

## INTRODUCTION

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*The lover followed the paths of his beloved absorbed in thought.  
He tripped and fell among the thorns, and it seemed to him that they  
were flowers and that he lay on a bed of love.*

— Ramon Llull, *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*<sup>1</sup>

THE GENESIS OF *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity* was a 2006 conference attended by about fifty theologians and scholars of religion from across North America who came together to discuss how eros and sexuality have fared in Christianity historically and up to the present.<sup>2</sup> The papers presented brought into sharp focus how Christian texts and traditions can be implicated in many contemporary societal struggles and injustices related to human gendered and sexual embodiment. The presenters also emphasized that Christianity has had a nearly obsessive fixation on the dynamics of sexual desire. Whether through repression, spiritualization, or regulation, Christianity has made the body and its passions central to what it means to be human—and “saved.” We in the Western world live, willingly or resistantly, in the ongoing wake of this legacy; therefore, it behooves us to know more about eros and the Christian tradition. After

this 2006 conference, conversations continued with other scholars of religion, thus sowing the seeds for an anthology which would investigate the possibilities for and the shape of an embrace of eros in Christianity that would be enlivening not repressive, matter-of-fact not obsessive, plurivocal not uniform. This introduction presents to readers the principal themes of this text's critical interaction with the Christian tradition: eros, bodies, and sexuality.

## WHOSE EROS? WHAT CHRISTIANITY?

Eros, from the name of the Greek god of love, understandably is associated for most people with pleasure, including sexual pleasure; few, no doubt, expect the Christian tradition to be its place of nurture. Christianity from its inception preached continence and eschewed pleasures of the flesh. Jesus' statement that people in heaven "neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels" (Matt. 22:30) was applied to extol virginity and abstinence within marriage. When the apostle Paul directed Christians to think of their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 6:19), they took this to mean that Christian faith requires elevating spiritual concerns over bodily desires. Paul's allowance of marriage and remarriage as an outlet for those who are "afire" with sexual desires (1 Cor. 7:9) seems liberal in comparison to third-century church theologian Tertullian who declared, "We admit one marriage, just as we do one God," and who even advised widows not to remarry but to commit themselves to what is "nobler"—namely, "the continence of the flesh."<sup>3</sup> By the fourth century, sex even within marriage was spoken of as base, unclean, and dishonorable, as we see in Jerome's pronouncement that "in view of the purity of the body of Christ, all sexual intercourse is unclean" and his teaching to husbands: "If we abstain from intercourse, we give honour to our wives."<sup>4</sup> It is no hyperbole to say that Christianity, from its origins and in its formative years, was largely antierotic, casting aspersions even on those dimensions of human relations where sex was licit. Even Protestant reformer Martin Luther, who deemed celibacy so rare a gift as to be called a miracle, still thought along patristic lines that sexual desire was sinful, though permissible in marriage where "God excuses it by his grace."<sup>5</sup>

Does this mean that eros was completely absent from Christian writings? Many scholars would consider this claim to be too flat. Take, for example, the history of interpretation of the biblical Song of Songs, a book dripping with erotically charged energy between a yearning young woman and her virile lover. Early church theologians saw the dangers this text posed for monastic contemplation. How should monks at prayer interpret verses like these?

*I slept, but my heart was awake.  
 Listen! My beloved is knocking.  
 "Open to me, my sister, my love,  
 my dove, my perfect one . . ."  
 My beloved thrust his hand into the opening,  
 and my inmost being yearned for him. (Song 5:2, 4)*

Origen, a third-century Neoplatonic theologian, urged an allegorical reading of this poem: the young maiden represents the soul and the young man who calls out to her is the word of God.<sup>6</sup> From Origen in the Eastern church to twelfth-century mystic Bernard of Clairvaux in the West, the eroticism in the Song of Songs was alive and well in monastic piety—under the veil of allegory, of course.<sup>7</sup>

The effort to control and channel eros is not just an antique or a medieval Christian struggle. The church continued its vigilance through the early modern period. In the seventeenth-century North American context, sexuality was inextricably linked to the colonizing and missionizing of indigenous populations and to the economic entrenchment of slavery.<sup>8</sup> Passion and sexual incontinence was read onto the dark-skinned subjugated body in distorted ways that postcolonial and race theorists today are still unraveling.

