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**At the crossroads of sexuality and spirituality:  
The sanctification of sex by college students**

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Manuscript submitted on October 23, 2002

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## Abstract

Consistent with embodiment/incarnational theological perspectives on sexuality, this study applies the construct of sanctification to college students' sexual behavior and satisfaction. One hundred and fifty-one college students from a mid-western university completed measures on the extent to which they viewed sexual intercourse in loving, non-marital relationships as a manifestation of God (e.g., God is present in sexual intercourse between two partners who love each other) and as characterized by sacred qualities (e.g., holy, blessed, sacred). A sub-sample of 65 participants completed a parallel set of sanctification measures regarding their views of sexual intercourse in their current loving relationships. As expected, greater levels of both forms of the sanctification of sexual intercourse were related to greater sexual satisfaction in the sub-group. Contrary to expectations and regardless of dating history, the more that the participants in the entire sample perceived sexual intercourse in loving relationships as having sacred characteristics, the more likely they were to engage in sexual behavior. This included a greater lifetime likelihood of sexual intercourse, greater current frequency of sexual activity, greater number of lifetime partners, and greater variety of non-intercourse sexual activities (e.g., oral sex). Finally, consistent with prior research, greater general religiousness (e.g., frequency of attendance at religious services, self-rated religiousness) related to lower levels of sexual behavior. Overall, these results suggest that sanctification is a unique and useful way to examine the connection between sex and spirituality.

### At the crossroads of sexuality and spirituality: The sanctification of sex by college students

Attitudes about the relationship between sexuality and spirituality have changed as beliefs, cultures, and religious institutions have shifted during the past century. Consistent with proponents of theological dualism (e.g., "the soul is good, the body is evil" Davidson & Moore, 1994, p. 179), social scientists have focused on religion as a constraining force on premarital sexuality. As will be seen, such an emphasis seems justified by current research, which relies heavily on brief, global markers of religiousness. Alternately, the theological perspective of embodiment frames sexuality in positive terms (e.g., the body and its functions are from God and are good; Verhey, 1995). Within this perspective, an integration of spirituality and sexuality could enhance personal and sexual well-being (e.g., "sex can be healing and joyful...it can lead to personal growth... it is a way of knowing God, above all it is good" Furlong, 1994, p. 263). In this study, we look more closely at the intersection of religion and sexuality by applying the theory of sanctification to sex in premarital relationships. We examine links of both global religiousness and the sanctification of sex with college students' premarital sexual behavior and satisfaction.

#### Theological dualism and related empirical evidence

From a dualistic theological framework, the body is inferior to the Spirit; sexuality, then, becomes a bodily impulse that requires appropriate control and restraint. Langston (1973) declared, "it is commonly assumed that religion generally induces guilt and reinforces behavioral restraint. This seems particularly true in relation to sex, with most religions espousing the merits of premarital chastity." Davidson, Darling, and Norton (1995) corroborated this perspective: "our societal views about sexuality continue to be dominated by the religious view that sexual desires

are to be restrained and sexual pleasures to be avoided.” This traditional notion suggests that religiousness inhibits the expression of sexuality, particularly within premarital relationships.

In terms of empirical evidence, most of the 42 studies we located found that greater religiousness is tied to less premarital sexuality, with only 6 studies having null results (see Murray, 2000 for a detailed review). Specifically, greater religious attendance has been tied to less frequent premarital sexual activity across diverse cultures (e.g., Bainbridge, 1992; Bell & Chaskes, 1970; Davidson et al., 1995, Thomas, 1975; See Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001 for a review). In addition, in numerous cross-sectional studies, an increased level of self-reported religiosity and devoutness were related to higher rates of premarital abstinence, fewer lifetime partners, and less frequent intercourse (e.g., Alzate, 1978, Mahoney, 1980; Nicholas & Durrheim, 1995; Thornton & Camburn, 1989 ). Two longitudinal studies have confirmed that general religiousness inhibits sexual activity. Specifically, Paul, Fitzjohn, Eberhart-Philips, Herbison, and Dickson (2000) followed 935 participants in New Zealand from ages 3 to 21. Religious activity at age 11 predicted sexual abstinence at age 21. The persistence of religiousness was critical for sexual abstinence; those who were religiously involved at both age 11 and age 21 were four times more likely to be sexually abstinent than those with little or no involvement at either age. Schultz and colleagues (1977) followed 2,122 college students, demonstrating that conventional religious values in pre-freshman year predicted a lower incidence of premarital intercourse in respondents’ senior year of college.

In sum, most prior research has found that greater general religiousness is linked to less premarital sexual behavior. However, prior research is limited by heavy reliance on global, short indices of religiousness that are removed from the context of sexuality. In other words, prior

research in this area has predominately relied on a handful of items that assessed church attendance, conservatism, religious affiliation, and self-rated level and importance of religiousness. While useful, such indices do not directly examine the intersection of religion and sexuality because they fail to assess specific religious beliefs about individuals' sexual experience.

