

Review of *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religion*

Reviewed by: Christiana Peppard '05 MAR

The binary of “private” and “public” is a legal distinction in the United States, and in that context it significantly protects reproductive freedom for women and diminishes the power of those who may seek to instantiate a legislative or judicial hegemony of heterosexuality.¹ In this sense, the courts have determined that “private” is good. Beyond the legal realm, since the 1970s American feminists have insisted that “the personal is political” – societal attention to the erstwhile private realm can be important, particularly when the “private” (or “domestic”) realm is manipulated to conceal injustices based on gender or sexuality. This is not to say that the private/public distinction is universal or normative, but it is a recurrent theme in the book *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religions*, which “was formulated in the West and structured according to [the editors’] ever expanding but always limited horizons.” Indeed, the contributors agree that “sexuality is more than the private practice of individuals. It is behavior that arises within a complex set of power dynamics. In every instance, sex is intimately interwoven with the economic, social and political possibilities of the actors.” Thus *Good Sex* offers assessments of the seemingly private act of sex, but it also widens the context by asking how sexuality and morality are embedded in – and shaped by – larger patterns of political, economic, and especially religious power relations. This volume explores ways in which religious strictures continue to bind women’s bodies, practices, and pleasures.

Good Sex is neither a “how-to” manual nor a definitive answer to its own implicit question (what is good sex?). Instead, it is the result of a series of dialogues among women from eight countries and different religious backgrounds on two primary questions: “What is good sex in a globalized world in the twenty-first century?” and “What do feminists have to contribute to the understanding and embodiment of good sex?” Religion in particular forms a hinge for the discussion since, in the words of the editors, “[R]eligions have been the traditional guardians of sexual norms and practices. In fact, patriarchal religions are infamous for their taboos with regard to women and sex.” Consonant with other feminist critiques, the contributors variously claim that injustices toward women result from the structure of patriarchal societies, in which women’s voices are undervalued or ignored; the hegemony of “traditional” interpretations of gender comple-

mentarity or gender roles; and the predication of social order upon control of women’s bodies and reproductive capacities.

The book is divided into three sections: “Creation of Desires,” “Prices of Sex,” and “Reconstruction of Sexualities.” The first section charts “desire” as a function of socioeconomic, cultural, and religious influences. One of the more interesting suggestions here is that capitalism itself functions as a “religion” in the construction of desire and its impact on the lives of women (see “Capitalism and Sexuality: Free to Choose?” by Radhika Balakrishnan). The second section focuses on “prices” of sex—namely, the cost to women’s well-being, livelihood, and life options in relation to the resulting “prize” of femininity (most often understood to be motherhood, which may or may not come with actual honor or status). In this section, Pinar Ilkkaracan’s essay “Islam and Women’s Sexuality: A Research Report from Turkey” is especially compelling for its sociological methods and conclusions, particularly when paired with Ayesha M. Imam’s essay from the first section, “The Muslim Religious Right (‘Fundamentalists’) and Sexuality.” The third section includes constructive proposals for striving toward sexual justice in the context of several religions. Of the three essays in this section, Judith Plaskow’s “Authority, Resistance and Transformation” is the most notable; she suggests that “the feminist critic must begin, not by allying herself with dissenting voices within her tradition, but by questioning the authority of tradition, resisting any framework that leaves no room for women’s agency, and then proceeding to transform tradition by placing women at the center” (135).

The strengths of the book lie especially with its methodology, insofar as it is the product of numerous meetings of women of different religious backgrounds, academic backgrounds, and global regions. Also impressive are several authors’ attempts to explore, and then to challenge, religiously based “justifications” of women’s situations or treatment; as noted above, the two chapters on Islam are particularly compelling. Finally, *Good Sex* offers persistent attention to the ways in which sex is constructed publicly. There is much more work to be done here, but *Good Sex* is an important start.

The book is also limited in several ways; I focus on three. First, two of the three essays on non-monotheistic traditions – Buddhism and the historical Chinese practice of footbinding

– do not really engage the lived experiences of contemporary women. This seems odd for a volume concerned with interreligious dialogue about the lived experiences of women. (It does better for monotheistic traditions.)

Second, the volume self-consciously flirts with challenges and insights from postcolonial theory, and the editors admit deep vexation about the hegemony of Western epistemology; but the volume notes these issues only in passing. This is a significant and unfortunate omission. A book that more fully addresses these issues in the context of feminism and religion is *Postcolonialism: Feminism and Religious Discourse*, edited by Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-Lan (Routledge, 2002). *Postcolonialism* does not set itself up primarily as a sexual ethics book, but it leans heavily into issues of sex and related cultural practices (veiling, footbinding, etc.). Donaldson and Kwok's volume does so with an explicit suspicion toward the colonizing, Othering, and autonomy-obsessed Western gaze.

My third and final critique is has to do with myriad issues raised but not sufficiently addressed by the essays in *Good Sex*. Practices such as veiling in the Muslim world, the historical practice of footbinding, compulsory motherhood or compulsory heterosexuality, the practices of bride price or female circumcision all stand as examples of how religion, tradition, or "culture" shape women's bodies and experiences. The editors of *Good Sex* are concerned with the morality of such practices when read through the lives of women around the world; they assert that "the most compelling reason [for thinking interreligiously about sexual ethics] rests with the need to understand in global terms the relationship between the economic and political damage inflicted by corporations, governments and patriarchal religions" upon the lives of women. Such concerns are important, but enormous, and invite myriad questions – for example, what exactly constitutes a "culture" or "tradition" or "religion"? What sort of authority should a tradition have to shape the lives of its participants? Is the survival of "tradition" a moral good, even if women are oppressed within it? How should sexual norms and practices across cultures be evaluated – should sexual morality simply be relativized? Can women's well-being be a *sine qua non*, a litmus test for the validity of any religious practice or set of beliefs? These are more or less questions that obtain in recent debates about multiculturalism and feminism, but *Good Sex* is ill-equipped to deal with such issues.

What to do? I suggest another companion volume, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, which features an essay by the late Susan Moller Okin and fifteen brief commentaries (edited by Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum, Princeton University Press, 1999). Okin argues that a "multiculturalism" that leaves out the well-being of women and children, assigns their well-being to the determination of male representatives of "tradition," or privileges male voices (whether formally or actually) is in fact very bad for women. While this book is not strictly about religion, most of Okin's arguments rely upon the ways in which tradition or religion or culture is enacted upon female bodies. As a result, multiple commentators navigate a bevy of vexing questions to do with women, religion, justice, and the problems of charting morality in a multicultural world.

It should be clear that one book cannot say it all when it comes to feminism, religion, and sexual ethics. I would suggest that the search for hard and fast answers to such problems is a futile one, because the problems are multiple and dynamic. This should lead us – that is, pastors, theologians, activists, ethicists, humans – into a certain sort of humility, but not into apathy. It is possible to identify correctives for lurking injustices, especially those right under our noses; to create a wide berth for notions of justice based on the experiences of women worldwide; and even to identify moral and material prerequisites for what makes sex good, for women, in the context of religion.

1 The original is *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), which established the right to privacy by striking down a Connecticut law (set in 1879) that forbade the use of contraceptives. This precedent was invoked in *Roe v. Wade* (1973). *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) did not use "right of privacy" language in striking down a state sodomy law but stands nonetheless in the *Griswold* genealogy.

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