MAGIS

Volume 2 | Issue 1 Article 3

2008

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Recommended Citation
Sutherland, Philip (2008) "Sex and the Role of Jesuit Colleges and Universities," *MAGIS*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/magis/vol2/iss1/3

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Sex and the Role of Jesuit Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

A Jesuit college or university should help its students, especially young women, to recognize and resist internalized cultural messages about sexuality. In order to propose a beginning to such a large task, this essay will explore three important facets of the issue of sexuality and American youth. First, greater clarity around sexual messages prevalent in the culture will be sought. The work of Carol Gilligan (1970) and her seminal book In a Different Voice *will provide additional clarity specifically regarding how girls and young women in our culture may be affected by these sexual messages. Finally, a cursory retrieval of Augustine will be suggested as one way to begin bringing students at Jesuit colleges and universities into dialogue with the Catholic theological tradition and an alternative set of ethical norms.*

In their October (2007) issue, Loyola University's student publication, *Diminuendo*, published a series of drawings, photographs and poetry about sex (Kidman, 2007). However, at a Catholic, Jesuit institution in northern Chicago, the images were so controversial that the school's administration chose to remove the publication from public display. Certainly on today's typical college campus, the semi-nude bodies and drawings of sexual acts would barely raise an eyebrow from students. Yet, the ways the bodies were portrayed in the magazine were very objectifying. Rather than resisting the sexual objectification, exploitation and violence toward women that are such pervasive components of American culture, the editors of *Diminuendo* chose to mirror the prevailing sexual messages. Certainly, to be fair to the magazine, the editor-in-chief also wrote that they desired to portray a "wide range of creative expression" and to show many facets of sex, "from the spiritual to the romantic to the downright gritty" (Kidman, 2007, p.3). Perhaps the magazine simply published the submissions it received, artwork that reflected the typical sexual experiences of college students. Yet, it is still surprising that such artwork was submitted at all, and even more surprising that all of the controversial pictures were submitted by women. Regardless of the intent of the magazine's editors, the publication suggests that many of the culture's sexual messages have become embedded in the minds of many young women and men, and that many women do not necessarily view such images as morally degrading.

A Jesuit college or university in the United States should help its students, especially young women who often are uniquely affected by the culture's distortion of their sexuality, to recognize and resist these internalized cultural messages about sexuality. But in order to do this well, school administrators must be clear about what messages are being internalized and how women are uniquely affected by such cultural internalization. Only then can the school devise counter-messages that can help students to sharpen their critical thinking regarding the prevailing culture, engage students in a constructive dialogue with the school's Catholic tradition and present students with an alternative set of values. In order to propose a beginning to such a large task, this essay will explore three important facets of the issue of sexuality and American youth. First, greater clarity around the sexual messages prevalent in the culture will be sought, particularly through an examination of popular music videos. The work of Carol Gilligan (1970) and her seminal book *In a Different Voice* will provide additional clarity specifically regarding how girls and young women in our culture may be affected by these sexual messages. Finally, a cursory retrieval of Augustine's theology will suggest one way to begin bringing students at Jesuit colleges and universities into a critical conversation with the prevailing culture, some of the Catholic theological tradition and an alternative set of ethical norms.

The Current Sexual Climate

It has been well-documented in the media how sexualized the American culture has become. Instead of being supported by the culture, parents today claim that the culture has turned against them: "The village is now so polluted and so desolate of commonly held, child-appropriate moral values that my job as a mother is not to rely on the village but to protect my children from it" (Flanagan, 2006, p. 181). This sentiment—"the intersection of porn and ordinary life"—has been echoed in many other authors including Levy (2005), Paul (2005) and Timson (2005). As their titles suggest, the sexual culture today—both as portrayed in the popular media and as experienced by many parents with adolescent children—can easily be described as "raunch" and "pornified." The sexual messages are pervasive, unavoidable and influential.

In his documentary about music videos, Sut Jhally (1995) discussed the effects of these television images on male perceptions of women, sexuality and relationships. But he mostly ignored the images' effects on women's attitudes of themselves. Although his solution is to encourage the voices of those who are not heard on traditional music videos—particularly the voices of women—his assumption is that their voices are not already influenced by the media he is critiquing.

