



Holiness Sex: Conservative Christian Sex Practices as Acts of Sanctification

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In this article about conservative Christian heterosexual advice manuals I will pursue two lines of inquiry: First, I will argue exegetically that these texts represent a particular modern intertwining of sexual and religious discourses. Here, the bodies of the Christian heterosexual couple are shaped as tension-filled sites: In their sexual bodies the Evangelical men and women, who consume and contribute to these texts, are tasked to negotiate and endure the antinomies of sexual discourses in high modernity in addition to those of Christian theologies of grace. While these manuals combine a discourse that highlights the importance of freely enjoying sexual pleasures, they also echo a wider cultural sense that sexuality is a dangerous power in need of constant disciplining. In terms of theology, this complicated shaping of heterosexual enables a body theology of grace, in which it remains constantly unclear how much agency and submission the Christian man or Christian wife have to perform in the drama of salvation. As my second and theoretical line of inquiry, I will demonstrate how the proliferation of Christian advice products is part of the modernization of Evangelical heterosexual discourse by creating a specific marketable and consumable identity of Christian sexuality.¹

While there is a movement to broaden Anglo-American Evangelical public discourse to include care for the environment and concerns with global poverty, this inclusion of wider social issues did not come at the expense of Evangelical concerns about gender and sexuality.² The right order of the sexes is a central focus that not only motivates political evangelical discourses but also produced a flurry of debates among Evangelicals themselves about how to live a God-ordained sexual life. Marriage and sex advice manuals are prominent sites for these internal debates. They present to the scholar, therefore, an excellent place to analyze what is at stake theologically for Evangelicals when it comes to matters of sexuality. Such a theological analysis is needed if we want to gain a deeper understanding of why Evangelical Americans are prone to reproduce over and over again a discourse in which “men are naturally aggressive,” “women are ordained to be submissive,” and where homosexuality is connected with deviance and disease.

The classic text dealing with these manuals is Amy DeRogatis' 2005 article "What Would Jesus Do? Sexuality and Salvation in Protestant Evangelical Sex Manuals, 1950 to the Present" (DeRogatis, 2005). In it, she contrasts the development of Evangelical Marriage manuals with those of so-called secular authors, using Jessamyn Neuhaus' work on the history of sex manuals in the U.S. as a reference point (DeRogatis, 2005; Neuhaus, 2000). Whereas Neuhaus shows that post-World War II secular manuals up to the sexual revolution focused on male sexual satisfaction in marriage, DeRogatis presents us with Evangelical texts that are very concerned about mutual sexual satisfaction, for example Beverly and Tim LaHaye's (1976a) *The Act of Marriage: The Beauty of Sexual Love*.³

A few other texts have since appeared analyzing the intersection of secular and evangelical marriage guides, most notably among them Rebecca Davis' (2010) *More Perfect Unions: the American search for Marital Bliss*.⁴ However, in this article I will focus on DeRogatis' important analysis by extending it on three points: First, I want to continue her examination of printed marriage manuals by adding Internet-based texts, culled from discussion forums and marital advice websites. Doing so will add the dimension of user-feedback, which was inevitably absent in DeRogatis' 2005 article. Thus, we can see how ordinary users adopt and adapt the message of elite evangelical advice columnists.

Secondly, and more substantially, I want to follow her tantalizing suggestion that sexuality for evangelicals is of salvific importance. Under the heading "Sexual Bodies and Salvation," DeRogatis discusses how some of the marriage manuals, particularly Marabel Morgan's (1973) *Total Woman*, empower the wife to be the guardian of her husband's delicate ego and masculinity.⁵ By making herself erotically attractive, the woman can shore up and restore her man's virility, which may have suffered from the indignities and failures endured in his work-life and broader society (DeRogatis, 2005, pp. 125ff). Yet, the question remains how sexual practices relate to the wider project of Christian salvation for the Evangelical consumers of these texts. Already in 1986, Lionel Lewis and Dennis Brisset noted in their overview of Christian marriage manuals the theological dimension of sexuality in those texts: "Not only does God reveal himself in sexual love, but, as one book poetically argues, the only way mortals can find Christ is in the marital act, which is the holiest of acts" (Lewis & Brissett, 1986, p. 69). Apparently, salvation involves more complex activities than the verbal act of "confessing" Jesus as the Lord and savior. In order for this confession to be authentic the entire life-performance must be styled in a particular way, namely that the Christian should submit to Jesus. However, Lewis and Brisset's article misses a precise theological analysis as to how sexual activity is theologically pertinent. Providing such a theological perspective would require an understanding of how religious claims and sexual claims in these manuals are shaped by wider cultural processes. Not a timeless theology is at stake but an analysis that can locate the evangelical marriage text in the context of a process of theological revivalism and change.⁶