Since the 1970s with the rise of the women's liberation and gay pride movements, various church and parachurch organizations have attempted to consolidate eros with traditional (read: heterosexual, patriarchal) "family values." For most church denominations, sexual activity within marriage is seen as blessed; all other forms of sexual expression are consigned to categories of abomination (homosexuality), fornication (premarital or adulterous heterosexual sex), and misguided uses of the body (masturbation). A parachurch organization called Exodus International, which bills itself as "promoting the message of *Freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ*,"<sup>9</sup> organizes and offers referrals to programs for helping homosexuals "re-connect with [God's] original design and purpose for them as a man or woman"—that is, to covert to heterosexuality.<sup>10</sup> Evangelicals involved in this effort note the importance of providing a message not only of freedom from (homosexuality) but also freedom for (eros in marriage). In this regard, the conservative Protestant organization Focus on the Family runs an online marriage-counseling blog to answer questions couples may have about sex, in order to foster vibrant sexuality within the proper bounds of the husband-led Christian family.<sup>11</sup> There is a booming industry of how-to marriage and singleness guides from conservative Christian publishing houses. Titles include: *Sex and the Single Guy*:

*Winning Your Battle for Purity; Real Questions, Real Answers about Sex: The Complete Guide to Intimacy as God Intended*, and *Why Say No When My Hormones Say Go?*<sup>12</sup> The titles may strike some as prosaic or even humorous, but the burgeoning sales figures are real. The embrace of godly marital eros is felt all the way to the Vatican: Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), calls for a unity of the "wordly" love of eros and *agape* ("love grounded and shaped by faith") in the intimacy of the conjugal act.<sup>13</sup>

Liberal theological reflection on the meaning of eros today is trying to break out of binary approaches that pit sexualized eros against nonsexual *agape* love.<sup>14</sup> Eros is not just about sexuality, so say many contemporary theorists. African American poet, essayist, and self-affirmed lesbian Audre Lorde spoke strongly for a broad understanding of eros. In her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic and Power," which has reached near-creedal status among contemporary liberal theologians commenting on this issue, Lorde defined eros principally as a "creative energy" and "lifeforce" that has the capacity for "providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers."<sup>15</sup> It may entail sexual or nonsexual sharing; it may be solitary. It is always "replenishing and provocative" in that it incites and empowers from the deep wellsprings of the self.<sup>16</sup> For contemporary theologians, the erotic is inextricably linked to spirituality as the source of human well-being.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, from this perspective, celibacy and erotic desires are not mutually contradictory terms. Celibacy, the most misunderstood of lifestyles especially today, should not properly be seen, its adherents claim, as a life of asexuality or sublimation of passion.<sup>18</sup>

Whether found in liberal or conservative Christian contexts, the issue of eros seems to be an increasingly central and contested issue in Christian discourse today. Most Christian circles seem to have surmounted the early church's disdain of eros, but now the battle is over "Whose eros?" and "What Christianity?" The embrace of marital eros by some conservative Christians has meant the exclusion of the erotic "other" (gays, bisexuals, etc.). Conversely, the embrace of eros for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) persons by the liberal wing of the church has provoked a splintering within Christianity of global proportions.<sup>19</sup> Eros, it seems, will shape Christianity worldwide for the twenty-first century.