Jhally (1995) found that the (typically male) producers of music videos only filmed women in roles that depicted the sexuality of what he called a "dream world" of male sexual fantasy. For example, he identified the importance of the male gaze in the way women's bodies were filmed in music videos. Not only did the producers portray women as inviting the male gaze, but the women were positioned and panned by the camera so as to appear passive and desiring such a stare. Whether the shot of the woman was taken between her legs or up her skirt, they were angles that only reinforced objectification in the male fantasy world.

Furthermore, women were not portrayed as whole people with intelligence, personality, complex attitudes and relational qualities. Instead, they were fragmented visually, often presented as disconnected body parts. Women were also depicted with interchangeable bodies or only as undefined shadows shaped as bodies. They were denied their subjectivity and were no longer autonomous people with individuality. They were the ultimate objects, passive bodies at the service of male fantasy, with no contrary desires of their own.

Unlike predominately male-produced music videos, the majority of the editorial staff of Loyola's *Diminuendo* are women. Yet surprisingly, the way women were filmed in these videos shared striking similarities to the way they were presented in the latest issue of *Diminuendo* (2007). The front cover displayed the torso of a woman dressed in lingerie, with the word "slut" inscribed on her crotch. Inside the magazine were various depictions of naked women, including the shadowy outline of the top half of a woman and a penciled drawing of a couple in the middle of sexual intercourse. In all of these examples, the women were presented as objects rather than as autonomous individuals. They were only shadowy outlines of a body, or fragmented with only the torso depicted. The word "slut" further demeaned and objectified the subject of the photograph; the women were only objects of male fantasy and not subjects of their own sexuality.

There is a distinct similarity between many of the depictions of women in the magazine and Jhally's identification of the objectifying male gaze. Yet the editors of the literary magazine clearly intended to spark important discussions about sexuality, not to feed into the cultural "dream worlds." Perhaps these images were acceptable to many of the female editors because they depicted how many young women in the wider society viewed their bodies and their sexuality. Jhally (1995) hinted at the magnitude of this problem at the end of the video when he cited statistics that not only did 60% of men believe women provoked rape through their appearance or behavior, but 40% of women did as well. Jhally (1995) is correct that society needs new voices, especially the voices of women, presented in media depictions of sexuality. But even more than that, society needs new voices that offer a counterbalance to the prevailing sexual ethic. Many women and men have unwittingly internalized sexual messages that depict women only as objects and passive recipients of male-imposed sexual fantasy. Both women and men have internalized these sexual messages, and simply including the voices of women will not repair the damage already done.

Gilligan's Perspective

Carol Gilligan's research remains iconic within the fields of psychological and moral development and underscores how women are particularly susceptible to larger social pressures. In her groundbreaking research into women's psychological and moral development, Gilligan (1982) discovered that women have traditionally been ignored or labeled deficient whenever male moral development was presumed normative. Male moral development has been marked by separation, individuation, and an ethic of rights and non-interference. Women have traditionally remained connected within their relationships; their moral choices have centered on responsibilities toward other people. Moral problems for women have arisen from "conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights" and required for their resolution a "mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract" (p. 19). What has previously been over-valued in the moral reasoning of men (reason and logic) is instead viewed by Gilligan as equally valuable to the emotional and contextual moral reasoning of women.

Rather than competing developmental models, Gilligan (1982) saw the models as complementary. Just as men must move toward an "ethic of generosity and care" (p. 166) that includes interdependence within the larger community, so too must women move in the opposite direction. Their "recognition of the need for personal integrity" leads women toward a "concept of rights" and a claim for equality with those they serve (p. 166). In both sexes, ideally a person will find equilibrium between an "ethic of care" that encompasses others and an "ethic of rights" that attends to the care of the self in its relationships with others.

Unfortunately, society has traditionally dismissed, if not ignored, women's developmental stages. As Gilligan (1982) states, this "paradox" has defined women's roles in society for centuries: "For the very traits that traditionally have defined the 'goodness' of women, their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them as deficient in moral development" (p. 18). This sexism has also influenced how women view themselves as they have absorbed society's gendered valuations. There is a "fusion of identity and intimacy" (p. 159) that is not present in the same way with men whose development consists more of separation than of intimacy. When women were asked to describe themselves, Gilligan (1982) noticed that all the women in her survey described a relationship (mother, wife, child, lover) and talked about their relational strengths ("giving to," "helping out," "being kind, "not hurting") (p. 159). But none of the women thought to mention their academic and professional credentials, distinctions and personal histories.

