in responding. In tracing them, I won’t try to narrate the seminar discussions—which are often quite complicated. I will only give you my views as a participant in them.

One way is to pursue the question in the direction of traditional topics for Christian teaching on sex/gender. – I don't doubt that there are striking insights to be rediscovered here, but I testify from experience that they can be deeply buried under harmful doctrines. A first example: we could return to the claim that there is a divine plan for human sex/gender and search for divinely willed norms. Unfortunately, not a few of the "divinely willed norms" proclaimed historically by Christian theologies are thinly disguised exercises in control. A number of them also depend on claims that now appear to be false. – Remember that much of the detailed sexual morality in early, medieval, and early modern theology was based on analogies to animal behavior. The analogies are charming but inaccurate. They are also not specifically Christian, since they were originally borrowed from pagan philosophy. – Another example: we could try, again, to appeal to a "natural law" instilled by God in each human creature. But this is also not originally a Christian doctrine, and it has changed too obviously with fluctuations in other conceptions of law. – A last example: Christian theology could try to convince us that the world that sex/gender reaches its fullness *only* in relation to procreation and the reproductive family. I suggest that there is a lot of evidence to the contrary. I also can't see how this claim squares with the New Testament's strong critiques of procreation and biological family.

If we want to return to traditional topics of Christian teaching on sex/gender, my own strategy would be to head for the most obvious: love, *agapê*. You know that mountains of interpretation bury that word. Most of them dismiss the erotic after insulting it. But I believe we can hear other possibilities in the Gospels, especially in their tensions. Christian doctrines of unbounded love (illustrated by the parable of the Samaritan) sit uneasily with the strict confinement of erotic love to procreative marriage. If all Christians are supposed to be brothers

and sisters, doesn't Christian marriage authorize incest? Alternately, if Christian *eros* is subsumed into *agapê*, shouldn't all Christians be polyamorous? Or should we just forgo sex?

We read in the New Testament that early congregations quarreled over the permissibility of Christian marriage and Christian sex (1 Cor 7:1, Rev 14.4). Those quarrels point to a conflict or gap in community memories. Let me say this again. If Jesus meant to provide us with detailed sexual rules, he was either a very bad teacher or his disciples didn't take adequate notes. In the Gospels as we receive them, Jesus's ethical pronouncements on sex and marriage are frustratingly obscure and brief. Think of his severe claim about the indissolubility of marriage, which he links (according to some witnesses) with an analogy (?) to becoming a eunuch. Why *didn't* Jesus provide more detailed instruction about sex/gender? A ready answer is that he—or the followers who wrote about him—expected the quick passing away of the present order, including sex and marriage. Or perhaps Jesus understood his instruction on these points as no more than a variation on Jewish law. (Then why the example of celibacy and the emphasis on it?) Or maybe he gave no sexual code because he expected to continue always with his followers as friend, companion, guide: he would be there to help them to settle issues as they arose. Whatever the motives for the silence, one pedagogical result was to leave the teachings about *agapê* in tension with predictable human entanglements over sex/gender.

This points to a second way of hearing the seminar's last version of its guiding question. What might Christian theology offer to the current understanding of sex/gender that is not offered better by other teachers? That could be directing us towards sources and topics that *haven't* traditionally been consulted. An obvious example would be to take more literally the highly erotic language used by 'mystical' writers to describe intimate encounters with God. If the persistent, detailed imagery of these texts discloses the erotic in encounters with God, can't

we wonder whether other erotic episodes also open onto divine life? For decades now, a few Christian theologians have asked us to consider the body as a site of ongoing revelation—not only in its suffering but in its ecstasy. Transgressive prayerbooks now supply words for invoking God in sexual encounters. I don't think that this is obscene or silly. I hold that if you can't pray over it, you don't do it. That applies to sexual acts as well—unless we consider them to be altogether excluded from both divine creation and salvation history.

The theology of an incarnate God should be marked throughout by coherence with incarnation. This extends to any adequate theology of sex/gender. We learn this from large doctrines, like the resurrection of the body. We can notice it even in small ones, like the traditional claim that resurrected bodies have genitals. (Christian theologians assert and Christian artists insist that Jesus rose from the dead with his wounds and his genitals.) If that claim seems silly, we might follow it to some radical Christian views about human chronology. Eschatology has been used to suspend the divine command-to-multiply, but it can just as plausibly suspend any final judgment *in this life* on the ultimate purposes for the creation of sex. After all, we never attain physical maturity during this life. We are always less than adolescents. According to the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, our bodies are not yet in their final form. The first letter attributed to John says, “we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him” (1 Jn 3.2 RSV). What follows when we apply that reminder to church teaching on sex/gender? – Perhaps you can glimpse, through the narrow slit of my own views, a little of the seminar’s inquiries into sources and topics not traditionally consulted for Christian sexual ethics.

There remains the third and last way of hearing the guiding question. What might Christian theology offer to the current understanding of sex/gender that is not offered better by

other teachers? That question might cause you to wonder whether Christian teachers could contribute most significantly to current discussions by concentrating not on the contents of sexual ethics but on the *form* of its teaching. The deep forms of Christian teaching on sex/gender are not codes of rules and punishments. They are more embodied, more enigmatic, and more life-giving than that. Jesus's silence is filled in by his constant contact with vulnerable bodies and his evident readiness to rewrite gendered rules for purity. The Good News is for and about life—but this life obviously exceeds physical reproduction. (Jesus had no children—and yet he has millions.) His repeated invitation was to join him—not in codified purity, but in a series of embodied encounters along a road to Jerusalem. If Christian theology for sex/gender has failed through history by compromising with earthly powers, it has also failed—perhaps failed more—by undertaking to codify rules. The original sin of Christian sexual ethics may not be making oppressive regulations but presuming to regulate comprehensively at all. The great risk in many present moments is that churches will sacrifice the Gospel to their doomed defense of what is, after all, only their own mistake about how to teach.

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### **Writing cue 2**

*Before you set this paper aside (or throw it away!), I'd ask you to do another few minutes of free-writing. Here are two cues. Choose one or invent another.*

**(1) Imagine a contemporary religious organization that took a position of agnosticism with regard to most questions about sex, marriage, or gender. Its teachers might say, "We leave all of that to our members' consciences," or "We don't think that has much to do with spiritual progress," or "We have received no**

teaching on that point.” (If you actually know such an organization, simply call it to mind.) What kind of future do you predict for this group? Do you think that its teachers will be able to persevere in their sex/gender agnosticism? Do you think that they ever achieved it?

(2) The *Philosophical Fragments* of “Johannes Climacus” (one of Kierkegaard’s personas) conceives that the only thing that one (Christian) generation can pass to another is this simple testimony, “We believe that in our time the god appeared in the form of a servant, lived as a teacher among us, and then died.” Imagine, for a moment, that you have received only that sentence. What could you conclude about the god’s teaching on sex/gender?