

## Western sex goes full-circle

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*The asexual can be somebody's husband or wife. But societal pressures keep most asexuals in the closet. They have to hide themselves because we are in a highly sexed society. Imagine someone who doesn't even want it and who isn't having a problem if they're not getting it. There's not really anyone for them to talk to. [Elizabeth Abbott, Dean of Women, Trinity college, University of Toronto, Canada]*

*When it comes to having children, some asexuals say they would like to have a baby, but most would use IVF to avoid having to have sex. [New Scientist]*

'Asexuality' is currently getting a run in the media with the recent release of a comprehensive study into the phenomenon. It seems that around 1 in 100 adults identify as asexual in orientation. These are people who say they are not sexually attracted to anyone, male or female. They may have close, intimate relationships with other people. They may even be married. But they do not have sex, and report feeling little or nothing in the way of sexual feelings.

Asexuals are only a small proportion of the population, but for journalist Hilary Burden 'of far more interest are all the happy singles not having sex. ... This group is much larger and growing; what's more, they don't need a support group, exist without having to make a statement, have a USP, or wear the logo.' Happy singles avoid sex because:

enough relationships have soured for many grown-ups to know it's got to be pretty good to be worth it next time. Who wants the aggro, the health risk, the letdown, the fake intimacy, the second guessing, the whole commitment phobic ritual-cum-charade that goes with getting close to someone in a modern world built on false hopes, lost faith, quick fixes and the lies of those to whom we are entrusted?

Hmmm. There are points where Christians wish to pause everything and cry 'time-out!' If we recall correctly, adding the word 'Christian' to 'not having sex' is generally to imply that followers of Jesus are lemon-sucking, anti-fun weirdoes. But suddenly, *trendy* singles don't have sex. And here's the catch: apparently it all depends upon *why* you're not having sex. If you can point to a new sexual orientation, in a 'my genes made me do it' (or in this case, 'stopped me from doing it') kind of way, that's cool. Even cooler is if I refrain from sex because that's what cool people do now. Too many bad experiences in the sexual department also become cool, in a dark, anguished kind of way. But anyone who has chosen not to have sex outside of a marital relationship because they are a Christian deserves a right pasting, as we saw Christian virgin Catherine Von Ruhland delivering to the Christian community in a recent *SMH* feature.

What is going on here? What drives a society to say that Christian celibacy is fundamentally weird or dysfunctional, whereas asexuality (or whatever) is hip? Perhaps an irrational hatred of those loyal to Jesus is at work; but perhaps we can also say more.

In our highly sexualized environment, sex is seen as the most reliable, tried-and-true gateway to happiness. After analyzing data on the self-reported levels of sexual activity and happiness of 16,000 people, Dartmouth College economist David Blachflower and Andrew Oswald of the University of Warwick in England report that sex 'enters so strongly (and) positively in happiness equations' that they estimate increasing intercourse from once a month to once a week is equivalent to the amount of happiness

generated by getting an additional \$50,000 in income for the average American. The report's use of happiness implies that sexlessness equals sadness. Thousands of men agree: according to pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, since becoming available in 1998 their Viagra has helped about 16 million men around the world improve their sex lives, with 9 tablets being dispensed every second worldwide.

But elsewhere, Megan Gressor can no longer understand sex. It is no longer connected to pregnancy. It can occur by phone or internet. It seems to depend on what people feel is going on, not what they actually do. "I'm all for sex. It's just that ... I'm still not quite sure what it is."

Has the modern West's fundamental misunderstanding of sex now turned full-circle? Has what began as a triumphal quest for sexual freedom ended as a cry of despair over sex, or a shout of anger against it?

Sex, as the Bible discusses it, is not a stand-alone topic. It can only be 'decoded' as a facet of the good gift of our bodies, and within the context of a particular relationship. In Christian thought, sex is not an individual 'need' in the way that food, water and air are. Many of us have sexual desires—sometimes very strongly—but these are not 'needs' as such. What truly 'needs' sex is the relationship called marriage. Sex is the glue that transforms lifelong faithful marriage from a nice idea into something powerfully liveable. Blachflower and Oswald report that married people, who get the most sex, are happiest. But is this happiness only due to frequency? Could such happiness arise from married sex having found its proper home?

Christians know very well that we each have genitals, hence our 'sexuality' is very close to us. For Augustine, our 'soul' (or 'self', if you like) is so totally 'stitched' into our body that he can describe the soul as the 'spouse' of our body—and "what pertains more closely to a body than its sex?" Even lifelong celibacy does not deny this profound truth. But modern Westerners have gone an extra step: not only sexuality, but *its expression in sexual intercourse*, is 'central' to human identity. Hence we have individual sexual 'needs', just as a car needs fuel; and life without sexual intercourse is seen as unintelligible, unwholesome, and defective.

But lately it seems that life *with* sex has let us down, so some are rejecting the very idea of sex. What began as an idealisation and idolatry of this aspect of the body is now rejected as an unnecessary, defective and troubling aspect of our bodily life. So the sexual idol totters. But in Christian thought, "our sexual affections can no more define who we are than can our class, race or nationality." At the deepest level, there are only "human beings, male and female, called to redeemed humanity in Christ, endowed with a complex variety of emotional potentialities and threatened by a complex variety of forms of alienation" (*The St Andrews Day Statement*). Our journey to discover what it is to be 'in Christ' takes the form of one of two kinds of life: faithful marriage, or chaste singleness that is always open to marriage. No person is any less 'whole' for limiting their sexual experiences, or any more 'whole' for having some sexual experiences for which they can thank God and their spouse.

Jesus and Paul say that people can live a sexually single life [Matt. 19:12, 1 Cor. 7:25-38] to the glory of God and for the great benefit of those around them. Perhaps those who identify as 'asexual' simply prove that celibate singleness is not an insane idea, and that the NT was always commending something good. However the idea of 'asexuality' seems to turn this gift into a matter of 'core identity', which is as mistaken as any other use of sex to create 'identity'. Married 'asexuals' also seem to be missing something:

that married people work at reawakening the sexual feelings of the other, and keep on giving themselves to each other, as an ongoing expression of the way marriage is about serving and pleasing the other [cf. 1 Cor. 7:3-6]. Indeed, we might sadly wonder if married people have taken on the mantle of 'asexuality' as a fatalistic resignation to their sex life falling short of what they dreamt it to be. The good news, though, is that with a little friendly guidance, even the most desolate couples can often find delightful new ways to discover each other sexually (and for Sydney people, we've listed the number of one such helper below).

The modern West seems to flip between saying sex is everything or nothing. Life in Christ sets us free to know sex in a new way: that our bodies are good, and our sexual capacity and desires are not to be despised; but that sex needs its proper home, and can never be the passport to ultimate happiness.

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### **Sources and further resources:**

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