

# INTRODUCTION

## *Hiding under the Bed of Heaven*

There are many ways to learn about sex. Hiding under a bed is one of them. At least that is an approach preserved in one memorable story from rabbinical Judaism. In it, we are told about an apprentice of the Torah who hid himself under his rabbi's bed. He did so to better understand physical intimacy between husbands and wives. The rabbi, on suddenly realizing the presence of his student while in the midst of marital lovemaking, commanded him, "Get up, come out, for this is not the way of the earth [an idiom that means this is not proper conduct]!"<sup>1</sup> Although this was an awkward moment, the apprentice replied in earnest, "It is Torah, and I need to learn."<sup>2</sup>

From the perspective of traditional Judaism, it is indeed a matter of Torah (a commandment) for a man to know how to please his spouse sexually.<sup>3</sup> But such a pleasure-focused directive is not so consistently found in Christianity. In truth, many Christian communities vacillate between recognizing sex as a gift of God and insisting upon the vigilant chastisement of our sexual desires—not just as a matter of prudence, but often with warnings about soul-damning sin. A wide variety of Christians have long warned that a failure to properly chastise sexual desire could result in grave consequences, such as sodomy, lawlessness, shame, disease, and death; perhaps even hell.<sup>4</sup> *Chastity* is the virtue that is designed to temper our wild passions so that we do not get lost in the dark woods of desire. Sex is good, we are told, but only if it is well regulated.

Of course, to regulate something is not necessarily a bad thing. We regulate a lot without assuming that an authoritarian agenda is at play. People regulate their blood pressure, their bank accounts, and even how fast they drive their car. But when the regulation of anything becomes excessive or

controlled by peculiar norms, people tend to question the authenticity of the rule. When it comes to the regulation of sex in Christian ethics, it matters a great deal where one puts the theological emphasis. For example, doctrines of *creation* can help people to embrace embodiment and sexuality as good things, generally speaking.<sup>5</sup> But doctrines of *sin* have cast suspicions over what—if any—original goodness remains in human beings, not to mention that sin and sex tend to be closely related subjects in traditional Christianity.<sup>6</sup> That said, Christian theologies of *redemption* tell us that sin does not have the final word in the story of humanity. But in the history of Christian thinking on this matter, theologies of redemption tend to be brief—or regulatory—when it comes to human sexuality.<sup>7</sup> One thing is certain: whatever Christ thought about such things, his interpreters have had more to say.<sup>8</sup>

Human sexuality is complicated, and as a result it can be rather confusing. So, much like that apprentice of the Torah, many people have wanted to “see for themselves” what sex is all about. And why wouldn’t we? Sex is everywhere—whether shrouded or unveiled. A lesson about biology can inspire curiosity and experimentation. Engaging with the arts can arouse an interest in aesthetics and eroticism. Even moral warnings about sex can serve as windows to pleasurable possibilities. Like the rabbi’s apprentice, people sometimes sit under a bed to get a closer look at sex, which is everywhere around us—and yet something that needs more than a brief peek or a medical illustration to fully understand. We seek out an education about sex in a variety of ways and under a number of beds.

For example, just like voyeurs, some people hide out in domains that provide access to sexually explicit content. From Harlequin romance novels to various media of adult entertainment, these are beds that directly expose people to sexual relations—but not always with the best of examples. Some content categorized as “adult entertainment” not only features sexist, racist, misogynist, and exploitative scenes, but even presents them as desirable. When access to this kind of pornography is the primary bed under which apprentices hide (and learn), there should be real concern that people’s sexual and moral education can be profoundly skewed to ignore concepts of justice and mutuality. But not all sexually explicit material is so apathetic toward justice in human relationships.<sup>9</sup> In such cases, what is sexually explicit can be revelatory of both pleasure and goodness.

On the other hand, there are people who are forced to sit under the beds of strict codes found in religious catechisms—the kind that issue rigid laws and result in loud monologues about sexual purity and the damning consequences of sexual sin. The origins of these laws often lie in antiquity.