Such identities often led to unrecognized passivity in relationships. When women's experiences were consistently ignored, women came "to question whether what they have seen exists and whether what they know from their own experience is true" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 49). Such questions about the nature of reality and doubts about their own knowledge can compromise women's abilities to act on their own perceptions and to take responsibility for those actions. As long as "goodness" was equated with "self-sacrifice" then what a woman wanted was irrelevant and she became the passive object of others' (often men's) desires. Gilligan (1982) gave the real-life example of a woman considering an abortion. The woman stated, "I was doing it not so much for myself; I was doing it for my parents. I was doing it because the doctor told me to do it" (p. 86). As long as the "moral" option meant the self-sacrificial option, then the woman did not need to take responsibility for her own choices because self-assertion was intrinsically "selfish." This selfish/sacrificial tension was a consistent theme in Gilligan's (1982) investigation and identified as a serious developmental impasse for many women.

Finally, this passivity can lead to silence. As Gilligan (1982) bluntly stated, "when women feel excluded from direct participation in society they see themselves as subject to a consensus or judgment made and enforced by the men on whose protection and support they depend and by whose names they are known" (p. 67). Such oppression makes women reluctant to voice their opinions. Furthermore, women's reluctance in making absolute moral judgments often stemmed from "their uncertainty about their right to make moral statements, or perhaps from the price for them that such judgment seems to entail" (p. 66). The silence is both imposed from without and self-imposed from within. An unbalanced "ethic of care" will tend to enforce silence by the "wish not to hurt others but also by the fear that, in speaking, her voice will not be

heard" (p. 51). It is a silence of enforced passivity and self-imposed restraint, often under the false pretense of an "ethic of care" that desires to avoid harm at the expense of the caregiver.

Gilligan (1982) fleshes out much of what Jhally (1995) described in his documentary. The passivity, the silence and the lack of self-assertion all mirror the "model" woman in the music videos. Indeed, an ethic of care that emphasizes self-sacrifice denies the woman her subjectivity and often places her under the influence of others' desires. The mature equilibrium that Gilligan (1982) advocates—equilibrium between an "ethic of care" and an "ethic of rights"—places a claim upon the woman's own subjectivity that society actively tries to deny her. But perhaps most importantly, women's own conceptions of themselves are subtly influenced by the self-sacrificial denial of self, the "paradox" as Gilligan (1982) identifies it, of the woman's expected role as nurturer and caregiver who is also developmentally deficient to men. Such self-denial and self-imposed silence will have profound consequences on many of her decisions. If she lacks agency in most of her other decisions, it can be inferred that she will also lack a great deal of agency in her sexual decisions.

Jhally (1995) and Gilligan (1982) have both identified important ways that women are objectified in society. They lack subjectivity in many of the sexual messages portrayed on television and they also lack subjectivity in many of their sexual relationships. Although Gilligan (1982) is very careful *not* to blame patriarchy, she does blame a general andocentric bias in much psychological research and a distinct social bias favoring hierarchy, independence and relational domination. Jhally is much more direct and criticizes the lack of female voices in society's constructions of sexuality, particularly in the area popular music videos. However, in both accounts, women are subtly influenced by the social constructions of their sexuality, identity and value. It is these messages that our Jesuit colleges and universities must more aggressively combat. It is to Augustine that we now turn to for possible guidance.

Augustine and Sexuality

St. Augustine's theology can offer a new perspective about sexuality that may compete with many of the prevailing culture's sexual messages. Augustine is often accused of being pessimistic about human embodiment, and his theology is rife with Platonic and Manichean mind-body dualisms that ring harsh to the modern ear. Yet, if school administrators want to recover anything from this tradition, they can start with Augustine's surprisingly optimistic analysis of the human will's ability to overcome its corruption through gratitude for the mercy of God. At the heart of Augustine's theology is not condemnation but redemption; the focus ultimately is upon God's grace and not upon humanity's inherited sinfulness.