## THE EMBRACE OF BODIES—BUT NOT THEIR PLEASURES

Christianity has, from its origins, been intensely body focused. There are theological, ritual, and spiritual reasons for this. Theologically, the doctrine

of the incarnation—the notion that God became human flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth—was affirmed as orthodox in the ecumenical church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries. Henceforth, anything other than belief in Christ's indivisible full divinity and full humanity was considered anathema. The Athanasian creed states: "Although He is God and man, He is not two, but one Christ." Creedal affirmations such as this precipitated in the early church a decisive anti-Docetic and anti-Manichean turn. Docetism, the viewpoint that God only appeared to take human form in Jesus of Nazareth, was rejected by the dominant patristic voices, which insisted that the "Son" really became incarnate in a human body. The early church's rejection of the Manichean dualism is seen starkly in the *Confessions* of Bishop Augustine of Hippo (354–430), who was at one time a follower of Manichean philosophy, which viewed the material world as evil. As a new convert, Augustine at first bristled at the notion that God would have deigned to be born of a woman, since how could he be thus "mingled with her flesh without being defiled"?<sup>20</sup> Notwithstanding their subsequent rejection of Docetism and Manicheanism, church fathers such as Augustine could not embrace the body's pleasures; rather, bodily appetites were associated with animal lusts arising from the "habit of the flesh."<sup>21</sup> Henceforth, regulating sinful "flesh" became an obsessive focus of the church.

Ritually, Christianity's central sacramental practices developed as revolving around the body. The Eucharist, the laying on of hands in rituals of healing, the giving of last rites—these and other practices of material religion consolidated bodies as central to Christian ritual. In many ecclesial rites, purification of the body is transacted or symbolized. Whether it involved infants or adult catechumens, baptism became a ritual for purifying the body from sin and consecrating the whole person as part of the church community. What occurs in the sacrament of baptism, sixteenth-century Protestant reformer John Calvin says, is "the mortification of our sin. . . . For so long as we live cooped up in this prison of our body, traces of sin will dwell in us; but if we faithfully hold fast to the promise given us by God in baptism, they shall not dominate or rule."<sup>22</sup> Not surprisingly, gender often played a role in how the body was seen as in need of purification. For example, the now defunct rite called the "churching of women" (where postpartum women were readmitted to church after the sprinkling of holy water and priestly prayers) communicated—whether intentionally or not—that the bloody process of birth somehow rendered women's bodies impure.<sup>23</sup> Ancient prescriptions concerning menstruating women partaking the Eucharist or even entering a church confirm the notion that blood was seen as defiling female

bodies, despite the effort to construe the prohibition otherwise.<sup>24</sup> The ritual embrace of bodies in Christianity is punctuated by images of the defiled, sinful, gendered body.

Spiritual practices in Christianity, especially with the rise of monasticism, put the body front and center with its practices of prayer. Marked by extreme asceticism (fasting, sexual continence, self-flagellation, denial of sleep, and so on), monastic life was extremely body negating. Nevertheless, the body was also seen as indispensable. Early seventh-century abbot John Climacus aptly captures this sentiment:

[B]y what rule or manner can I bind this body of mine? . . . How can I hate him when my nature disposes me to love him? How can I break away from him when I am bound to him forever? How can I escape from him when he is going to rise with me? . . . He is my helper and my enemy, my assistant and my opponent, a protector and a traitor. . . . If I wear him out he gets weak. If he has a rest he becomes unruly. . . . If I mortify him I endanger myself. If I strike him down I have nothing left by which to acquire virtues. I embrace him. And I turn away from him.<sup>25</sup>

Spiritualities across the spectrum of Christianity show this tension regarding the body. The body is necessary for one's devotional life of bodily practices; yet the body's sin-prone inclinations are at odds with one's spiritual aspirations. Again, gender perceptions intersect with this tensive attitude toward the body resulting in a mix of misogyny and eroticism, as seen in the writings of the so-called desert fathers—ascetic men who often saw the devil coming to tempt them sexually in the form of a woman.<sup>26</sup> While medieval female mystics waxed eloquent about union with their bridegroom Christ, their embrace of his body did not translate into care of their own bodies, which they sometimes mortified to the point of "holy anorexia," as one scholar puts it.<sup>27</sup>

## SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL DESIRES

Sexuality as an orientation or an identity is a very modern notion, foreign to theological and other writings predating the advent of modern psychology. Even in the contemporary age, theologians and religious ethicists have stumbled for terminology to describe sexualities outside of the heterosexual norm and gender expressions outside of the male-female binary. Three methodological developments have proved decisive for a breakthrough for contemporary theologies addressing the issue of sexuality.