For example, it was medieval Christian theologians who produced certain sin-lists for sexual ethics from the religious resources of natural law theory, scripture, and church teaching. Consider the theologian Thomas Aquinas, who taught that *sins against nature* (mortal sins all) include those sexual acts that cannot result in reproduction. By definition, such grave sins include masturbation, using contraception, oral sex, anal sex (between any two people), same-sex activity, and bestiality.<sup>10</sup> What is more, the theologian's list of *sins against reason* included having sex in ways that could lead to reproduction but with the wrong person or at the wrong time, including premarital sex, adulterous sex, rape, and seduction.<sup>11</sup>

Today, the Catholic Church still holds to these codes but articulates them in positive terms, namely, that only heterosexual, marital, loving sex that is simultaneously open to procreation is holy and virtuous.<sup>12</sup> For those instructed by these codes, a failure to live up to them is counted as a matter of sin—and often described as sin of the most serious kind. That said, church commentary is not always deployed in accord with the letter of the law. For example, when Pope Francis was asked (in 2013) about how he would serve as a confessor to someone who is gay, the pontiff responded, “Who am I to judge?”<sup>13</sup> When explaining his comments, Pope Francis said, “If a person is gay and seeks out the Lord and is willing, who am I to judge that person? . . . I was paraphrasing by heart the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* where it says that these people should be treated with delicacy and not be marginalized . . . [and] I will say this: mercy is real; it is the first attribute of God.”<sup>14</sup> That said, the occasional pastoral response of Pope Francis is not always prioritized among either the Catholic hierarchy or the Catholic laity. Some prefer to emphasize the gravity of mortal sin; and others claim it may confuse the faithful to affirm anything but the marital and procreative norm.<sup>15</sup>

When we turn to examine Christian ethics from Protestant perspectives, the churches of the Reformation do not agree about which sexual ethic should function as the primary instructive bed under which Christians should sit and learn. For example, many evangelical Christians define themselves as traditional, Bible-centered, and family-focused. Yet in truth, many such evangelicals have very permissive attitudes toward the use of contraception (in marriage)—something that contradicts centuries of Christian tradition on marriage, family, and sexual ethics.<sup>16</sup> This shift in evangelical thinking occurred largely in the twentieth century. Due to the advancements and availability of artificial contraception, evangelicals (and Protestants more broadly) revisited sexual ethics, considering whether procreation should really be a controlling norm. This theological inquiry resulted in a revised

sexual ethic among Protestants, namely, that the use of contraceptives can be good, both morally and religiously (albeit with various contraceptive methods preferred, according to different denominational standards).

So, too, some evangelicals have created erotic manuals to help people better enjoy sexual activity. For example, Ed Wheat and Gaye Wheat are the coauthors of *Intended for Pleasure: Sex Techniques and Sexual Fulfillment in Christian Marriage*.<sup>17</sup> Chapter 5 of the book is aptly titled, “One Flesh: The Techniques of Lovemaking.”<sup>18</sup> Sexual performance is one concern of evangelical books like this, but so too is the discussion of what makes marital sex holy and pure. However, having let go of the procreative norm, evangelicals must now wrestle theologically with questions about nonreproductive activities such as masturbation and oral sex, where to draw the line on types of contraception, and the use of sex toys (to name just a few). These are topics about which the Bible makes no explicit reference—leaving “Bible-centered” evangelicals to innovate new teachings from personal judgment.

Meanwhile, Mainline Protestants are now searching for how best to articulate sexual morality for a wide range of people representing sexual and gender diversities. In truth, there are a number of beds under which these Protestants sit. For some it is the bed of the marital rule, albeit applied to heterosexual and LGBTQ people alike.<sup>19</sup> For others it is the norm of monogamy. For still others it is a principled approach, emphasizing the qualities of mutuality and love over any formal rule or marital demand.<sup>20</sup> These more liberal Protestants are sometimes critiqued by their evangelical siblings for revising sexual morality according to cultural norms instead of drawing on the gospel to change culture. Quite to the contrary, careful studies of the Bible and church teaching, coupled with reason and experience, have resulted in many of these Protestant denominations embracing a sexual ethic that is more inclusive of gender and sexual diversities than those of the past. Among these more progressive churches, an often-spoken refrain is that by taking the Bible seriously new insights into sexual ethics are illuminated (especially in the spirit of being “ever-reforming” according to the word and wisdom of God). Even so, the manner in which each denomination articulates these new norms of sexual ethics is quite unique. As a result, these Protestant churches offer different beds under which to sit and learn about the varieties of sex and how to pursue these varieties well.