Analyzing the sexual theology of the manuals in the wider context of the modernization of sexuality will allow me to finally expand on a third point in DeRogatis' analysis. Here she asks why evangelicals continue to buy these manuals, given that according to their own surveys such Christians have the most fulfilling sexual life. In an aside she ventures the guess that parents buy these texts for their

children in order to help ensure the passing-on of their own Christian faith to the next generation (DeRogatis, 2005, pp. 133, n. 90). My discussion will demonstrate how the proliferation of Christian advice products is part of the modernization of Evangelical heterosex discourse by creating a specific marketable and consumable identity of Christian sexuality.

I will proceed in four steps. First, I will describe the kind of texts that are the basis of my analysis. Second, I will analyze the tension between sex as natural act and as disciplined performance in Evangelical heterosex manuals. Third, I will interpret this tension as one that is theologically productive. Fourth, I will demonstrate the connection between these texts and the modern commoditization of sexuality and religion. As a word of caution, let me mention that in this article I will focus on both the construction of Christian masculinity and femininity in their mutuality. In the context of the texts it is impossible to divorce an understanding of one from the other.

Focus on Focus on Family

Evangelicals shared in the big publishing push of sex manuals following 1970, and their marriage and sex advice publications were in turn part and parcel of the expansion of Evangelical media in the US. Before Dr. James Dobson founded Focus on the Family in 1977 he had already made his name as a family and marriage counselor. His book *What Wives Wished their Husbands knew about Sex* sold over 100,000 copies in 1975. Today, Dobson's book is still sold as part of a host of Christian books, broadcasts, videos, CDs, pamphlets and workshops aiming to educate the Christian married couple about the techniques and ideals of Christian heterosex (Dobson, 1975; LaHaye, 1976a, 1976b).

My primary textual basis comprises current broadcasts, websites, message boards, and printed matters produced by the conservative Christian media, counseling, lobbying, and ministry organization Focus on the Family—one of the main producers of conservative Christian culture (Apostolidis, 2000). At its heights, Focus commanded an annual budget of more than \$100 million, a mailing list of over 3 million names, and radio shows that were broadcasted by over 3000 stations (Apostolidis, 2000, p. 24; Burlein, 1999; Gilgoff, 2007, p. 2).

Focus has had to reduce and restructure some of its offerings due to financial difficulties and we witness a slow change of leadership due to Dobson's retirement. Yet it is too early to sing Focus' dirges. This organization still has deep reaches into the conservative mainstream of the US, by influencing churches and Evangelical movements from the Southern Baptist Convention to Evangelical Episcopalians.⁷ Focus' audience is particular in that it represents the non-extremist, politically engaged, and modernizing segment of US conservative and evangelical Christians.

Besides its reach into the US mainstream, two other qualities recommend Focus as a site of study. First, its materials present a carefully managed message that nevertheless integrates a polyphony of Evangelical voices: Some evangelical websites become increasingly egalitarian and permissive when it comes to heterosex. The site "christiannymphos.org" for example endorses the idea that Christian wives should stimulate their husband's anus by digital penetration. Other manuals on the other hand are concerned about sexual acts because they could turn out to be performances that transmit STDs: sexually transmitted demons (DeRogatis, 2009). As

we will see, Focus however integrates into a complex picture of Christian heterosex the importance of mutual pleasure for the heterosexual couple *and* the dangers of spiritual corruption through sexuality. Through this strategy, sexuality can be conceived as both natural and as in need of Christian intervention.

Second, as an extremely successful media organization with strong consumer feedback, Focus echoes and shapes how Evangelical Americans talk about sex. Paying attention to the language relayed by Focus is particularly important given how difficult it is to define the scope of Evangelicalism in America with reference to institutions or substantive theological beliefs (Viefhues-Bailey, 2010).