Embodiment theology: An alternate theological view of human sexuality

In contrast to theological dualism that emphasizes inherent conflicts between the soul and sexuality, other theological perspectives highlight the complimentary nature of these realms. Helminiak (1996) suggested, "...the contemporary concern is to retrieve an appreciation for the beauty and value of sex and to explain how sexuality and spirituality complement each other." Similarly, Nelson (1987) described the desire to "reunite sexuality with the experience of the sacred." Such sentiments span diverse religious traditions. For example, within Islamic thought, sexuality represents an imperative, fundamental life force, with the potential for spiritual insights (Hoffman, 1995). Within some Hindu and Buddhist traditions, Tantra emphasizes sexual passion as a source of spiritual energy and a way to experience transcendence (Carmody, 1979; Puttick, 1997). Many earth based spiritualities also contend that sexuality and the body are sacred (Puttick, 1997; Starhawk, 1989). Finally, some themes within Judeo-Christian traditions decry a split between body and soul, instead proposing that sex can be a spiritual event, one that connects individuals with the Divine (Fox, 1992; Plaskow, 1995). The Song of Songs has historically held great significance for both Jewish and Christian traditions and has often been interpreted as the loving, mutual relationship of the Lord and His people, Israel (Carr, 1998). Carr (1998) concluded that the Song also helps to "envision a sexuality that is holy and a spirituality that

courses throughout the whole person - that is, the whole embodied person.” By comparing the sexual relationship of bride and bridegroom<sup>1</sup> to the relationship between the holy covenant of the Lord and His chosen people, sexual intercourse becomes a sacred covenant within Judeo-Christian traditions. MacKnee elaborates this theme (1997) declaring, “For too long the Christian church has depreciated sexuality as something anti-spiritual. Since humans were created with both spiritual and sexual dimensions, it is likely that integrating the two facets will reveal more of the mystery of being ‘fully human’ or ‘whole.’” In short, many religious traditions have framed sexual intercourse as a sacred aspect of life. To date, however, virtually no empirical research has directly assessed these kinds of beliefs.

### Sanctification of sex

The current study was designed to examine the sanctification of sexuality, as one way that embodiment theological perspectives may apply to the sexual realm. Sanctification has been previously defined as perceiving an aspect of life as having spiritual character and significance (Mahoney, et al. 1999; Pargament & Mahoney, this issue). Individuals may sanctify objects in nontheistic or theistic ways. In the former case, people may ascribe sacred qualities (e.g., holy, blessed, sacred) to an aspect of life, such as sexuality. In the latter case, people may view sexuality as being a manifestation of God and their faith life (e.g., God is present in sexual intercourse between my partner and I). Recent studies have found that greater sanctification of various aspects of life, such personal strivings (Mahoney et al., this issue), marriage (Mahoney et al., 1999), parenting (Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2000), one's physical body (Mahoney et al., this volume), and the environment (Tarakeshwar, Swank, Paragment, & Mahoney, 2001) is related to greater investment in and/or well-being derived from these domains (See Pargament &

Mahoney, this volume, for further review).

### The goals of the current study

Few researchers have examined whether people directly view sexual intercourse in spiritual terms. To fill this gap, one major goal was to assess whether college students sanctify sexual intercourse by viewing it as a direct manifestation of God (e.g., “God is present in the sexual union between two loving partners”), as well as by ascribing sacred qualities to this sexual experience (e.g., “holy,” “blessed,” “spiritual”). As noted previously, most researchers have focused on assessing “global” measures of religiousness (e.g., church attendance, self-rated religiousness, Christian conservatism) in attempts to uncover the role of religion in an individual’s sexual experience. In contrast, we directly assessed beliefs about connections between religion and sexuality.

Another major goal of this study was to examine how the sanctification of sex relates to college students’ premarital sexual functioning. Consistent with prior theory and empirical research on sanctification in other aspects of life (Pargament & Mahoney, this issue), one set of hypotheses centered on the idea that the sanctification of sex would be related to greater investment in the preservation and protection of sexuality. Thus, participants who sanctified sex were expected to engage in lower levels of sexual behavior. More specifically, belief in the sanctity of sexual intercourse in a loving relationship was expected to be associated with less premarital sexual behavior, lower incidence of premarital sexual intercourse, fewer lifetime partners, and lower current frequency of intercourse. Another set of hypotheses focused on how people derive greater satisfaction and well-being from the experience of what is sacred to them (Pargament & Mahoney, this issue). Thus, we predicted that greater sanctification of sex would



be related to greater sexual satisfaction for those who were involved in loving sexual relationships.