First, gender analysis, borrowed from women's studies, began to figure prominently in religious studies from the 1980s.<sup>28</sup> Although women cannot be reduced to sexuality, there has been an entrenched historical linking of women to sexual temptation. Hence, discussing women in the Christian tradition not only caused the issue of sexuality to emerge, when before it had been relegated to narrow categories (e.g., marriage), but it also precipitated new methods of scholarly analysis. For example, Toinette Eugene's essay on black spirituality and sexuality in a 1985 anthology on feminist ethics exemplifies an approach that feminist, womanist, and other scholars of religion—including many contributing to this volume—would henceforth employ: an intersectional analysis that allows religious experience to be refracted in terms of intersecting cultural factors of embodiment: gender, sex, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on.<sup>29</sup>

Second, new modes of historical analysis are being explored and debated in religious studies, marked by the postmodern paradigm shift in intellectual thought. Many scholars are influenced by the way postmodern historians, like Michel Foucault, exposed the cultural codes, gestures, regulations, and "discourses" of sex for eras predating the term *sexuality*. Scholars have found that these discourses of sex turn out to be very diverse, culturally contingent, and multivocal. Moreover, when these discourses are most filled with religious diatribes about sin and debauchery, they ironically have the effect opposite to the intended one—that is, not repression but consolidation of the very desires they mean to stamp out, not eradication but "dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sexualities."<sup>30</sup> For example, Mark Jordan has investigated how the practices of the confessional elicited—in order to categorize, judge, and punish—accounts of male-male sex acts, or "sodomy" as it began to be called after the eleventh century. Paradoxically, in training confessors to root out tendencies toward sins of sodomy, church authorities instructed that "only very virile men, men excessively attached to women" should hear confession, because it became apparent from the flow of sexual narratives in the confessional that sodomy was "in fact not repulsive [but] . . . immensely attractive" to many men.<sup>31</sup> Foucault and other postmodern theorists have provided scholars one way to analyze the discursive production of sexualities—a mode of analysis that continues today, now with attention given to ever-expanding discourses of religion, psychology, law, medicine, psychiatry, pornography, global capitalism, virtual reality, and so on. Theologians today, including several in this volume, are employing aspects of postmodern modes of analyzing how cultural discourses and bodily practices invest bodies with sexual meaning, value, and power.

A third development that has had an impact on how theologians approach the issue of sexuality has been the methodological shift to experience as a valid and often preferred source and norm for theological reflection.<sup>32</sup> Whereas in the past theologians might have turned to normative Christian texts (Scripture, creedal documents, magisterial teachings, etc.) as primary sources and norms, the past three decades have seen a flood of theological texts whose starting point or primary criterion of validity is human experience, such as the experience of women, gays, lesbians, transgendered people, and so on, where gender, embodiment, and sexuality have come to the fore as lenses for doing theology.<sup>33</sup> Whether through phenomenological analyses of embodiment or ethnographic investigations of particular bodily practices, theological writing has been transformed by making concrete human experiences central for reflection about God, Christ, the church, and salvation. When combined with gender analysis and postmodern modes of reflection, the methodological focus on experience has made possible a growing theological embrace of the issue of sexual desire, revealing a vast uncharted territory of bodily practices, identities, and spiritualities waiting to be narrated, theorized, and theologized.