Traditional attempts at defining Evangelicals have focused on four characteristics: a belief in the necessity to submit to Jesus Christ; the inerrancy of scripture; the importance of missionary activity; the preeminent role of the cross (Bebbington, 1989, pp. 2-3; Noll, 2004, p. 422). Yet, at the same time, scholars of Evangelicalism, like Noll, contend that Evangelical movements are “diverse, flexible, adaptable, and multiform” (Noll, 2004, p. 424). Citing Noll, Benson and Heltzel wonder “how clearly can we define ‘evangelicalism’” (2008, p. iv) and the religious studies scholar Randal Balmer acknowledges the “unwieldy nature of evangelicalism in America” (1993/2006, p. xvi).⁸ Sociologically, evangelicals are part of a variety of denominations and they hold a variety of beliefs, such that the sociologist William Shea claims that Evangelicals *are* the true heirs of the Protestant reformation whereas his colleague Alan Wolfe argues that they have left the substance of Protestantism behind (Shea, 2004; Wolfe, 2006a). Given this impasse in an attempt at defining the evangelical movement with reference to allegedly held shared *beliefs*, I have suggested elsewhere that scholars should focus on shared *linguistic performances* (Viefhues-Bailey, 2010). Independently of what individual Evangelicals may or may not believe, they are connected by a shared use of language—about God and about sex. Thus, I define US Evangelicals as those Americans who circulate certain types of languages about God. They talk about “accepting Jesus” or “biblical truth,” and so on such that they can recognize each other and differentiate themselves from other Christians (for example, Catholics, who in turn have their own dialects).

Focus is a central relay station for these languages. By analyzing the discourses relayed through Focus, we can therefore gain insights into the tensions produced through and in the linguistic world that defines Evangelicalism. Particularly, we can study the role languages about sex play in producing this linguistic world with its peculiar theological tensions.

Lastly, let me mention that I focus on Internet-based texts since they allow us to see a complex fabric of Evangelical discourse, where one linguistic context connects to a host of others. A 2009 broadcast advising the husband to prepare every once in a while a bubble bath for his wife, so that she can relax from the stresses of childrearing and prepare herself for the bliss of mutual intimacy, also includes references to the husband as head of the household. Thus, this broadcast invokes sets of discourses about the theological need for the wife to submit to her husband. These discourses in turn use language about the right political order: the vice-president has to submit to the president of the US. These connections establish a web of meanings such that Christian heterosex discourses lead to and nuance political, theological, and psychological texts. The Christian man will learn from them

how to be a caring husband, take responsibility for his household, and how to be a good American citizen. Let us now trace some of these interconnections in exemplary passages from sexual advice sites mainly produced by Focus on the Family.

Marital Heterosex as Performance of the Natural Mutually Orgasmic Bodies as the Ideal

In its current products Focus declares sexual fulfillment for the couple—orgasms for both husband and wife—to be the goal of marital heterosex. With this message Focus echoes non-Christian sex manuals of the pre-World War II era, which stressed the importance of mutual orgasms (Neuhaus, 2000). Like these earlier texts, Dobson and Focus seem to claim that a couple that orgasms together, stays together.

This emphasis on mutual orgasms contrasts with another tradition in the history of conservative Christian sex and marriage manuals; one that reaches from Marabel Morgan's *Total Woman* (1973) and *Total Joy* (1976) to more contemporary Evangelical workshops and groups. Morgan insisted that it is not important whether the Christian wife achieves sexual fulfillment in marital heterosex. Rather, she stressed that the wife should completely orient herself to fulfilling her husband's desires. By making herself desirable, for example through dressing in sexually enticing outfits, the total woman submits completely to her husband's desires. She will be rewarded with the joys of having a satisfied and happy mate and with the material security he will secure gladly for his wife (Morgan, 1976).

The historian Rebecca Davis analyzed the odd mix of male dominance and female power in Morgan's scenarios. The Christian husband as the God-given and natural head of the household seems to stand at the center of the family's power structure. He is the one providing material stability and leadership for the family. Yet, through her acts of submission the wife is tasked with shoring up the frail and endangered masculinity of her husband (Davis, 2010). The men in Morgan's texts are both designed by God to be in charge; and yet they are permanently threatened in their sexual identities. Without their wives' abiding attention and constant care their masculinity would wither away. We find this peculiar vision of male and female powers not only in Morgan's texts from the 1970s and 80s but also in other sites of contemporary Evangelical culture. For example, Marie Griffith observes in her study of the Evangelical woman's movement Aglow that members are convinced of the responsibility of the wife to uphold their husband's Christian virility: "It is up to her to see that her man is kept satisfied, as well as contained, assuring him of his worth by admiring his virility" (Griffith, 1997, p. 56).

This particular Christian concern about virility exhibited in Morgan's texts and in the movements described by Griffith is oddly in synch with so-called secular sex manuals from the post-World War II period, where we notice a shift away from the idealizing of mutual orgasms in the prewar period to a focus on male orgasms. The woman has to be taught to conduct herself during the sex act such that the husband will indeed orgasm.