Finally, as mentioned, prior research has consistently found that traditional, global indices of religiousness (i.e., frequency of church attendance and prayer, self-rated religiousness and spirituality) are related to sexual functioning. Because beliefs about the sanctification of sex are more closely connected with sexual functioning, we expected our measures to account for unique variances in sexual functioning after controlling for global religiousness. In addition, dating status, a commonly used indicator of sexual “opportunity” and level of commitment, has been consistently linked with sexual activity (Davidson & Leslie, 1977; DeLamater, 1981; Herold & Goodwin, 1981; Herold & Way, 1983; Schultz et al., 1977). We expected that any results regarding sexual functioning would not be solely attributable to sexual opportunity or relationship status. Thus, we predicted that sanctification would account for unique variance above both global religiousness and sexual opportunity.

## Method

### *Participants*

One hundred and fifty one (67% female) undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology classes volunteered for this study in exchange for class credit. Respondents were primarily Caucasian (92%) with a mean age of 19 (SD = .88). Forty percent reported a Protestant religious affiliation, 40% reported Roman Catholic, 2% reported Jewish, 10% reported “other” affiliation, and 9% reported no religious affiliation. The majority of the sample (70%) had engaged in sexual intercourse. Engaged, married, gay, and lesbian individuals were not included in the analyses due to their small numbers.

*Measures**Sanctification of sexual intercourse.*

We adapted two scales from Mahoney et al. (1999) to measure both theistic and non-theistic sanctification of sexual intercourse. All of the participants (N = 151) completed both indices with respect to their beliefs about the sanctification of sexual intercourse for “two people in a loving relationship who are not married.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, a subsample of participants (N = 65) who were currently having sexual intercourse in a perceived loving relationship completed both indices of sanctification a second time with respect to their own sexual relationship.

*Manifestation of God in Sexual Intercourse.* All participants completed an eight-item Manifestation of God in Sexual Intercourse scale to assess the belief in sexual intercourse between two unmarried loving partners as an expression or manifestation of God. Items were summed to create a total score ( $\alpha = .90$ ). On a 5-point Likert scale with the anchor points of “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5), participants indicated the degree to which they agreed with the following eight questions: In a loving relationship, sexual intercourse is connected to God's will; in a loving relationship, sexual intercourse provides spiritual meaning; God is present in sexual intercourse between two partners who love each other; The mystery of God's love is apparent in sexual intercourse between two people who love each other; sexual intercourse between two loving partners is an expression of spirituality or religiousness; Sexual intercourse between loving partners is symbolic of God and what I believe about God; God is part of the sexual union between two loving partners; Loving partners experience God through sexual intercourse. To avoid confounding outcomes with this sanctification of sexual intercourse variable, the items were neutral about direction of influence of God on the sexual functioning

(i.e., none of the items asked if God helped or hindered sexuality in the context of a loving relationship).

Participants who identified themselves as involved in a loving relationship that involved sexual intercourse (penis in vagina) completed another, slightly modified version of the Manifestation of God in Sexual Intercourse scale. The wording of the items were changed to apply directly to the participant's current relationship (e.g., In my loving relationship, sexual intercourse is connected to God's will). Total scores were also generated ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

*Sacred Qualities of Sexual Intercourse.* On a 10-item Sacred Qualities of Sexual Intercourse scale, participants rated their degree of belief in sexual intercourse as having qualities typically associated with divine, transcendent phenomenon. Participants used a 7-point Likert scale with the anchor points of “does not describe at all” (1) to “very closely describes” (7) to indicate the degree to which the following ten words applied to sexual intercourse in a loving relationship: “sacred,” “holy,” “heavenly,” “blessed,” “spiritual,” “awesome,” “mysterious,” “religious,” “inspiring,” and “miraculous.” The items on this non-theistically oriented scale made no direct mention of a divine “Being” (e.g., God, Higher Power). A Sacred Qualities of Sexual Intercourse score was obtained by summing the ten items ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

Again, participants who identified themselves in current sexually active relationships (penis in vagina) completed another, slightly modified version of the Sacred Qualities in Sexual Intercourse. Total scores were also generated ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

*Global Index of General Religiousness.*

Four items were used to assess general levels of religiousness including: frequency of private prayer (rated on a 9-point scale ranging from “Never” to “More than once a day”);

frequency of attendance at religious services (rated on a 9-point scale ranging from “Never” to “More than once a week”); self-rated religiousness (rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all religious” to “very religious”); and self-rated spirituality (rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all spiritual” to “very spiritual”). These four items have been previously used in religion and psychology research (General Social Survey, NORC, 1998). The items were summed to create a composite, global index of general religiousness ( $\alpha = .69$ ).

*Biblical Literalism.* Biblical literalism was assessed with a single-forced choice item about the degree to which a participant holds literal beliefs about the Bible; this item is widely used in sociological research on religion (Boyd, 1999; Tarakeshwar et al., 2001).

