



Religion and Sexuality: Reframing Intimacy as Sacred

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AMERICAN FAMILIES OF FAITH

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How can faith enrich sexuality in marriage? By redefining sex as sacred, mutual, and expressive of covenant love.

In the very first chapter of the first book in the Bible, God commanded Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” (Genesis 1:28). Religion has always informed the meanings and purposes of sex, but has not limited sex to procreation. In the second chapter of Genesis, God also commanded our first parents to “be[come] one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). “In the beginning,” the divine plan included having a family *and* the unifying and sanctifying power of marital sexual relations.

Over the past 25 years, in our [American Families of Faith](#) project, we have interviewed hundreds of wives and husbands from “exemplary marriages” in many faiths across the major branches of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Many participants raised and

addressed the topic of religion and sexuality without us even asking them to “go there.” What did they tell us?

Some Religious Beliefs Can Be Damaging

Much of what the exemplary wives and husbands discussed about the connection between religion and sexuality was positive. However, despite being highly religious themselves, some couples readily acknowledged real and potential harms of certain religiously based ideas on marital sexuality. When we asked participants if there were any negative or damaging aspects of religion, one Eastern Orthodox Christian husband responded,

One [potentially damaging belief] that comes to mind ... [is] the idea that ... human sexuality is only for procreation. I think [that] is very dangerous to marriages. One of our fathers, John Chrysostom, says it's for two things—children *and* the increase of love.

A Christian wife named Jessica said,

I think that one [harm] is this issue of sacrifice and guilt. If a person feels like they have to always have to give in to what the other person wants, or always kind of crucify themselves for the sake of the marriage, that's not going to lead to long-term health.

Another issue, avoidance of communication about sex, was raised by an Orthodox Jewish wife named Sarah, who said,

Well, certainly [some highly religious persons] are missing the spirit [of sex]. When I was growing up, we weren't allowed to read certain books. I would hide them under my bed. We didn't talk about sex at all [and that was not helpful].

Noting the above issues of potentially damaging beliefs, poor messaging, and lack of communication about sex that religion can intensify, we now turn to several positive connections between religion and sex that our participants shared.

The Sanctity of Sex

As reported in a *Review of Religious Research* [article](#) by [Chelom E. Leavitt](#) and colleagues, *American Families of Faith* participants discussed how sex can elevate and bless marriage. Many couples expressed their belief that God gave them the “gift” of sex to unite them, to create strong bonds, and to gain a sense of connection. A Muslim husband named Ahmad said,

[S]exual interaction between married couples is considered worship in Islam, and you get rewarded in terms of good deeds. [However], if you have [the] intention when you do it, that you are [only serving] yourself, and [only trying] to fulfill your desire, [you] do it the wrong way.

Ahmad clarified that marital sex is considered a form of worship, and that it must be focused on one’s partner and the relationship—not based in self-absorption. A Black Christian woman named Shawna praised her husband, Ty, for not being “selfish” in their sexual relationship. Shawna said,

[T]he other thing that I appreciate about [my husband, Ty, is that] he is my lover and he’s an awesome lover. He takes the time to make sure that my needs are met. He’s not selfish in the bedroom. I know when we go up there, he’s looking out [for me] (*laughter*). ... [O]ur children, we always said to them, “This is keeping Jesus happy, because [our] marriage bed is undefiled.” And I said, “So, if you want to know what’s going on [in our bedroom], Mama and Daddy are just keeping Jesus happy.” Our children are very open about [discussing] sex, because we have been [open with them].

For Shawna and Ty, and many others we interviewed, their marital and sexual relationship had a higher purpose, were a form of worship, and were even a way to please God through fidelity and keeping the “marriage bed undefiled.” Rather than being seen as sinful or problematic, for most of our AFF respondents, sex is seen as joyful and happy and can draw the couple into a deeper connection that is sacred and God-ordained. This view is what helps sexuality to become a sanctified and holy part of their relationship, which can help religious individuals to focus on each other and marital unity rather than solely on themselves.

The Expression of Sex Is Limited to Marriage

In addition to describing the sanctity of sex, marital couples from the *American Families of Faith* project frequently addressed why waiting to have sex until after marriage can bless a relationship. For many, sex was defined as an expression of love that was only to be used within marriage. A member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints named Robert explained that the religious commandment of not having extramarital sex was not a constraint but freeing. He said,

Waiting until you are married to have a sexual relationship with someone is something that [some of my fellow co-workers] consider very restricting. They think that they want to be free, they want to go out, party, and have a good time. [T]hey look at that, and they say, “Well, you have no freedom.” I look at it as it gives me a tremendous amount of freedom because I don’t have to worry about all the problems that go along with those things. I don’t have to worry about sexually transmitted diseases, I can enjoy the relationship that I have with my wife, and know that she feels the same way about me. To me, that gives me a tremendous amount of freedom. [R]ules that we choose to live by aren’t restrict[ive], they give us freedom.

A wife from the Church of Jesus Christ named Michelle explained,

We believe that committing adultery is wrong, [and] that having sex outside of marriage is breaking that commandment. The concept of total chastity before marriage seems like the greatest sacrifice [to some, but] I don’t feel that that is a sacrifice. I feel that’s a way of ensuring further blessings for my life.

Many interviewed couples perceived that they gained more religious and relational blessings from God because of their commitment to not having sex before marriage. This perspective reportedly allowed marital sex to be viewed not only as a divine gift, but also as a sacred trust from marital partners to each other, consistent with the Apostle Paul’s teaching, “The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife” (1 Corinthians 7:4). Like this scripture suggests, couples viewed married sex as a holy sharing of their bodies and sacred selves with one another.