Mutually Problematic Bodies as Sites of Discipline

In contrast to the male-orgasmic tradition in Morgan's vision of Evangelical heterosex, current Focus texts highlight that the marital act should be mutually

fulfilling. This prescription however leads to a situation in which both the male and the female bodies are problematic. Both female and male bodies need Christian attention so that they can become orgasmic.

For example, in one Focus message board a Christian wife asks whether it is biblical to use a vibrator to help her orgasm. She ends with the following plea: "Please help, I really want to be able to experience this feeling the way God intended it to be felt." Focus recruited Dr. Clifford and Jenny Penner to provide advice and they answer with a nine-step program that aims to integrate slowly the vibrator into the couple's heterosex play. Nevertheless, the ideal would be that she could learn how to orgasm without using the vibrator. Using a vibrator can be dangerous, since the wife could end up getting used to too much of the kind of steady stimulation that a vibrator but no husband can provide. The Penners write:

Sex was designed for becoming one as instructed in Genesis 2:24 and referred to again in I Corinthians 6:16 and Ephesians 5:31. Does using a vibrator help you build intimacy? Because it can interfere with your ability to learn to respond to him [sic] touch, we do not recommend the vibrator as the way to learn to be orgasmic.

The goal of becoming one in marriage is achieved by orgasmic mutuality through mutual stimulation of one real penis and one real vagina (Penner, 2009, #2770).⁹

While this discussion presents the body of the woman as problematic and in need of special attention, in another message board we see the body of the *man* as needing intervention. Here, participants of a Focus message board "For Woman Only" discuss the problem of how women can rekindle their husband's sex drive. In these texts women appear as concerned both about their own sexual fulfillment and about their husband's spiritual and sexual health. One contributor, ARGirl, asks how to deal with her husband of one year who seemed to have lost interest in having sex with her. She describes her anger and frustration and her desire to be sexually fulfilled. The advice she receives from other women visiting the board ranges from offers of prayer to the suggestion that the husband may suffer from a hormonal or spiritual problem (like porn addiction). One member who goes by the handle Polly_Winzeff suggests the following:

On our honeymoon, 9 years ago, we went to a Christian bookstore and bought, "The Act of Marriage" by Tim & Beverly LaHaye. We did this because we started having trouble in this area in our first couple of weeks together! ... This book was just what we needed. You see, I think in the beginning, the man is so excited to be having sex with his wife, that he just goes for it and doesn't worry about performance. But once he has one experience of being unable to perform, or thinking his wife is not quite satisfied, it is enough to make any man crawl into a hole. ... He needs to know that this is normal and that his wife will never ridicule him for the occasional inability to perform. After my husband read the chapter on impotence, it cured him! ... This might be all you need. And don't forget to pray for [your husband]! As you have said, if your husband is not ill, or on

medication, or overly stressed, then this might be all you need. And don't forget to pray for him! (ARGirl, 2009, #2774)

Polly_Winzeff leaps to the topic of impotence. This move may be biographically motivated but the move to conceive of male sexuality as a site for Christian intervention echoes the other responses to ARGirl's question. In the world construed by the texts of Focus, both male and female bodies are tasked with coming and they are thus sites for Christian discipline.

The Penners' nine steps for gradually introducing a vibrator were one example for the scripting of heterosex in these manuals. This need for ritualizing the sexual performance is in line with the manuals that DeRogatis discusses. However, in a notable deviation from these texts, Focus' message boards show a concern for the male body in addition to the female one as needing intervention.

Consider Tim and Beverly LaHaye's *The Act of Marriage* (1976), which Polly_Winzeff suggested to ARGirl, and by extension to us. Discussing this text, DeRogatis focuses on the fact that it presents a detail-rich script for the first marital encounter of a young Christian couple:

As the husband is tenderly caressing the clitoris or vaginal area with his hand, the couple will probably be lying on the bed with the wife on her back. If she will spread her legs, keeping her feet flat on the bed, and pull them up toward her body, it will be helpful for them both. The husband finds this voluntary act of cooperation very exciting and it makes her most sensitive areas accessible to his caressing fingers. (LaHaye, 1976a, p. 102)

In scripting in fine detail the allegedly natural marital heterosexual encounter, the LaHayes inscribe on the bodies of the bliss-seeking couple the expectations of Christian normativity. The husband is the instigator of intimacy who appreciates "voluntary" cooperation—note how the text oddly invokes the specter of involuntary or forced cooperation. The wife is supposed to be making herself readily available for his probing penetrations. In numerous passages like these, *The Act of Marriage* makes clear that the image of a young wife taking on the leading role of exploring and probing her husband's body is supposed to be inconceivable. In fact it is notable that the passage prescribing the wedding night is mainly focused on what "the husband" should do to the body of the wife. She has to cooperate or to instruct, every once in a while, her husband. But the onus of agency is mainly on him. This rhetorical focus on male agency reflects the sense that the body of the woman is problematic but that of the man is not: "A man's ejaculation is almost ensured without benefit of prior experience; a woman's [orgasm] is an art that must be learned by two loving, considerate, and cooperating partners" (LaHaye, 1976a, p. 91).¹⁰ At the same time, the husband bears responsibility for the sexual success of the marriage.