*Sexual behavior history.*

Three items from past research on sexuality were employed to assess participants' prior sexual activity: the age at which the participant first engaged in sexual intercourse (penis in vagina), how frequently the participant had engaged in sexual intercourse in the last month (actual number), and the number of lifetime partners with whom the participant had had sexual intercourse (actual number). These items were obtained from Mahoney (1980).

In addition, other types of prior sexual behavior were assessed with eight items (e.g., “kissing/making out,” “anal intercourse”). These items were taken from an unpublished research study on sexual behavior that did not report psychometric properties of the measures (Basi, 1999). These eight items were summed to form a “summary of sexual behavior” scale, reflecting an individual's experience with other sexual behaviors besides penile/vaginal intercourse ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

Finally, participants who had engaged in sexual intercourse reported their current

contraceptive usage (Tanfer and Horn, 1985). However, inferential data analyses using this variable were precluded by the very high self-reported base rate (95%) of use of contraceptives (e.g., oral contraceptives, condoms) in this subsample.

*Affective reactions to sexual intercourse.* A 12-item scale that was adapted from Weis (1983) was used to assess participants' affective reactions to sexual intercourse. This included items about feelings of guilt, tension, exploitation, nervousness, sadness, fear, embarrassment, love, excitement, pleasure, romance, and satisfaction. Items were summed to obtain a total score for affective reactions to intercourse ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

*Demographic information.*

Demographic information included items on gender, age, ethnicity, and education level. In addition, information about both dating history (i.e., “How would you categorize the most serious romantic relationship that you have ever been involved in”) and current dating status (i.e., “What is your current romantic relationship status?”) were obtained.

## RESULTS

*Preliminary data analyses*

Because no gender differences on any variables were found across the total sample, all subsequent analyses were conducted with males and females combined.

Descriptive data analyses were conducted on general level of religiousness and sexual history. Based on the composite index of global general religiousness, the total sample was moderately religious ( $M = 15.4$ ,  $SD = 4.8$ ) and yielded a normal distribution of these scores. Based on item-level data, the students reported attending religious services about once a month ( $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ ) and praying privately once a week ( $M = 5.3$ ,  $SD = 2.4$ ). In addition, the

students rated themselves as moderately religious ( $M = 2.6$ ,  $SD = .7$ ), moderately spiritual ( $M = 2.8$ ,  $SD = .8$ ), and moderately conservative in their beliefs about the Bible ( $M = 2.0$ ,  $SD = .57$ ). Regarding sexual behavior history, 70% of the participants had engaged in sexual intercourse. Over 85% had engaged in kissing, breast play, and genital play. Over 70% of the sample had engaged in oral sex and 12.6% of the sample had engaged in anal intercourse. Overall, the mean value on the summary of sexual behavior history variable was 6.2 ( $SD = 1.9$ ). The mean age of first intercourse was 16.6 ( $SD = 1.6$ ) and participants reported an average of 2.4 lifetime partners ( $SD = 3.9$ ). For those participants who had engaged in sexual intercourse, the average frequency within the past month was 2.9 ( $SD = 5.8$ ). For those in loving relationships, the average frequency was 6.13 ( $SD = 7.54$ ). Participants in sexually active relationships reported generally positive feelings about their experience of intercourse ( $M = 69.66$ ,  $SD = 12.83$ ). In addition, 95% reported using condoms, oral contraceptives, or a combination of these when having intercourse; this high base rate of protective behavior precluded further data analyses with this variable.

Preliminary data analyses were conducted to examine links between the two sanctification measures and indices of general religiousness. For the total sample, neither type of sanctification of sexual intercourse in loving relationships was significantly linked to the composite general religiousness variable or to the four variables that made up this index. However, greater endorsement of literalist views of the Bible was related to lower levels of Sacred Qualities of Sexual Intercourse ( $r = -.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

For the subsample of participants who reported on their current sexually active, loving relationships, higher levels of the Manifestation of God in Sexual Intercourse were significantly

related to higher levels of global religiousness ( $r = .29, p < .05$ ). In addition, higher levels of Manifestation of God in Sexual Intercourse were related to higher ratings on the single items of self-reported spirituality ( $r = .33, p < .01$ ) and more frequent private prayer ( $r = .28, p < .05$ ). Higher levels of Sacred Qualities of Sexual Intercourse were also related to greater self-reported spirituality ( $r = .29, p < .05$ ). No other significant associations emerged between the two sanctification measures and indices of general religiousness or Biblical literalism. Overall, these results suggest that sanctification does not strongly or consistently covary with traditional religiousness at a group level.