Sex Has a Strengthening Power within Marriage

Many married couples we interviewed expressed that one notable aspect of sex is the power that it has to bond a wife and husband. An Orthodox Jewish couple named Ruth and Saul said,

Ruth: One thing [our sexual relationship] does is promote a lot of cooperation between a husband and wife.

Saul: [T]his can be an occasion and an area that probably a lot of couples don't talk too much about. [But in Orthodox Judaism] you are required to arrange things that otherwise don't necessarily have to be arranged.

Ruth and Saul felt that patterns created by religious laws surrounding sex united them, brought them together, and helped them to cooperate. Deborah, a Conservative Jewish wife, further explained that sex helps a married couple develop Godly characteristics. She said,

[Our marriage is] a marriage between the male and the female aspects of godliness—the male aspect being considered the giving, and the female the receiving, for obvious symbolic anatomical reasons. The male aspect of God [is] the aspect of God which is beyond comprehension, beyond the confines of any kind of physicality or humanity.

For Deborah and others whom we interviewed, the process of learning how to give and receive love fosters growth between a wife and husband. Many other participants reported having more unity and synergy in their marriage as they approached sex as both sacred and empowering.

Sex Is for Procreation

Without specifically being asked questions about sexuality, a quarter of our sample shared with us that procreation is a vitally important part, but not the sole purpose of sex. A Muslim husband named Kamal said,

My understanding is that Allah, the Creator, has created us to [both] worship and [procreate]. Family life is a unit to protect people; it's a protection, actually, for men and women, in their everyday life. And it's a unit of support. So basically, procreation is worship.

Like Kamal, some participants shared the view that sex with the purpose of creating life made it especially meaningful, making procreation a form of connection with the divine. Patrick, a Catholic husband, similarly said,

I don't think that the Catholic religion supports thoughtless procreation. I think God is calling you and me to [engage in] responsible co-creation, and that means you can't ... heedlessly procreate. Now you ask, what kind of Catholics are we? We're not a Catholic family [that has] babies, babies, babies. That, to me, is a [far] too fundamentalist reading of a Biblical passage. But [we have tried not to go] where I think many Catholics have gone, and that is 1.2 children and *my house, my vacation, my, my, my*. [Some people] have opted for methods that effectively demean human life and close people off so that they're not as generous, that they're not as creative as they could be in a way. And that's [sad] to me.

Patrick emphasized that "thoughtless procreation" is not a healthy practice and can demean the beauty of sex. A Jewish wife and husband, Barbara and David, similarly said,

Barbara: Well, [in the Torah] there was rule number one: "Make more."

David: "Be fruitful and multiply."

Barbara: Yeah.

David: It's a commandment which is incumbent upon men: To have children.

"Making more" applies to procreation but also to making more love, connection, and unity that empower the couple to face challenges that arise within any close relationship. Sex not only "replenishes" by creating children, but it replenishes the individual and couple in ways that create energy and meaning in their relationship.

These participants in exemplary marriages voluntarily shared their views on sex, and also recognized that there were multiple layers to having a healthy marital sexual relationship. Their wisdom included the repeated view that, as important as sex is in marriage, it was one of many essential elements.

Sex Is Only One Component of a Strong Marriage

A theme spontaneously mentioned by 22 diverse couples was that “marriage is far more than just sex.” One Catholic husband and father named Ryan stated,

I try and teach [my boys that] love is a choice, and God chose to love us. And it's not fireworks; it's not [just] sex [all the time]. It's not. [L]ove is a choice. You know, we chose each other, and God chose us for each other. And then you stick to that choice.

A Black Christian husband named Grant said,

Finding a mate involves a lot of things: chemistry, sex appeal, charisma, common interests, and all those kinds of things, and they are all important. But for me, the strength in any marriage seems to be dependent upon the degree of commitment from both partners. My wife and I had that going in, and after 32 years, [we] still have it. We are committed to the institution, I think, even more than to one another. [I cherish] the experiences we've had with one another, and I can give credit and stability to that commitment, but the commitment was there at the outset.

Indeed, marriage as a *commitment* between wife, husband, and God seemed core to many participants' views on sanctified sex. Indeed, one husband said of his wife, “She was committed to marriage long before she was committed to me.”

A Living Invitation from 8,000 Years of Marriage

From the reports of wives and husbands in the *American Families of Faith* project, we see that many of these wives and husbands reported:

- (1) Religion can do damage through negative messages or through enabling avoidance of healthy communication about sex.
- (2) Sex can create an “elevated purpose to marriage,” and many viewed sex as a “gift” from God.
- (3) Based on religious beliefs, many viewed sex as an expression of love that was restricted to the bounds of marriage, but saw this commandment as a sacred protection.
- (4) There is more unity and synergy in marriage when sex is approached as both sacred and empowering.
- (5) Procreation is a vitally important part, but not the sole purpose, of sex, and
- (6) As important as sex is in marriage, it is one of many needed components—including a commitment to each other, marriage itself, and (for these couples) a commitment to the commandments and teachings of God, who supports them in marriage.

We acknowledge that these attitudes in the *American Families of Faith* participants are not typical in contemporary culture. However, our aim for 25 years has not been to explore the trendy or typical but to discover what underlies the exemplary and extraordinary marriages in America. We now know a little more and have their “lived invitation” to apply what these religious wives and husbands, who have about 8,000 years of combined marital experience, offer for our careful consideration.

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