Apparently, in the world of LaHaye's text men are always sexually aggressive and ready to orgasm. DeRogatis comments, "One wonders what an orgasmic bride and a flaccid groom would do with this manual to guide them?" (DeRogatis, 2005, p. 110). Yet, in Polly_Winzeff's appropriation of the LaHayes' text in Focus' message board we see a more complex picture. In the textual world of Focus at least one

flaccid groom read through the passages dealing with male performance anxiety and worked with his wife to overcome it. In general, Focus' texts present the male body as both naturally aggressive, easily geared towards active penetrative heterosex, always on the brink of coming *and, at the same time*, as the object of delicate intervention by Christian sex therapists and wives (Slattery, n.d.). What sets these texts apart from others in the universe of Christian sex manuals is that contrary to those centered on male orgasm, like Morgan's books, Focus propagates the mutual orgasm model. However, in line with Morgan's vision, Focus also produces an image of the male body as a problematic site in need of Christian and wifely intervention. Its virility and sexual performances are both naturally given and in need of attention.

The Tensions of Christian Heterosex and of Theology of Grace

This particular tension-filled picture of Christian masculinity and heterosexuality is not unique to the Christian sex manuals. Rather, it extends to Focus' wider vision of how to live a Godly erotic life. Susi Shellenberger, who until the recent financial crisis ran the advice column for *Brio*, Focus' now defunct magazine for teen girls, counsels her readers "**Let the guys take the initiative!**" when it comes to romantic attachments (Shellenberger, 1998, original emphasis). While women can aspire to leadership positions in the professional worlds, in their erotic lives they must submit to the allegedly natural leadership of the man. Focus tells its readers again and again that women by nature desire a secure, steady, and predictable environment and they are more cautious. It is in the nature of men on the other hand that they appreciate the risk and adventures of change, writes Dobson. "Boys are designed to be more assertive, audacious and excitable than girls." A real boy has the tendency to risk life and limb and "harasses grumpy dogs. . . . He loves to throw rocks, play with fire, and shatter glass. He also gets great pleasure out of irritating . . . other children. As he gets older, he is drawn to everything dangerous. At around sixteen, he and his buddies begin driving around town like kamikaze pilots on sake. It is a wonder any of them survive." In sum, in Dobson's anthropology, boys and men are chemically hardwired to be risk-takers and to be assertive and aggressive (Dobson, 2001, pp. 2, 4, 27).

This is however only one side of a complicated picture. Yes, the Christian man has to live up to his aggressive, risk-taking, sexually demanding masculine nature—yet he also has to be submissive and passive towards the word of God. He has to be a leader in his family, but also is called to practice mutual submission. In Focus broadcasts on how Christian men can be more involved in their wives' intimate life and how the couple can achieve true intimate bliss, we hear talk about the need for mutuality in the bedroom but also reminders that the husband has to be the leader of the house. Yet, what it exactly means to be a Christian man is, therefore, unclear: how much aggression is mandatory and natural—and how much submission is demanded?

The contours of the path to Christian manliness are always in question. Like Scylla and Caribides, this path is guarded by two extreme versions of masculinity, which must be avoided at all costs. These are, as I have argued previously, the hyper-male homosexual and his counterpart the hypo-male (Viefhues-Bailey, 2010). The pagan, disease-ridden, all penetrating, sexually abusive gay is a stock figure of texts that describe to Focus audiences how the American family is threatened "by the

forces of hell" (Dobson, 2002). This is the hyper-male who does not submit to God's law and natural order but lives a masculinity that is out of bounds. In contrast the hypo-male, the homosexual man lacking in natural aggression and violence, appears in texts that talk about ex-gay conversions. The way out of this sexual confusion is through male role models and through prayers so that Jesus can shore up the afflicted man's masculinity (Comiskey, n.d.). Christian men have to be aggressive as they are naturally in a state of quick sexual arousal—but they have to be not too aggressive or too sexually demanding, lest they become threatening hyper-male gays. And they have to be submissive to God and work on mutual submission with their wives—but not too much, unless they become hypo-male homosexuals. Thus it is not surprising to hear that during a chastity workshop, Evangelical boys were told that in the Garden of Eden lived "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" and that abstinence was not emasculating (Hendershot, 2004, p. 93).