#### *Descriptive Findings on the Sanctification of Sexual Intercourse*

One goal of this study was to determine whether college students believe in the sanctity of sexual intercourse in loving relationships. The mean rating of the belief in the Manifestation of God in Sexual Intercourse for two people in a loving relationship was 27.0 ( $SD = 10.8$ ; range 8-56). These scores were skewed somewhat downward, indicating that many participants' responses to the questions fell slightly below the "neutral" value. The mean rating of the Sacred Qualities of Sexual Intercourse in loving relationships was 40.0 ( $SD = 12.5$ ; range 10-70) and the scores reflected a fairly normal distribution. For those reporting on the sanctification of intercourse in their current relationships, the mean rating of the Manifestation of God in Sexual Intercourse was 22.5 ( $SD = 10.9$ ; range 8-56) and the mean rating of the Sacred Qualities of Sexual Intercourse was 43.6 ( $SD = 14.2$ ; range 10-70). Overall, although respondents tended to agree that sexual intercourse in their current relationships was sacred, they generally did not perceive it to be a manifestation of God.

The two sanctification scales (Sacred Qualities and Manifestation of God) demonstrated

moderate positive associations with each other with  $r = .51$  ( $p < .01$ ) for beliefs about loving relationships and  $r = .57$  ( $p < .01$ ) for current sexual relationships. This demonstrates overlap but not complete redundancy between the two scales.

*Sanctification of sexual intercourse, general religiousness, and sexual behavior history*

To address the hypotheses that sanctification would be related to lower levels of sexual behavior, Pearson correlations were calculated. Table 1 displays these results along with associations with traditional indices of religiousness. Results were contrary to the expectation that greater sanctification would signify more protective behavior of sexuality. Specifically, in the total sample, greater perceived sacred qualities in sexual intercourse in loving relationships was related to a greater likelihood of ever engaging in sexual intercourse ( $r = .32$ ,  $p < .01$ ), greater total engagement in other sexual behaviors besides intercourse ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < .01$ ), greater current frequency of sexual intercourse ( $r = .21$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and more lifetime partners ( $r = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This type of sanctification was unrelated to the age of first intercourse in the total sample. The other type of sanctification, the Manifestation of God in Sexual Intercourse, was not significantly related to any of the sexual behavior variables.

In contrast to the results with sanctification and consistent with prior research, significant correlations emerged between traditional indices of greater global religiousness and lower engagement in sexual intercourse ( $r = -.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ), lower total engagement in other sexual behaviors ( $r = -.25$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and number of lifetime partners ( $r = -.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to address the hypothesis that the sanctification of sexual intercourse would predict unique variances in the prediction of sexual behavior. A preliminary step involved examining the correlations between dating history and



sexual behavior, given “opportunity” as a major reason for engaging in sexual intercourse.

Dating history (never dated, dated more than one person, or steady and exclusive relationship with one person) was related to greater sexual behavior among the total sample ( $r$ 's = .42 - .56,  $p < .01$ ). In addition, current dating status (not dating, dating more than one person, or steady and exclusive relationship with one person) was related to current frequency of intercourse ( $r = .44$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, dating history was controlled for in the hierarchical regression analyses for sexual history (i.e., sexual behavior history, ever had intercourse, number of lifetime partners). For current frequency of sexual intercourse, current dating status was controlled for.

Separate regression analyses were conducted on each of the sexual behavior variables (engagement in intercourse, total engagement in other sexual activities, age of first intercourse, current frequency, and number of lifetime partners). Table 2 reveals these results. After controlling for relationship history and global religiousness, the perceived sacred qualities of sexual intercourse in loving relationships accounted for unique variance in the engagement in sexual intercourse, total engagement in other sexual activities, and number of lifetime partners. After controlling for current relationship status and global religiousness, the perceived sacred qualities of sexual intercourse accounted for unique variance in the frequency of sexual intercourse within the previous month. Perceived sacredness did not account for unique variance in the age of first intercourse. In summary, belief in the sanctification of sexual intercourse in loving relationships accounted for small but significant amounts of unique variance in many of the sexual behavior variables over and above the effects of dating history, current dating status, and global religiousness.

*Sanctification of sexual intercourse, general religiousness, and affective reactions to sex*

To address the hypotheses that greater sanctification of sexual intercourse would be related to greater sexual satisfaction, Pearson correlations were calculated. For students having intercourse in a loving relationship, greater sacred qualities of sexual intercourse in their current relationship was strongly related to more positive affective reactions about sexual intercourse ( $r = .55, p < .01$ ). In addition, beliefs that God was manifested in sexual intercourse was related to more positive feelings about sexual intercourse ( $r = .35, p < .01$ ). Thus, higher scores on both measures of sanctification for people currently involved in sexually active relationships were associated with more pleasure, love, romance, satisfaction, and excitement, and less guilt, exploitation, tension, nervousness, fear, sadness, and embarrassment. In addition, the perceived sacred qualities of sex was related to an increased frequency of intercourse ( $r = .24, p < .05$ ). There were no significant associations between global religiousness and either current frequency of sexual intercourse or feelings about intercourse.