## HISTORY, CULTURE, AND RECONSTRUCTION

*The Embrace of Eros* is divided into three parts: history, culture, and reconstruction. The historical section (part one) provides an overview of the persistent anxiety in Christianity regarding eros—from the writings of the early church fathers to modern papal encyclicals and Protestant denominational rulings. Given what the Bible and authoritative theological voices have said about sex historically, what possibilities exist to reengage the tradition in light of contemporary perspectives on eros? David Jensen surveys what the Bible is thought to say about sex and asks, Should the Bible be taken as a rule book on matters of sex or is there a possibility for a more eros-friendly hermeneutic? Against the backdrop of the early church's polemic against sexual desire, Mark Wallace proposes a theology of the erotic, tactile healing of bodies with a focus on Luke's narrative about a woman who engaged in intimate touching of Jesus' body. Tackling the apostle Paul's supposed invectives against homosexuality, William Stacy Johnson argues that Paul's writings are best understood as a critique of practices of slavery in the Roman Empire—not as a moral denunciation of Greco-Roman homoeroticism. Augustine of Hippo, arguably the pivotal thinker for Western Christendom, bequeathed to us an anthropology of denial that equated bodily desires with death, according to John Thiel, who explores why this viewpoint has been so resilient in the



Christian tradition. Corey Barnes introduces readers to the subtleties of the Scholastic theology of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) to show the extent to which Aquinas's views on bodily appetites could potentially provide some basis for affirming the goodness of passionate bodies. Tatha Wiley critically assesses the views on sexuality and contraception in the 1968 papal encyclical *Humanae vitae* and proposes an alternative approach to sexuality for Roman Catholic married couples. Do principles of the Protestant Reformation support homosexual ministers who will not comply with current denominational rules of self-imposed celibacy? This question guides Paul Capetz in his semi-autobiographical essay as an ordained Presbyterian minister actively grappling with this current theological and existential issue.

Part two reflects theologically on bodies, desires, and sexual identities in the modern period. Five scholars use various critical theories (including theories of race, gender, queerness, and postmodernity) in order to analyze and reflect theologically on the construction of embodied eros in a range of modern cultural attitudes and practices. Shannon Craigo-Snell analyzes how female theologians such as herself find themselves attempting to "pass" as male in the academy by valuing masculine modes of rationality and by devaluing the embodied relationality that has marked women's cultural ways of knowing. Mark Jordan's essay tracks how church leaders from the post-WWII era and later struggled to label and religiously situate persons with male-male sexual desires. Rebecca Davis demonstrates how eros and gender were constructed for conservative Christian families based on one of the most widely read evangelical marriage manuals of the 1970s, Marabel Morgan's *The Total Woman*. Edward Antonio outlines the theological challenge of conceptualizing African sexual identities in light of the devastation of HIV/AIDS and the legacy of colonizing Western public-health discourses about sexuality in Africa. Theologian and spoken-word artist James Perkinson comments theologically and autobiographically on intersections of eros and white male fetishizing of hip-hop.

The guiding question for part three of *The Embrace of Eros* is, How can classic Christian doctrines be reformulated in light of more positive views of eros? The essays in this section offer theological reconstructions of five traditional doctrinal loci: creation, incarnation, ecclesiology, eschatology, and pneumatology. Laurie Jungling reinterprets the doctrine of creation as God's call to embodied relationality based not only on the freedom to seek erotic possibilities but also on the call to faithfulness appropriate to our creaturely finitude in time and space. In her reflections on the doctrine of the incarnation, Laurel Schneider uses the provocative term *promiscuous* to represent the

refusal of divine exclusivity in God's choice for fleshly intimacy with humanity. Paul Lakeland's essay on ecclesiology employs the dialectic of presence and absence in order to compare Protestant and Catholic metaphorical representations of the church's love of and desire for God and to project a dynamic ecclesiology of desire. Is there sex in heaven? This question guides Margaret Kamitsuka's reflection on eros and the resurrection of the body in light of the Freudian psychodynamic theories of feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva. Joy Bostic reads Toni Morrison's iconic *Beloved* in relation to feminist and womanist pneumatologies in order to formulate a doctrine of the Holy Spirit who brings erotic justice to broken flesh.