The Christian woman on the other hand has to embrace her submissive and passive feminine nature—yet she also has to be aggressive enough to resist potential spousal violence. Focus texts discussing wifely submission are full of reminders that such submission does not mean that the husband can abuse or "lord it over" his wife. In the world of these texts these conflicting demands are represented through the rhetorical figures of the Feminist or the Abused Wife. The Feminist shows Christian women the dangers of grabbing for power in the family. Such a woman, like the Feminist, will lose her God-given femininity and she will become masculine. The Abused Wife represents the opposite danger: a woman who has given up her power to protect herself and her god-given femininity from the violence of her husband, brothers, or of other men.

A consequence of this conflict-ridden discursive frame of Christian sexuality is the following. Each individual Christian woman affected by these texts has to confront in her body a deep conundrum: she is tasked with shoring up her husband's allegedly natural virile aggression by being sexually submissive and, at the same time, with protecting herself from sexual and physical abuse by limiting her submission. Likewise, the Christian man has to negotiate in and through his sexual body the need to be sexually aggressive and domineering and the mandate to be a gentle servant of his family, in submission under God and in mutuality with this wife. Masculinity, in other words, demands a complex understanding of agency.

The sexual body becomes therefore the field in which Christians—men and women alike—negotiate the correct amount of agency needed in the drama of salvation. Languages of submission appear not only in Christian texts about sexuality: The Christian citizen has to submit to the rightful authority of the American nation; in order to read the bible correctly a Christian has to submit to the text; and the inner-Trinitarian relationship between God the Father and Jesus the son is characterized by Jesus' perfect submission to the Father's will.

In all of these examples, the right kind of agency is at stake and a good Christian has to carry out the particular kind of submission demanded from her or him. After all, submission is an activity, as Stormie Ormatian writes for Focus: "Submission means, you have to submit yourself" (Ormatian, 2002). An example of this delicate balance of agency is Heather Jamison's article "Pursuing Holiness in Marriage." Here she states, "Holiness means that we are to become different from our natures, which have nursed us and comforted us." Jamieson names the different

ways in which her own nature and her natural desires hinder her to embrace holiness and a fulfilling life of marriage and she concludes that holiness “goes against our flesh.” To overcome this natural resistance Jamieson advises the reader to pursue the following activities: “Rest in Jesus. ... Adore Him for yourself. ... You will ... find that reclaiming intimacy in your marriage is not only possible—it is natural.” Resting in Jesus suddenly brings to light a different experience of nature, one in which it is in line with holiness. Nature corrupted became nature redeemed through actively embracing passivity; i.e., through resting in Jesus, adoring Jesus and trusting Jesus to fulfill our needs (Jamison, 2003). Given this theological framework it is clear that Christian heterosex is *aimed at realizing the right natural order* and therefore about disciplining these sex practices so that Evangelicals can navigate through them the conundrum of grace.

Thus, if we read in these manuals the claim that Christian heterosex is “natural,” then we need to be mindful about the two possible understandings of nature; i.e., nature redeemed and nature fallen. The former is a normative and performative concept. Sex in line with our redeemed nature is in line with what we *should do or feel* and it results from performing within the realm of sexuality our submission to Jesus. As DeRogatis pointed out, Evangelical sex manuals are not simply geared at providing advice about how to achieve orgasm; rather they are proscriptive in yet another way (DeRogatis, 2005, p. 110). Through consuming these texts, the Christian couple learns what sexuality *should* be like and feel like, if the sex act is performed in the way that God intended it to be. We can see now that in following these prescriptions the natural act becomes part of our redeemed nature. The couple therefore exercises compliance not only with constraints of natural sexuality but moreover compliance with the right kind of Christian masculinity and femininity. The sexual task is not only to be orgasmic but also to fashion the desired kind, and gender-appropriate level, of activity and submission that is needed for nature fallen to become nature redeemed. Only in our redeemed nature can we fully submit to Jesus and accept him as our Lord and savior, not just in words but truly in spirit.