But of all the beds under which people might sit and learn about sex and sexual ethics, there is one that is rarely discussed: the bed of heaven. Such a statement may strike some people as odd or offensive. In the Christian tradition (broadly conceived), heaven has rarely been imagined as a place

where human sexuality continues. For some Christians, the idea of heaven is so spiritual and otherworldly that any notion of physical sex continuing there is absurd. But for many Christians (of a wide variety of denominational identities), heaven is not merely a spiritual state. For these Christians, belief in the resurrection of the dead means that human spirits will one day receive new and everlasting bodies. According to this view, Christ's own resurrection narratives in the New Testament function as a preview of what's to come. Consider a few examples. Even though he had been crucified and killed, Christ was resurrected into a physical body, and yet one that could pass through locked doors and disappear.<sup>21</sup> What is more, the resurrection narratives infer that Christ's risen body could eat, touch, and be touched, while still being able to transcend the plane of space and time by ascending into heaven.<sup>22</sup> For Christians who believe that heaven will include the mystery of a supernatural body like that of Christ, questions about that body and its functions have been relevant. For example, the fifth-century theologian Augustine offered commentary on resurrected (glorified) bodies within his book *The City of God*. In it Augustine teaches that the redeemed will be resurrected in perfected bodies. These bodies will be demarcated by physical sex, with genitalia fully intact—albeit with no sexual function. For Augustine, the one worthy fruit of sex is procreation, something that will not continue in the resurrection of the dead. Augustine hasn't been the only influential theologian to think about such things. A wide variety of Christian theologians (and artists alike) have speculated about life in the resurrection of the dead, wondering what aspects of this embodied life may continue into the next, as well as what might be radically new.<sup>23</sup>

While traditional Christianity has largely held that there will be no sexual relations in the resurrection of the dead (i.e., the heavenly life), other religious traditions have been open to the idea. Rabbinical Judaism has a few references to sex in the afterlife. Traditional Islamic teaching more explicitly embraces it. What is more, a number of Christian utopian movements in nineteenth-century America revisited the idea of sex in heaven, showing themselves willing to consider that erotic human relations may indeed endure in the life of the world to come. Likewise, twenty-first-century Christian theologians and ethicists have begun to produce a new body of academic literature on sex in heaven and the relationship of heavenly sex to sex and morality in the here and now. The possibility of sex in heaven is important because if Christians are to live on earth as it is in heaven, then understanding the possibilities of sex in heaven could say much about how Christians conceive of sexual ethics on earth.

This book explores the relationship between ethics and eschatology and considers how conceptions of sex in heaven might provide for ways of thinking anew about Christian sexual ethics on earth. By definition, *eschatology* is the study of the end—and in particular, the end of time, with topics concerning the return of Christ, judgment day, resurrection, and cosmic renewal. Within the domain of eschatology, Christian theologians offer different forecasts of what human beings will enjoy. Some argue that the afterlife will be exclusively *theocentric*, defined as a state of being in which the glory, joy, and reward of heaven is the eternal gaze of God; an eternal life of simply enjoying direct communion with God apart from any social reunion with family and friends.<sup>24</sup> Other theologians consider the possibility of a social or *domestic* heaven, in which one not only enjoys direct communion with God forever but also enjoys the company of all the redeemed—who will deepen their bonds of love for all eternity.<sup>25</sup> Eschatology considers all this and more, but it also intersects with ethics.

As a discipline, *ethics* concerns critical reflection on morality: an interrogation of how and why people arrive at the values that they (and we) hold.<sup>26</sup> One assumption might be that eschatology and ethics have little to do with one another. That assumption is mistaken. The vision of the eschatological life (whether one refers to that as heaven or the resurrection of the dead) provides Christians with a vision not just of “the end,” but also of a new beginning. The eschatological life is an ideal state of being in which humanity lives in communion with God—and potentially, an eternal life of communion with all beings that have been redeemed by the grace of God. That vision of heaven can function to inform Christians about what is good and worth pursuing on earth. Likewise, Christian concepts of goodness—or morality, as broadly conceived—can inform how Christians describe the ideal state of heaven. In this sense, eschatology and ethics have a mutually informing relationship. That relationship is explored here with respect to sexual ethics.

In chapter 1, the reader is invited to rehearse some basic concepts of Christian ethics in order to build a relationship between ethics and eschatology. There, the argument will be made that *theology is morality*. In particular, chapter 1 will demonstrate that theological views directly shape what many people of faith value, such that any discussion of Christian ethics is really an exploration of how theology shapes the mechanisms of moral analysis. Thus, it is important to review the theological resources that shape Christian concepts of morality: the Bible, church tradition, reason, and experience. But eschatology can also function as a theological resource from

which to engage in moral reasoning. As chapter 1 suggests, eschatology can sometimes subvert or overrule particular teachings from the Bible or sacred tradition, despite being derived from both.