One of Augustine's most helpful contributions to Catholic theology has been his thinking about original sin and the corruption of the will. In his treatise, *The Excellence of Widowhood*, he explicitly laid out his theology about original sin and its relationship to the human will. In response to Pelagius' emphasis of the human will over grace, Augustine (1996c) stated that freedom of the will and God's grace are not mutually exclusive: "we do not destroy the freedom of the human will when we acknowledge with pious gratitude the grace of God by which the will is assisted, and do not reject it with ungrateful self-sufficiency" (p. 85). These are important themes that have stayed with Christian theology: grace, free will, gratitude and sin.

In his letter to Julian of Eclanum, Augustine (1996a) argued that original sin is the basis for our corrupted wills. He stated that "desires are evils which we restrain by reason," whereas "members are goods which we move by the decision of the will" (p. 91). Specifically, the *pudenda* (genitals) are not good because they are under the control of lust rather than of the rational will (p. 91). In the end, it is lust that makes sexual intercourse sinful and not the intercourse itself. Augustine (1996a) makes this clear when he asked, "Why do you not believe that…to those in Paradise before there was sin that they might without any lust procreate children by tranquil action and the union or intercourse of members of the body…?" (p. 92). Augustine (1996a) even went further and stated that not only was *sex* (without lust) good, but so was the body. He stated, "even now, in evil adulterous union, we see that the work of God in the condition of the bodies is good" (p. 88). By separating lustful desires from the sexual act, Augustine creates intellectual room to call sex

and bodies good but the accompanying lust bad. Rather, original sin has corrupted the good inherent within God's creation.

But all is not lost. The guilt of original sin was "taken away by regeneration by which there is the forgiveness of all sins" (Augustine, 1996b, p. 103). Humankind is not doomed to condemnation, because this original sin passed from Adam and Eve can be forgiven by God. Furthermore, people can overcome their disordered will with the grace of God, as Augustine (1996c) insisted, "nor is the perfection of virtue to be despaired of through the grace of Him who can change and heal a nature vitiated from its origin" (p. 88). However, it takes a combination of free will—"who, I say would have continence if he did not will it?"—as well as God's supernatural assistance (p. 85). Augustine realized that not everything about our human nature is totally under the control of our free will. It is this corruption of the will that is our "original sin" and that puts us in need of God's forgiveness. And that free will must also be "healed," "enlarged" and "replenished" by God's continuing grace (p. 85).

Ultimately, the focus is upon God's ability to forgive original sin and to give the grace necessary to live a chaste life devoid, as much as possible, of actions accompanied by uncontrollable desire. Sex and embodiment are creations of God and therefore good things. But they have also been tainted by original sin and cannot be properly used without God's grace. Unlike the doctrine of Pelagius, one cannot remedy the sinful condition ourselves. One must simply acknowledge one's dependence upon God and allow God to heal one's divided will.

Indeed, Adam and Eve themselves were relational and God had set them in Paradise in order to initiate the human race (Brown, 1988, p. 400). It was the irrational, uncontrollable sexual *desire* that divided the will after the Fall (p. 404). This divided will was not only most manifest in sexual desire, but also fractured all the original bonds of society: marriage, friendship, family—leading to the great finality of death itself, that ultimate experience of the power of the body over the will (p. 404-405). Such was the state of humanity after the Fall, broken through a divided will, subject to uncontrollable and evil desire, but also open to salvation through the grace of God. At the heart of Augustine's theological anthropology is a vision of Paradise that originally consists of perfect human relationships.

Conclusions

While Augustine has very little to say about the value of human sexual pleasure, his view of human relationships and their subsequent fracturing intersects with Jhally and Gilligan's accounts of the contemporary American experience. It is Augustine's concept of the divided will that is most beneficial for young people today. Just as Jhally and Gilligan mourn the loss of women's subjectivity in the fracturing of male-female relations, so too does Augustine mourn the fracturing of male-female relationships in the Garden of Eden. At the heart of all of these visions are relational mutuality and harmony. To reach such a state requires men and women to resist many of the prevailing cultural messages about relationships and sexuality.