All the authors in this anthology are academic scholars in religion. Some have ministerial standing or seminary teaching appointments and would situate their scholarship in terms of ecclesial commitments. Some see their theological scholarship as situated within the sphere of religious studies where the validity of doing theology as an academic discipline is an issue they often have to defend. All the authors share a commitment to engage critically and constructively with the historical and current textual sources and material practices of the Christian tradition. Although the authors tend toward liberal positions, this volume does not present a univocal view on eros. For example, Schneider calls for considering the eros of divine incarnation in terms of the metaphor of promiscuity, while Jungling challenges the implied literal sexual promiscuity in the call for freedom in many current erotic theologies. Even the arguably most central figure to shape the theology and ecclesial institutions of the early church, the apostle Paul, is variously interpreted. Wallace categorizes Paul as a leading and early proponent of sexual renunciation that distanced Christianity from its Jewish origins, while Johnson situates a very Jewish Paul in the context of Roman practices of sexualized violence imposed on the bodies of colonized peoples such as his fellow Jews.

The hoped-for consequences of *The Embrace of Eros* are several. It is hoped that readers will gain an appreciation for the constraints and possibilities of eros and Christianity. These essays show representative instances of how the Christian tradition's imposition of constraints on bodily passions have not only denigrated desires and normalized identities in marginalizing ways but have also inculcated a disciplinary ethics-as-rule-following. Attempting to regulate eros based on scripturally derived rules overlooks how Scripture itself can be seen as an extended narrative of desire (Jensen). To this day, the cultural effects of the church's disciplinary discourses on the body are widespread: female theologians are constrained to think and act as "male" in order to be recognized as rational (Craig-Snell); sexually active gay ministers

are constrained against their conscience to pretend publicly to be celibate straight men (Capetz); Roman Catholic couples are constrained to hide the fact that their 2.5 children are not a dead give-away of their surreptitious use of prohibited birth control (Wiley).

These essays also show the possibilities for reengaging the tradition to find submerged, untapped dynamics of desire and new questions about the power and limits of eros for frail flesh. The evangelical wife, by enacting sexual submission, thereby validates—and hence to some extent controls—her husband's gendered and erotic authority within the marriage (Davis). We might associate the message that sex is natural with modern pop psychology, but it was the medieval Scholastic theologian Thomas Aquinas who was part of an underappreciated sea change in theological views on eros when he argued that sexual desire is natural to, rather than a corruption of, human nature (Barnes). This is not to say that Christian views of eros will heal what ails our current consumerist, voyeuristic cultural infatuation with erotic titillation. Just the opposite is the case: the centuries-long Euro-Christian colonialist exploitation of bodies of color must first be analyzed in order to expose white racist fears and desires (Perkinson). We must add to this sociopolitical analysis a psychological analysis of eros as a product of often conflicted psychosexual human development. Only then can we allow ourselves the luxury of imagining eros in a heavenly key, though, even then, the deep psychosexual wounds we struggle with in this life may be carried into the next (Kamitsuka).

This volume does not settle the matter of eros and Christianity. Rather, *The Embrace of Eros* points to the need to continue to hear new voices and entertain new cultural challenges, while reengaging with the texts and practices that have formed Christian identities for two millennia. Christians have been taught to believe that God is love. The time has come to reflect anew on the plenitude and mystery of divine eros and risk falling among its thorns.

### *Further Suggested Readings*

Burrus, Virginia, and Catherine Keller, eds. *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006.

Nelson, James B., and Sandra P. Longfellow, eds. *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994.

Pinn, Anthony B., and Dwight N. Hopkins, eds. *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Rogers, Eugene F., Jr. *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002.