The Commoditization of Sex and Religion

The previous analysis demonstrates how Focus produces a complex heterosexual body theology. This complex interweaving of languages concerning sexual pleasures, psychology, biology, politics, and theology picks up on certain not-Christian modern sex discourses and rejects others—Christian and not-Christian alike. For example, the high-modern proliferation of sex-talk and the concomitant discourses of liberated sexualities are both taken up and modified: They are taken up, for example, by adding a Christian voice about the uses of sex toys or by explaining how a Christian wife can stimulate her husband’s penis. Yet, in contributing to the proliferation of sexuality discourses, these Christian texts also modify them by embedding the languages of liberated desires into the creation of a complex sexual, political, and theological cascade of power and submission. In so doing they contribute to the ambivalences in high-modern sex-talk, which combines discourses of sexual liberation with those that create sex as a potentially dangerous site in need of disciplinary intervention. Sex in the world of Focus is both a practice of natural pleasure and one in need of disciplined intervention. Thus, it seems that Focus’ texts

on sexuality mirror what Scott Jackson calls the “sexual antinomies in late modernity” (Jackson & Scott, 2004). In other words, conservative Christian heterosex discourses appear as distinctly modern.

In this context let me turn to DeRogatis’ question as to why conservative Christians continue to buy these sex manuals. What can account for the flurry of products offering sexual advice and commentary? The incessant speech about sex or sexuality as discursive phenomenon itself is a distinctly modern mechanism of subject formation. For Foucault in the *History of Sexuality* (1978) modern sex discourse turns erotic pleasures, acts, artifacts, and experiences into sites of legal and medical interventions for bio-political purposes. Thus, the production of Evangelical sex as discourse is part of the modern invention of sexuality.

Yet, this sex discourse develops further into the production of sexuality as market commodity (Jackson & Scott, 2004). Whereas the medicalization and consequent pathologization of sexuality shaped modern discourses of identity, some of these identities are now being released into and produced by market forces. For example, “homosexuality,” first produced by and then released from the discourse of psychiatry, is now part of identities that can be attained through the right kind of consumerism. Thus, the taxonomies of stable sexual identities that legal and medical institutions create enable markets in which these identities can be purchased. By buying certain items and by frequenting certain parts of the city, I can ascertain my sexual identity (Hennessy, 2000). Given this move of sexuality in the market, I suggest that we interpret the proliferation of Christian sex products, such as manuals, websites, radio, video, and CD productions as adding to this process of commoditizing sexuality. These products introduce a “Christian heterosexuality” to the high-modern sexual taxonomy.

At the same time, these products also commoditize Christianity by providing another subsection to the market for products like the *Christian Dad’s Answer Book* or other manuals for how to be Christian. These texts make Christianity into an object in need of definition. Such definitional certainty may not to be desired by those living in a monoculture, where the rhythms of a more or less unified devotional practice are integrated with those of work, communal festivals, or the exchanges of goods and stories. However, ordinary conservative Christians, as Alan Wolfe’s work shows, do not live in such cultural isolation. They are among the most itinerant and seeking groups in America (Wolfe, 2006b, p. 101).

In these situations of mobility, where the boundaries of a religious identity are fluid, institutions that span different localities and unite them into a virtual community become important. Currently, these are particularly in groups with a strong radio, TV and (with rising impact) Internet presence. For the case of Islam, Oliver Roy shows how a network of multiple media organizations shapes a common religious language for populations with diverse geographical and cultural origins (Roy, 2002). Something similar is true for those mobile middle class Americans who are the main consumers of Focus’ products. Focus’ media output offers (with input from different localities) trans-local religious languages, which constrain and enable the theologizing of ordinary Christians. This development of a trans-local Christian language marks the conservative Christian sex discourses under review as a particularly high-modern phenomenon. Through DVDs, videos, radio series,

pamphlets, books, and seminars Focus provides a market on which Christian consumers can buy the right kind of Christian identity.

The type of language that is fit for this commoditization of Christian identity uses what I call the grammatical register of speech. For Wittgenstein, a grammatical investigation involves an inquiry into what we, as members of a specific speech community, find natural to say (Viefhues-Bailey, 2007). In these moments we treat our language use as an object and not as a performance in which we participate. The flow of words has stopped. We engage in such an inquiry if we encounter misunderstandings profound enough to make us wonder whether our words make sense. To use an image, in these situations we resemble people who are walking in a familiar city but have lost their way. To orient ourselves we imagine a map of the city and discuss where we should turn. Drawing a map of the city and deciding where to turn based on this information involves a different kind of knowledge of a place than that involved in simply walking. The former is abstracted and the latter is performative. While we need this grammatical register of language in situations when we have lost our way, it cannot be sustained as an ordinary mode of speech.