With the connection between theology, eschatology, and morality having been secured, chapter 2 turns to consider sex in heaven as an existing promise among certain religious traditions. Rabbinical Judaism, traditional Islamic teachings, and certain nineteenth-century American Christian utopian movements all include ideas about sex in heaven. With respect to Judaism and Islam, chapter 2 provides a brief sketch of their distinct teachings about sex on earth, their general beliefs about eschatology, and their teachings about eschatological sex. Then the chapter turns to consider nineteenth-century Christian utopian movements, examining the Oneida Perfectionist Community as well as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormon Church). All four religious traditions help to establish that the idea of sex in heaven is neither novel nor naughty, but rather a genuine concern that has been expressed within various traditions among the Abrahamic religions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam).

Working from the conclusion that sex in heaven is an established promise in certain religions, chapter 3 then turns and explores why the heaven of traditional Christianity is sexless. This chapter considers more directly Christian conceptions of heaven and the resurrection of the dead. It does so by examining New Testament texts and evolving church teaching. It will explore how theological notions of sin, sex, and death directly shaped Christian pronouncements about the eschatological life—and specifically, why so many Christians have not thought that sex will continue in the world to come. That view, however, is not shared by a number of present-day Christian theologians and ethicists who have challenged the traditional view that heaven is sexless. Chapter 4 explores three contemporary Christian arguments that affirm the possibility of eschatological sex. As these arguments unfold, they increasingly encourage us to consider a new sexual ethic borne of eschatological insights.

Building on the premise that there is room to imagine eschatological sex within a broad Christian framework, chapter 5 invites the reader to consider sex in heaven not as a promise but rather as a metaphor. Christians have long used material metaphors to describe the eschatological life—an eternal feast, a wedding between the bride and the Lamb (Christ and the redeemed), streets of gold, and a mansion with room for all. Chapter 5 argues that if Christians draw on sexual relations as emblematic of the goods of heaven,

then promiscuity, monogamy, and celibacy would each be (noncompetitive) meaningful sexual metaphors for heaven. Chapters 6 and 7 then change the focus to explore how the eschatological metaphors of promiscuity, monogamy, and celibacy might function to inform a new sexual ethic on earth. In these chapters it is argued that all three sexual metaphors for heaven can be embodied on earth, but none perfectly—and each with complications. Chapter 6 challenges the idea of assuming there is perfection in monogamy while nevertheless naming why some people do well to choose monogamous relationships. Then, turning from reflections on monogamy, chapter 7 affirms the possibility that sexual promiscuity might find praiseworthy expressions in sex with friends, polyamory, and various forms of pornography (as iconography of heaven); albeit with the caveat that the word “pornography” is a problematic one for social, moral, and linguistic reasons. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the choice of celibacy—both its gifts and its limitations.

As a work of constructive religious ethics, this book is written with the intention to contribute to ongoing academic discussions about Christian sexual ethics. It is also written for the theologically minded who wish to wade into the waters of eschatology, ethics, and sexuality. But above all, it has been written as an effort to explore and name real goods that might help humanity to flourish. To say so is to admit that theories of morality (whether from philosophical or religious perspectives) have the potential to shape people’s lives, whether for the better or for the worse. Each of us only has a small view of what a better life might look like when defined in such qualitative terms. That certainly means that no moral argument is ever complete or completely right. We can either see this limitation as self-defeating or appreciate it as a summons to engage in ongoing dialogue—offering our ideas as gifts to share and to likewise receive from others (including our critics). Within a Christian context, eschatology provides an unusual yet wonderful resource for identifying what is ultimately worth seeking. Indeed, eschatology can orient people to consider—with both humility and conviction—what it means to live on earth as it is in heaven.

Eschatology deconstructs everything by putting an end to this world and beginning a new one. Thus, there is no institution or systematic way of thinking that is not undone and re-created by the apocalypse of the eschatological imagination. As a result, eschatology can help people of Christian faith (and perhaps others more broadly) to critically interrogate concepts of morality. But it can also provide us with creative reasons to embrace values that promote practical goods in the here and now. Thus, if in this book



traditional Christian ideas about sexual ethics are challenged from an eschatological perspective, it is not out of a wanton effort to destroy the faith. Rather, mine is a humble effort to inspire and sustain new conversations about sexual morality. To that end, the reader is now invited to hide under the bed of heaven. There, it is possible to consider anew what can be learned about sex and sexuality within the context of graced relationships and prodigal love—and then, to imagine how the sex of heaven might be incarnated upon the earth.