

Sex rears its head



Next week's Westminster Faith Debate takes as its theme the sexualisation of society. Specially commissioned research shows that Christians have a more relaxed approach to sex today, but are deeply concerned about its wider impact. Here, the organiser and two of the debaters outline their views

According to the YouGov poll that we commissioned to inform the Westminster Faith Debate on the "sexualisation of society", 68 per cent of those who express an opinion agree that sex is important to a fulfilled life and only 9 per cent disagree, writes *Linda Woodhead*.

People who say they are religious are more likely to agree than those who do not. But when asked if the profile of sex is too high in our society, similar proportions agree that it is – 66 per cent of the general population, and 78 per cent of those who say they are "religious". In this apparent contradiction lies an important clue about how attitudes to sex have changed.

We have moved a very long way from the traditional Christian view that the highest form of life involved sexual renunciation. This prevailed for 15 centuries. A celibate life was the highest calling, exemplified by those who belonged to religious orders and by clergy in the Western tradition.

They took their cue from the New Testament, in which Jesus tells us that in the resurrected life there is neither marriage nor giving in marriage, for we are like the angels. It was to this higher angelic state that the most serious Christians aspired – anticipating in this life what could only

be fully realised by God's grace in the next.

Only after the Reformation did a different view come to prevail among Protestants, in which the legitimacy of sex within the context of the patriarchal family was celebrated – with bawdy enthusiasm in Luther's case. Several centuries on, Catholics seem to have travelled this path – their views on sex have become "Protestantised". In our poll, 73 per cent of Catholics say that sex is important to a fulfilled life, and there is no significant difference between nominal and practising Catholics on this point.

But Catholics have become far more liberal than the Protestant reformers, with almost three-quarters of practising Catholics saying they would not feel guilty about pre-marital sex, and just under a third saying they would not feel guilty about extra-marital sex either. Nevertheless, 86 per cent of practising Catholics think that the profile of sex in society is too high.

What this tells us, I think, is not that most people, religious as well as secular, have simply abandoned chastity in favour of sexual licence. The fact that we think sex is important to a fulfilled life does not necessarily mean we think that all sex is good – any time, anywhere. The sexualisation of society worries most people – especially women

and older people – because they value sex not lightly, but deeply. It is precisely because many people think that sex is an important part of a fulfilled life that they are concerned that a sexualised culture offers many – including the most vulnerable – only a shallow, false fulfilment.

This also means that the analysis that blames child abuse and other sexual crimes on the sexual revolution is wide of the mark. As a society, we have become much more condemnatory of child abuse since the 1950s, not less. That is why the scandals in both secular and religious settings – to which so many turned a blind eye before – are now being exposed one by one. If there is any critique to be made, it is that we now invest sex with too much significance, not too little.

■ **Linda Woodhead** is professor of the sociology of religion at Lancaster University.

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FREUD WON the PR battle over sex, but all around the casualties are still rising, writes *Jenny Taylor*. From our current vantage point, we can only look back down the long path of sexual "liberation" and wonder at the price we have paid for it.

In asserting that our identities are formed around sex, a Freudian culture has left a situation in which abstinence becomes just absence. Freud's theory may be fine for those whose psyches can survive the rigours of promiscuity and serial monogamy, but for those who cease to be sexual, it confers a kind of twilight existence. There is no word to describe or dignify the seven million who now live in one-person households (according to an Office for National Statistics 2005 survey) through force of circumstance – divorce, bereavement, age and choice.

Freud set himself against the Christian sex ethic for good reasons and bad. Shame, degradation, ignorance, hysteria, hypocrisy and the Contagious Diseases Acts (which allowed the state the right to vaginally inspect any single woman to protect men

'The secularisation of the body is a deeply serious social issue. Chastity needs to make its overdue comeback'

from syphilis) were just part of the morbid reality.

But in demolishing the Christian moral infrastructure that civilisation had built itself upon through abstinence and the channelling of sexual energy into cultural accomplishments, he effectively also dismantled our sense of responsibility for one another. Today, a rampant new form of (mostly) female slavery in the form of global trafficking infests all our cities.

Women, especially at risk from "civilisation", having thrown off the shackles of victimhood by having sex at will, now struggle to guard even their own children. Wilhelm Reich's "free love" was especially aimed at children who should be "allowed by their parents to express their love" – but it directly spawned Jimmy Savile and unchecked groomers of young girls. In researching my book, I came across so many

stories of parents abetting their children's sex lives that I called a section of it "Parental accomplices". Even a clergywoman told me that her mother had insisted she have sex to get a husband.

Yet the police, trying to piece together the extent of the sex-grooming crisis, had only parental evidence to go on because, according to the Coalition for the Removal of Pimping (CROP), children were too immature to understand their own situation.