## Discussion

Consistent with prior empirical research on sanctification in non-sexual aspects of life, we found that college students who perceived sexual intercourse as sacred experienced greater satisfaction with sexual intercourse in their current loving relationships. Likewise, greater beliefs that God was a part of sexual intercourse in one's own loving relationship was related to more positive affective reactions about sexual intercourse. Contrary to expectations and regardless of relationship status, the more that the total sample of college students perceived sexual intercourse in loving relationships as having sacred characteristics, the more likely they were to have ever had sexual intercourse. In addition, higher ratings of sacred qualities of sexual intercourse were related to a greater range and frequency of prior sexual activity, greater current frequency of sexual activity, and greater number of lifetime partners. Moreover, perceiving sexual activity as having sacred qualities contributed to greater sexual behavior, even after taking into account participants' dating history and general religiousness. Bivariate correlations between indices of general religiousness and sexual behavior were consistent with prior research suggesting that religiousness inhibits premarital sexuality. Namely, greater general religiousness (i.e., church attendance, frequency of personal prayer, self-report religiousness and spirituality) was linked to lower frequency of sexual activity across the entire sample.

At first glance, the results of this study are counter-intuitive. Namely, why would greater sanctification, particularly greater sacred qualities, be related to more frequent sexual activity, whereas greater general religiousness is related to less frequent sexual activity? One clue to understanding these results is the fact that neither type of sanctification of sexual intercourse was significantly linked to the composite general religiousness variable. This may reflect competing

forces in theological views that underlie the two broad domains of sexuality and religion. That is, some devoutly religious people may hold dualistic views about sexuality, which would correspond to negative correlations between sanctification of sexual intercourse and general religiousness. Such speculation is consistent with the fact that greater endorsement of literalist beliefs about the Bible was weakly, but significantly, correlated with lower levels of sacred qualities of sexual intercourse. In contrast, other highly religious, but less theologically conservative, individuals may hold embodiment views of sexuality, which would correspond to positive correlations between general religiousness and sanctification of sexual intercourse. Thus, across the entire sample, null associations would emerge between general religiousness and the sanctification of sexual intercourse. Therefore, rather than concluding that general religiousness and sanctification of sexual intercourse are inherently incompatible constructs, these results highlight the fact that a more fine-grained assessment of specific religious beliefs about sexuality, such as sanctification of sexual intercourse, may reveal surprising implications for sexual functioning.

A careful consideration of embodiment/incarnational theological views about sexuality reveals additional insights about the underlying reasons for the links between greater sanctification of sexual intercourse and more frequent premarital sexual activity. Although previous interpretations of empirical findings on links between global indices of religiousness and premarital sexuality have been rooted in theological dualism (e.g., "the soul is good, the body is evil" Davidson & Moore, 1994), this view misses major themes emerging in contemporary, spiritually-oriented dialogues about sexuality. An overview of Nelson's (1987) discussion of the "three major stages" in the Western understanding of the connection between

religion and sexuality provides a relevant historical context within which to interpret this study's results, given that the participants lived in a Western culture and were predominantly affiliated with a Christian denomination (85%).

According to Nelson (1987), the first historical stage of the relationship between sexuality and religion in Western culture incorporated sexuality into religious myth and ritual. The second stage separated sexuality into two spheres: "...the sacred became increasingly transcendent while sexuality was demythologized and confined to a small part of the earthly order (procreation within institutionalized marriage)" (p. 187). The third period represents a paradigmatic shift from "sexual dualism," where spirit is superior and opposed to body, to "incarnational theology," where the emphasis is placed on the ".....Word made flesh-and in the Word still become flesh" (p. 188). Within Christianity, this theology focuses on the body as given and loved by God, as God loved his earthy Son; the body and its actions are gifts from God and may take on spiritual significance themselves. Thus, sexuality would be another way to experience the body as a gift from God or as part of a "natural" order in the universe. It could also become a way to experience God through the flesh. Nelson concluded by saying, "This cultural-religious revolution is still unfinished" (p. 190).

If this "third period" or "revolution" was apparent to participants during their childhood and adolescent development in the 1980s and 1990s, then perhaps these decades are beginning to bear their generational fruit. In short, the results of this study are consistent with this "third period" paradigmatic shift. In a predominantly Christian sample, it is possible that incarnational or embodiment theology has expanded to include sexual intercourse within the context of nonmarital loving relationships. Participants who perceive sex between two loving partners as

sacred or spiritual could espouse an incarnational theology and then engage in sexual behavior more often, as well as experience more satisfaction from it. One study with married couples suggests that these kinds of beliefs about sexuality are related to greater sexual activity within marriage (Young, Denny, Luquis, and Young, 1998). Specifically, Young and colleagues (1998) studied married adults from the general population of the United States and found that those who believed that God encouraged sex (e.g., sexuality is a gift from God and should be enjoyed) engaged more frequently in uninhibited sexual behavior (e.g., anal sex, masturbation). Similarly, in the current study, we found that college students involved in sexually active, loving relationships engaged in more frequent sexual intercourse as their perceptions of the sacredness of their sexual activity increased. In addition, across our entire sample, greater ratings of sacred qualities of sexual intercourse was related to more frequent current and prior sexual experiences.