The grammaticalization of Christian speech through manuals and other such products that help establish Evangelical identities objectifies Christianity, and requires that its practitioners engage with it on the level of abstraction. In this form Evangelicalism can become commoditized since it is produced as an object abstracted from localized performances. Moreover, since grammaticalization is the register of speech through which this type of Christianity is spoken into being, a permanent instability of meaning is introduced. To recall the image of the lost walkers: Instead of walking, more maps are drawn and compared and redrawn. In sum, the texts under review place Evangelical Christianity into the modern discourse of religion, which is characterized by using a distinctly grammatical register. Thereby they create an entirely modern product: Evangelicalism as sexuality and religion. Importantly however, this commoditizing language of Christian sex also enables a particular body theology of grace, as we have seen. Their sexual bodies are for Christians a landscape in which to negotiate the complex question of what is the right amount of agency required in the drama of salvation. Yes, conservative Christian languages about sex as relayed by Focus are evidence of a modernization of Christianity as religion, but this modernization expresses also a theological conundrum with deep historical roots.

Conclusion

This analysis of Christian sex manuals in conjunction with Internet-based materials from the influential media, mission, and advice organization Focus on the Family yielded the following results. First, in paying attention to how users contribute to this type of sex discourse we noted that both the body of husband and wife are construed as sites in need of intervention. In contrast to a surface reading of conservative discourses on sexual roles, the body of the man is both imagined as sexually charged and as fragile. Second, my theological interpretation of these tension-filled visions of masculinity and femininity in conservative heterosex discourse showed that this advice literature contributes to the construction of a complex body theology. We can identify the connection between sexuality and salvation that DeRogatis' text so tantalizingly posited. Through their sexual acts

conservative Christians are encouraged to enact the right kind of agency that allows for and reflects submission to Jesus. Third, in content and form this body theology contributes to a specific high-modern commoditization of sexuality and religion. Why do conservative Christians continue to buy sex advice? Through participation in this Christian consumer culture, they perform their identity as husbands and wives living a Christian life of nature redeemed. In addition, they have the best sex, naturally.

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Notes

¹ I am grateful to the reviewers of this article whose critical remarks helped me to strengthen it considerably.

² In the following I use Evangelical as shorthand to refer to Anglo-American Evangelical churches. In so doing I want to acknowledge that the texts under examination in this article arise from religious contexts that differ from, for example, the Black Churches or Latino evangelical movements (Benson & Heltzel, 2008). This attempt to broaden the agenda is mostly supported by younger Evangelicals in the United States, who see critically the movement's engagement with conservative party politics (Wilcox, 2000, p. 5).

³ Contrast, for example, the statement that the clitoris is of no importance, which characterizes the consensus for post-War manuals, with what the LaHayes have to say about clitoral stimulation. Outlining in detail how the husband should stimulate the clitoris, the LaHayes admonish: "The vigor with which the husband massages this vital area should be determined by the wife. Some prefer it slow and easy, while others enjoy vigorous motion." DeRogatis does not cite this passage directly, yet it is representative for the adoption of a sex positive attitude in Evangelical manuals from the 1970s onward. A newer piece by DeRogatis focuses on a strain in Evangelical thought that sees sexuality as profoundly dangerous (DeRogatis, 2009).

⁴ Other noteworthy works on the Evangelical understanding of gender and sexuality are: Griffith (1997), Bartkowski (2001) and Moon (2004).

⁵ Davis discusses in extensive detail the complicated power distributions in Morgan's texts and workshop materials; see particularly her chapter "Marriage under Fire," (2010, pp. 176ff).

⁶ The temptation to treat theological movements that claim to be committed to doctrinal orthodoxy as reiterating timeless beliefs seems great in the study of religion. Samira Haj (2009) describes the deleterious effects of giving into this temptation for the study of Islamic revival movements and warns the reader that being committed to orthodoxy and to modernization of a tradition is not a necessary contradiction.

⁷ Hudson reports that Focus' listeners also include a significant number of Catholics (2008, p. 138), and Wilcox notes that Focus' attempts to ban gay marriage led the organization to reach out to African American, Hispanic, and Korean conservative Christians, as well as conservatives of other faiths (2000, p. 9).

⁸ Despite the groundbreaking nature of his book, Balmer's own definition is somewhat circular: He uses the term "evangelical as an umbrella term to refer broadly to conservative Protestants ... whose beliefs, institutions, and folkways comprise the evangelical subculture in America" (1993/2006, p. xvi).

⁹ Other websites are not as conflicted about introducing a vibrator into the Christian sex act. The website <http://www.book22.com> celebrates both the Song of Song (as the 22nd book of the bible) and Christian sex. One of the “intimate kits” on offer includes a vibrator. I am grateful to one of the reviewers of this article who pointed me to this website.

¹⁰ DeRogatis discusses this and the previous passage from LaHaye (DeRogatis, 2005, pp. 109f).

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