Today's "plastic sexuality" – in the phrase coined by Tony Blair's policy adviser Lord (Anthony) Giddens – now gives us sexual identity as "a project of the self". But that is a macabre academic fantasy in which we need give no account to society. How can the weak assert themselves against the strong and the exploitative in this kind of context?

While evangelicals welcome a critique of the culture's "cheerless sexual consumerism",

‘Students reported longing for less hookup culture, more meaningful sex and the desire for old-fashioned dates’

“HOOKUP CULTURE” dominates the lives of America’s college students, *writes Donna Freitas*. It has become the status quo on the vast majority of residential campuses, be they public, private-secular or even Catholic institutions. It has the veneer of a liberated, anything-goes attitude about sex, and those involved boast about their conquests within it with gusto – at least in public.

Three criteria define this practice: some element of sexual intimacy (anything from kissing to genital sex), its brevity (from 10 minutes to a few hours) and the demand to walk away unattached. Alcohol is the unofficial fourth criteria.

When I ask young men and women in private about sex, meaning, spiritual identity and what they consider their student peers think about all of the above, I was surprised by the amount of angst both genders expressed about hooking up and how constrained they feel within this culture. After doing 112 one-on-one interviews and surveying a little over 2,500 students at a variety of college types, I found a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

At one end of the spectrum were the 40 per cent of respondents who said that hooking up made them feel anything from angry, sad, frustrated and regretful to alienated from their peers and even abused. In the middle were a third of respondents who expressed ambivalence about the sexual intimacy they experienced within a hookup. Most of the remainder were no more excited about hooking up than to say that it was “fine” (and that was the word they used most often), topped off by a tiny group who said that hooking up was the best ever.

While this data is only a momentary snap-

they balk at any view of chastity as the ideal. It is “appropriate in some circumstances”, according to them. But if it is not an ideal, it is not anything, merely a condition we offer God until he gives us something “better”. Conditional love is mere barter.

A right understanding of sexual order ennobles the effort to remain obedient to God in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. In the view of St Ambrose, right-ordered sexuality is a martyrdom, a witness to the fact that there will be no marriage in Heaven. It is also a protection for society as a whole, and indeed underpins what is left of marriage and the very survival of society.

The secularisation of the body is a deeply serious social issue. Chastity needs to make its overdue comeback. It is time to consider how might we realistically begin to embody the body’s resacralisation.

■ Dr Jenny Taylor is executive director of the Centre for Religion in World Affairs and author of *A Wild Constraint: the case for chastity* (Continuum). See www.lapidomedia.com

shot of how college students feel, over the last five years I have visited more than 75 colleges and universities across the US to discuss this culture with students, faculty and staff, and these findings resonate powerfully among the students with whom I have spoken.

It seems that living in a culture of hooking up year after year, coupled with believing that this culture forbids alternative types of sexual and romantic encounters, can exhaust a person. Across the board, students reported longing for less hookup culture, more meaningful sex, and the desire for old-fashioned dates, where a person could spend hours “just talking” with a potential partner, getting to know that person – emotionally, spirituality and physically. Many young women and men felt ashamed of wanting romance and attachment from sex, since they believed they should be beyond such desires.

There are currently groups of college students who are mounting an organised response to what they see as the tyranny of hookup culture, via a loud support of chastity and abstinence. Clubs like the Anscombe Societies (named after the Catholic philosopher G.E.M. Anscombe) that have cropped up all across the US in the last five years with the help of the Love and Fidelity Network, a conservative organisation based in Princeton, New Jersey. Given the prevalence of hookup culture, it makes sense that certain groups of young adults would feel compelled to gather in visible clubs so that other like-minded young adults can find peers.

I am politically liberal myself and wish there were more moderate options for the students who fall into that broad middle of people who would like to remain sexually active but find more meaning and the possibility of openly hoping for love. In the absence of such options, the fact that anyone is providing a visible alternative to hookup culture is a positive in my opinion.

If there is anything I have learned within this research, it is that students need a listening, non-judging ear when it comes to sex – whether they are having five types of sex with 20 different partners or hanging on to virginity and doing so within a conservative context.

To attack the student response that offers three cheers for remaining chaste is to undermine and underestimate the importance of what it offers. Why would we ever want to thwart one trend of young adult exploration of sexuality in favour of another? To say that one is more liberated is to misunderstand the notion of sexual liberation. Within hookup culture, meeting a student confident enough to say that they are staying chaste and feeling proud about it is about as liberated as it gets.

■ Donna Freitas is author of *Sex and the Soul: juggling sexuality, spirituality, romance and religion on America’s college campuses* (OUP) and *The End of Sex* (Basic Books), available in the UK in April.



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