The original sin identified by Augustine still distorts relationships today. People are cut off from each other and from God. Yet Augustine placed his trust in God's grace, and at the beginning of the *Confessions* (1997) focused not on human sin but on the yearning within every soul for a relationship with God, as he prayed: "You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you" (p. 39). The challenge for Jesuit colleges and universities is not so much to convince their students that sex outside of marriage is "sinful" or "wrong," but to present them with different sexual messages that embody an alternative vision of sex, bodies and human relationships. Augustine's insight is that humanity's divided will is not part of God's original plan and therefore must be healed and transcended by the grace of God. The prevailing sexual ethic identified by Jhally (1995) and Gilligan (1982) is fundamentally destructive to our humanity if God truly created humanity in God's own image as a model of perfect relationships. Sexism, power and domination would find no place in

that original Paradise. This is an alternative vision that many students may find attractive as they seek fulfilling ways to address their deep desires for intimacy and relationships.

Such intersections between the Christian Gospel, the Catholic tradition and cultural forces comprise the core mission of Jesuit colleges and universities today. In its most recent General Congregation 34, the Society of Jesus directly reaffirmed its mission as the "service of faith" and the "promotion of justice" (McCarthy, 1995, p. 35). Yet, the Congregation went further and stated that faith and justice are "dynamically related" to the evangelization of culture (p. 36). The Congregation stated:

> Justice can truly flourish only when it involves the transformation of culture, since the roots of injustice are embedded in cultural attitudes as well as in economic structures. The dialogue between the Gospel and culture has to take place within the heart of the culture. (p. 36)

Such evangelization must certainly include a coherent Christian vision of sexuality, human desires and relationships. Augustine is only a partial answer to this problem, but an examination of his theology reveals a rich tradition that can be brought to bear against the ubiquitous cultural attitudes.

Augustine is but one example of many voices within the Catholic tradition that can inform how students are formed at Jesuit institutions of higher education. As religious institutions, the spiritual formation of the students should be as much of a priority as their academic training. The Catholic theological tradition can be mined to present a coherent vision of sexuality that will counter many of the culture's messages that often support the objectification, domination and oppression of women. The potential for the empowerment and liberation of women and men from such oppressive social structures is great. Jesuit colleges and universities can create their own culture that values mutuality, equality and empowerment for women and men, particularly with regard to sexuality and relationships. Such counter-messages would help students to critique the often subtle influences of the larger culture, and could open a fruitful dialogue between students and the Catholic tradition to reveal an alternative vision of sexuality previously hidden behind the walls of unexamined cultural presuppositions. As General Congregation 34 made explicit, the promotion of justice and the transformation of culture must go hand-in-hand, for justice must permeate from the level of personal relationships to the level of social relationships. Social justice is as much about transforming the interpersonal relationships that give rise to unjust social structures, as it is about directly challenging those self-perpetuating structures in the abstract.

If the mission of the Jesuit university is the service of faith and the promotion of justice, then that mission should be shared by its students, staff, faculty and alumni. As an example of this mission, Seattle University's Mission Statement succinctly states that it is dedicated, "to empowering leaders for a just and humane world" ("Seattle University"). The formation of ethical, responsible leaders who will carry this mission into the larger world is imperative. Even students who are not Catholic can be formed in a coherent, attractive and challenging Gospel-vision that both respects their particular religious traditions and impels them toward self-transcendence.

Sexuality is not an easy topic to discuss on college campuses. Indeed, the resistance to a Christian message can be openly hostile or simply dismissive. Yet Jhally (1995) and Gilligan (1982) show that the prevailing sexual ethic is particularly harmful toward women and is a symptom of a much larger social disease. Mutuality and equality do not often characterize many relationships portrayed in the popular media, especially as portrayed in music videos. Often women feel they must remain silent or are not aware of the subtle social conditioning that has promoted their relational interconnectedness at the expense of their subjective autonomy. Jhally shows how this relational disfigurement becomes incarnated in sexual messages that further objectify women as the passive playthings of their male partners. Just as men have internalized many of these messages, so too have women, and students at Jesuit colleges and universities are no exception. The mission to evangelize the culture should not stop at the university's doorstep, but encompass the formation of students who will carry that evangelization outside of its walls.

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