Overall, the results support the notion that the sanctification of sexual intercourse, particularly sacred qualities of sexual intercourse, is a nontraditional religious variable. Church attendance, religious affiliation, and self-rated religiousness are typically used to assess general levels of religiousness. For the past few decades, researchers have used these types of crude, global measures of religiousness to examine links between sexuality and religion, and have demonstrated that higher religiousness is related to lower levels of sexual behavior. Consistent with these prior empirical findings, participants in this study who attended services more often, participated in prayer more often, and rated themselves as more religious and spiritual were less likely to have ever engaged in sexual intercourse, to have lower rates of various types of sexual activity, and a lower number of lifetime partners. As stated earlier, the current study extends the research in this area by including an integrated or “proximal” measure of beliefs that taps more

directly into theological assumptions consistent with an embodiment or incarnational view of sexuality. However, to gain a balanced and complete understanding of the impact of beliefs about sexuality rooted in dualistic theology, future research should develop more fine grained measures of specific beliefs reflecting a dualistic theological orientation about sexual behavior, particularly premarital sexuality. Thus, instead of assuming that people internalize a religious institution's presumed teachings about the sinfulness of premarital sexual intercourse, researchers could directly assess individuals' spiritual beliefs about premarital sexual intercourse. This study represents an initial attempt to obtain a more fine-grained picture of the intersection of religion and sex by focusing on the sanctification of sexual intercourse. The intriguing results clearly highlight the need for more research that delves directly into the intersection between sexuality and spirituality. This could be examined from both embodiment and dualistic theological points of view.

Regarding sexual satisfaction, the results of this study were consistent with expectations. Namely, participants involved in sexually active relationships reported higher levels of emotional gratification and satisfaction as their ratings for both types of sanctification increased. This has several implications for sexual well being. Although relatively little research has been conducted in the area of religion and sexual satisfaction, it appears that the sanctification of sex may be tied to reduced sexual dysfunction and increased sexual happiness. In addition, greater personal sexual satisfaction could lead to closer romantic relationships and higher levels of commitment, which could ultimately foster the decision to marry. Finally, because marital researchers have found a strong association between marital and sexual satisfaction for married couples (Young et al., 1998), sanctified sex could facilitate more personally fulfilling intimate relationships, as well

as a more fulfilling sex life.

Thus far, we have emphasized an embodiment theological view as an organizing conceptual framework to interpret the results of this study. However, the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance offers a non-theologically based, psychological theory to account for the results about the sanctification of sexual intercourse (Festinger, 1957). Festinger proposed that humans strive for consistency among opinions, attitudes, and behavior. When a person experiences “dissonance,” an incongruity between beliefs and behavior, this produces a drive to reduce such dissonance. In the context of this study, if a person had espoused traditional, dualistic beliefs about premarital sexual intercourse, but then engaged in sexual intercourse, dissonance could result. To reduce this experience of dissonance (to regain consistency or “consonance”), a person may change his/her beliefs about sexual intercourse. For example, a person could reason that “sex is really wonderful, I’m sure that God would want me to be happy” or “sex is spiritually okay because I am in love” after engaging in intercourse. Thus, a person could retrospectively decide that sex is sacred or connected to God. In sum, sanctification could be the result of the drive to reduce dissonance, instead of a perception that precedes the experience of intercourse.

As alluded to earlier, this study suggests that global indices of religiousness tap into a component of religiousness that inhibits sexual behavior. At the same time, the results point to another component of religion that can potentially disinhibit sexual behavior, despite messages by traditional religious establishments that prohibit sexual intercourse between unmarried couples. For some college students in loving relationships, sexual intercourse apparently can be a spiritual experience that encourages expression. Nevertheless, the sanctification of sexuality may



be accompanied by some risks, especially for unmarried college students where the bond between partners is not marked by the level of psychological or economic commitment associated with marriage. If unmarried adults sanctify sexuality, they may suffer greatly if the sacred sexual bond is lost for any reason. That is, people may experience relatively greater psychological and spiritual distress upon the termination of a relationship in which sanctified sexual intercourse took place, because of convictions that the sexual bond was characterized by sacred qualities and/or served as a connection with the Divine. Even stronger negative emotional responses could occur if one discovers that his or her partner knowingly violated the parameters of the loving relationship (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, in press). For example, people who have sanctified a sexual relationship with a partner could experience more depression, anger, and anxiety if the significant other engages in sexual relations outside the relationship than people who do not imbue the sexual relationship with spiritual significance. The desecration associated with the sexual betrayal of a sexually active, loving relationship could be emotionally and spiritually devastating (Mahoney et al., in press; Pargament & Mahoney, this issue).

