

July 8, 2010

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Posted: May 24, 2010 11:54 PM

God, Sex and Love on American Campuses

The sex is hot, but the heart is cold. Undergraduate men today have more "fuck buddies" than dates. A college date is a rare phenomenon, not unlike seeing a California condor in the 1980s.

I now know who does what sexually to whom among university students, and under what relational conditions. It was not by chance that I started investigating students' erotic world in the same year my twin daughters began to menstruate. Forty years ago I had sampled the pleasures of flesh in the first flush of the sexual revolution, stoned encounters in strange beds and on forest floors with girls whom I didn't know very well. But when I looked around at the adolescent world my daughters were entering, I felt that something had changed.

My generation took love for granted; sex was the great uncertainty, the adventure. This new generation has reversed the equation. For them, sex has become ordinary; what is uncertain, frightening, and for an increasing number of them unbelievable, is love.

Much to my daughters' chagrin I started my research on Facebook. Normally you have to pay kids to take surveys. Working with Paolo Gardinali, the head of our university's survey research center, I didn't have much money.

All we could muster was a knowing invitation. Our first banner ad in Facebook ran as follows: "When was the last time you got laid? Prayed? Said I love you? Tell us about it."

In a couple of weeks, more than a thousand students took the survey, a quarter of whom wanted to be interviewed personally about it. We have now surveyed many thousands of students both through Facebook and in large classes at the University of California, Santa Barbara where I teach, a place known both for the Nobel prizes won by its scientists and the sexual abandon practiced beachside by its students. My campus is a hot house for brilliant brains and beautiful flesh.

We asked students to tell us about their last sexual encounter. Who touched what body part? Was it a boyfriend/girlfriend, a hook-up, a booty call, friends with benefits? Did you love her or him? And she/he you?

We now have a huge sample of sex acts. More than half of all sex takes place in relations stripped of any romantic intent or possibility. That's for everybody. If you break out the guys, two thirds of their sex takes place in loveless, non-romantic -- typically first-time -- encounters. While some girls are playing by *Sex and the City* rules, most hope a relationship is going to flare up out of these first frictions.

American evangelicals and fundamentalists reached for political power in response to my generation's sex, what they saw as a horrible debauchery. Jerry Falwell began his Moral Majority after stumbling into a stoned, orgiastic Led Zeppelin concert. For three decades now, there has been a religious political obsession with what goes on in young people's underpants.

I am not so concerned with young people's sex. It's their love lives that have me worried. Students don't exactly believe in it anymore. The majority suspect love might be a fiction invented to keep women down. They don't expect their own romantic bondings to last. Indeed a fair proportion don't even want them to last.

So who loves? Nobody, except for J.K. Rowling, seems to be worried about that. The religious right has been preoccupied with young people's sexual abandon, pushing through abstinence-only forms of sexual education, which made it once again into President Obama's recent health reform bill in 2009. Sex outside a sacramental marriage is a sin, they say. Only a return to God can contain our lusts.

Does God matter? A huge amount of research has now been conducted on whether religious belief and practice constrain the onset and promiscuity of young people's sexuality. American sociologists have found that really religious young people have intercourse a bit later and with fewer partners. But the more people have looked, the less religion seems to matter.

Just as in the case of Representative Mark Souder, the Congressional cheerleader for abstinence-only sex education who had sex with his staffer and was recently forced to resign, God does not do a good job guarding their private parts. We found that belief in God has no impact on young people's sex lives. College virgins are no more likely to believe in God than non-virgins. Even those who took a virginity pledge are not sexually different from those who didn't, except they have had a little more oral experience.

Researchers have been looking in the wrong place. God is not working in people's underpants. But God, it turns out, does matter to young people's love lives. A student's belief in God is strongly associated with whether he or she conjoins sex and love. When compared to those who don't believe in anything beyond the physical world, young people who definitely believe in God are twice as likely to make love, as opposed to just having sex. Those who believe in God, and even more so a loving God, it turns out, are much more likely to have romantic sex and to find it difficult to separate out sex and love. If you want a lover, one of the best places to look is among those who believe in God.

Why does belief in God promote the making of love? There are various possibilities. The first is that our monotheisms make love into a sacred value. People who believe in

God learn to value love. The second is that religion makes sex into a guilty pleasure. The religious need to love to justify their sex. But I think there is third reason, one that points to love as a structure of faith central to the making of our world. A relation with the divine is one in which you acknowledge your lack of sovereignty and self-control; admit that you are not your own basis, your own source; and depend on an other for your being whom you will never really understand or control. Religiosity and real romance are parallel orders of experience.

Whether religious faith is a template for loving or loving is the ground out of which we imagined our one God, romantic love is a historical achievement, one of the critical ways we moderns constitute ourselves as individuals. The desire to give oneself to another, to be entrusted with another's being, to hear the call and respond, is a font from which social solidarity, equality, and justice all derive. Love is an unlikely, even impossible, life course, but nonetheless an essential driver of much that is great in our world. Love is the prerequisite of our kind of history. When we no longer believe in it, we cripple our capacity to make it.

To me, it is more frightening that there are increasing numbers of young people who doubt the existence of love than that of God. It may be that God doesn't want us fornicating, but love's vulnerability to decay is ultimately more threatening to our political union than which sexual acts are objects of prohibitive legislation.

We need to be less concerned with how and when our sons and daughters cover their genitals, and much more with whether they can uncover their hearts. That it has become easier for a lot of young women to put a man's penis in their mouths than to hold his hand is the real obscenity. God's presence in our underpants is the least of our worries.

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