

Gay Sexual Ethics, Part I  
The Reverend Jonathan C. Page

The line for the bar stretched down the block. Usually, I am not one for long lines at bars, but this was my first Guerrilla Queer Bar in Boston and everyone in the line was gay. The concept is simple. You put together a Facebook group and then once per month send out a message that the gays are taking over a straight bar for the night. In Boston, it worked surprisingly well.

Standing next to me in line was a drag queen, or more accurately a drag nun. She wore a black habit with a nun's hat and painted her face white with expressive lipstick and eyeliner. Naturally, I introduced myself and inquired, "So, if you don't mind me asking, what's with the nun outfit?" She proceeded to flip open her Japanese paper fan and cool herself down before responding, "I am a nun in the order of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence." From within her sleeve she produced a business card, which stated as much in colorful writing. Hmm, must be true, I thought. Later I went home and googled the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. As a student of religion, I figured it was important research.

It turns out that the order was founded by Iowan, although sadly he was a Hawkeye and not a Cyclone. He had found some old nun's habits from a convent in Cedar Rapids and brought them with him to San Francisco. On Easter 1979, this Iowan, Ken Bunch, convinced two of his friends to don the habits and "terrorize" the streets of the Castro "to promulgate universal joy and expiate stigmatic guilt." Talk about creative: the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a protest against gay sexual repression in the Catholic Church, and in the Christian Church more broadly, complete with its own religious elements.

As a gay Christian, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence prompted some deep thought. For me the heart of the conflict between gay culture and Christianity has never been about the seven biblical passages that supposedly condemn homosexuality. The issue with being a Christian and gay is about desire and sexual desire in particular because here is where we run into a problem. A gay identity is fundamentally about sexuality and the expression of that sexuality, whether physically or not. You cannot have a liberated gay sexual identity without desire, and the early church was deeply suspect of sexual desire, both gay and straight.

From the best we can tell, Jesus was a celibate man and apparently encouraged others to live in a similar manner (Matthew 19:12). The apostle Paul, also celibate, explicitly advocated celibacy and urged people to get married only as a protection against excessive desire (1 Corinthians 7). Presumably in marriage your desire would be extinguished, which is not a strong endorsement of sex in marriage! According to Wayne Meeks in his famous study of ancient Christian morality, the early church held quite conventional views on virtues and vices but placed disproportionate emphasis on sex. In the fourth century the Jovinian controversy led Jerome and other Church Fathers to argue that sex was only permissible for

procreation, even within marriage. Around the same time Augustine of Hippo claimed that original sin was passed down because of the inherent sinfulness of the sexual act. After all, at the moment of orgasm you are not usually thinking about God, not counting those who like to scream, "O God!" I don't think Augustine was considering that.

I find it oddly ironic today that conservative Christians insist that heterosexual marriage is the historical biblical ideal. It isn't. Others argue that it was Greek philosophy that led to Christian prudishness about sex. The supposedly "original" Jewish Christianity was not so prude. While there is some truth to that, Christianity did become more ascetic in the first few centuries, it is often overstated to sanction Christian sexual desire today.

I would argue that it is important for everyone to engage honestly with the role of sexual desire in our lives. Sex is an incredibly strong motivator. For Christians, any contemporary engagement with sexual desire must begin with the admission that Protestant Christians today, of all stripes, do not uphold the same notions of desire as the earliest church. Factors other than "what Paul believed" determine Christian ethical reasoning around sex and desire. Only once we can admit that fact can we begin to explore the actual grounds for our sexual ethics in a gay or straight context. I give the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence credit. They know what they believe and why. Can Christians say the same thing? Next month I will offer some of my own views.