Moreover, the sanctification of sexual intercourse, even if it occurs in the abstract by people who have never engaged in consensual sexual intercourse, could lead to more pronounced problems if any form of sexual violence occurs. Therefore, if sexuality is perceived as sacred and then desecrated through psychological coercion or explicit physical force, the repercussions could be greater than if the sexual act was not perceived as sacred. Overall, the spiritual meaning of sexuality should be considered by mental health professionals, ministers, and others who work with victims of violated bonds (e.g., extra-dyadic sexual relations) and with survivors of sexual

assaults, regardless of the context of the relationship.

Several limitations of this study deserve recognition. First, the results of the research are based on a correlational design. Although many theories were offered to explain the findings, longitudinal research models are needed to consider directional, causal links between constructs. For example, do beliefs about sanctification of sexual intercourse precede or follow sexual behavior, or do they bi-directionally influence each other? Second, the use of self-report questionnaires could have introduced bias in many ways. For example, participants may not have honestly reported their sexual behavior on self-report measures. On a broader scope, the sample of participants was limited to mostly freshman and sophomores at a midwestern university in the United States. Thus, the sample is restricted in age, ethnicity, and culture. It is important to consider the sanctification of sexuality across diverse religious groups and cultures. In addition, only heterosexual participants were analyzed. Although gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants were not excluded from the study, there were not enough of these participants to conduct statistical analysis. Therefore, it is unknown how the results of this study generalizes to individuals with different sexual orientations. Future research should examine the similarities and differences between the sanctification of sexuality across cultures, religion, and sexual orientations. Finally, sanctification is a new research area. Construct validity of the sanctification of sexual intercourse is limited to this study. It will be important to further differentiate the construct from other measures of religiousness and spirituality, as well as from measures about the importance of, and general positive attitudes toward, sexuality.

In conclusion, the results of this study open many new doors of research in religion, spirituality, and sexuality. The connection between these fascinating and complex human

endeavors has been an important area of thought and study for many decades. Sanctification offers a unique perspective in this ongoing area of thought, research, and experience. It adds new fuel to the ongoing theological debate about the role of the body in spiritual practice. From a dualistic theological view, sex has been denigrated as a hindrance and even as a demonic force that lures people away from spiritual enlightenment or their relationship with the Divine. However, the results of this study point to the powerful and distinct implications of an embodiment-oriented theological view. Sex and the sacred can not only coexist, but sexual union, in the context of love and consent, can be an avenue of spiritual expression and experience. We are now beginning to untangle the complex relationships between religion, spirituality, and sexual functioning.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Despite the use of the labels bride and bridegroom, many references throughout the Song indicate two unmarried individuals; see Carr, 1998 for discussion.

<sup>2</sup>Some research evidence suggests the importance of the type of relationship when considering appropriate level of sexual activity (e.g., Murstein & Holden, 1979). Due to the small percentage of individuals who perceive sex as completely appropriate outside of any sort of a relationship, loving relationship was added to capture these types of common relationships

Table 1.

*Bivariate correlations between global religiousness, sanctification, and sexual functioning in loving relationships*

	<u>Global religiousness</u>	<u>Biblical literalism</u>	<u>Manifestation of God in Sexual Intercourse</u>	<u>Sacred Qualities of Sexual Intercourse</u>
Total Sample (n = 151)				
<u>Sexual Behavior</u>				
Summary of sexual behavior history	-.25**	-.14	.11	.33**
Ever had intercourse	-.20**	-.09	.13	.32**
Age of first intercourse	.07	.05	-.14	-.16
Current frequency of intercourse	-.10	-.02	.08	.21*
Number of lifetime sexual partners	-.16*	.01	-.01	.23**
Subsample: Participants in sexually active, loving relationships (n = 65)				
<u>Sexual Functioning</u>				
Current frequency of intercourse	-.16	-.04	.15	.24*
Affective reactions to sexual intercourse	.07	.00	.35**	.55**

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analyses: Contribution of the Sacred Qualities of Sex Beyond Dating History and General Religiousness (total sample).

Predictor variables	Sexual Behavior History		Ever Had Sexual Intercourse		Frequency of Sexual Intercourse		Lifetime partners	
	Beta	R <sup>2</sup> Change	Beta	R <sup>2</sup> Change	Beta	R <sup>2</sup> Change	Beta	R <sup>2</sup> change
Step 1								
Dating History	.555***	.308***	.417***	.174***	.414***	.172***	.093	.009
Step 2								
General Religiousness	-.198**	.065***	-.153*	.061**	-.118	.041*	-.134	.060*
Sacred Qualities of Sexual Intercourse	.148*		.189*		.155*		.202*	
Total Model		.372***		.235**		.213*		.069*

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  and \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .