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**A CHRISTIAN
GUIDE TO
LIBERATING DESIRE,
SEX, PARTNERSHIP,
WORK, AND
REPRODUCTION**

Thia Cooper



A Christian Guide to Liberating Desire,
Sex, Partnership, Work, and Reproduction

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Thia Cooper
Department of Religion
Gustavus Adolphus College
Saint Peter, Minnesota, USA

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To Raoul

PREFACE

As a liberation theologian and Professor of Religion and Latin American Studies, I did not expect to write about sex. Yet, here I am. As a liberationist, I was initially focused on the various forms of poverty I saw around the world. I wanted to educate students on these forms of poverty and how religion could help us to work toward a more just world.

I began teaching at Gustavus Adolphus College, a small liberal arts college in Minnesota. Here, I quickly found myself flummoxed by MANY conversations with students about sex and relationships. While I had avoided all things personal with my college professors, these students had lots of questions and wanted help. I found myself in several conversations, including the following:

I'm pregnant. Should I get an abortion?
I got an abortion but it didn't work.
I think I was raped last night.
I was raped last night, but it was my fault.
I'm afraid I may have raped my girlfriend.
I don't like my boyfriend but he doesn't make me have sex.
I think I'm bi-sexual.
I had sex with him because he paid for our weekend away.

Now, I don't know about you but I was NOT trained to coherently converse about any of these things. Mainly, I listened. And I thought about what I had learned growing up. And I read, A LOT. I also started teaching a class called Sex, Race, Money, God. As I read and taught,

I found many intersections between race, class, sex, and sexuality. I found many articles I could share with my students but I could not find a text that overtly explored how to have good sex from a Christian perspective. I could also not find a text that had a coherent framework, which applied to desire, sex, partnership, and reproduction. And even the few that discussed two or three of these avoided sex work like the plague.

So, here we are. I hope that this book helps you begin to think about how to have just sexual relationships.

I am so grateful to my students for sharing their experiences with me. Between the great students in my classes and those I lived with for three years as Head Resident of the International Center on campus, I learned how to navigate difficult conversations, laughing and crying, usually at the same time. I am also grateful to my colleagues at Gustavus, many of whom read bits and pieces of this work and, in particular, encouraged me to keep going every time I freaked out about writing a book about sex. I am grateful for the wonderful sexual experiences I have had and for some of the less wonderful experiences, as I learned how to have good sex from those as well. Without naming names, several people have taught me about friendship and sex and this book could not have been written without them. Last but not least, I want to thank my mother for her love and support. She got married at age 70 and promptly paid me back for all my openness about sex in my teenage years by sharing way too much about her new love life.

Saint Peter, MN, USA

Thia Cooper

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Introduction: Liberating Sex

Abstract Each time we have sex, God is present. Sex can be a way to know God. This introduction articulates how liberation theology and its method can help to rethink the Christian tradition's denigration of sex and desire. Beginning with the current situation around sex, in particular, an understanding of the body, power, and violence, the chapter explains how we can work with the Bible, Christian tradition, and theology to liberate sex.

Keywords Desire • Sex • Partnership • Power • Violence

Why liberate sex? How is sex enslaved, unjust? Each time we have sex, God is present. Sex can be a way to know God. People often say it's "just sex." Well, let's unpack what just sex is. Those of us within the Christian tradition do not often discuss just sex. This book does. Liberating sex brings us closer to God. Students seem to think Christianity simply says "no sex before marriage." Instead, I want to urge us toward a positive sexual theology. How can sex lead us to justice?

I care about just sex because I believe we come to know God through knowing others. If our relationships with others are unhealthy, then we are not learning about the true God. Sex is one way people relate and sex is a place where God is present, even if, in the words of one of my students,

“I don’t like to think about God when I’m doing that.” Yes, it can be scary to figure out what our relationship with God looks like.

I’ll begin with the actual sexual practices of human beings. Predominant Christian theologies argue that sex should only occur between a man and a woman within the bounds of marriage. This argument excludes the majority of people having sex. Growing up, Christianity taught me not to discuss or have sex, the end. But if we don’t talk about what good sex looks like, then it is unsurprising we also have a hard time articulating what bad sex is. We need to uncover the theology underlying actual sexual practices. Then we need to make sex just. From within Christian theology, I ask how we can love God and love sex. The sexual landscape is constantly changing. If the boundaries of what defines “sex” were porous before, they barely exist now. Thus, this theology is of the bedroom, Skype, a massage parlor, any place we exist.

To have a just sexual relationship power must be shared, empowering the participants and the wider community. We are speaking of individual relationships and the very structures of society. We do so considering the humanity of each human being in the community.

Donna Freitas¹ wrote a wonderful and depressing book called *Sex and the Soul*. It provides evidence for the desperate need for holistic sex education. As we know, students separate religion from sex, unless evangelical; then it’s no sex or even kissing before marriage. The book details these facts.

Both Catholic and mainline Protestant ... students laughed out loud when asked what their faith tradition might have to say about these matters. ... They laughed because they see religious views about sexuality (at least what they know of them, which is typically not very much) as outdated and irrelevant. And they laughed because they were confused about the prospect of their faith having anything useful to say about these things. (Freitas, 196)

WHAT IS THEOLOGY AND HOW CAN IT HELP?

This book “does” theology, exploring how we can have good sex within Christianity. Theology can be defined as “faith seeking understanding.” Here, faith seeks to understand how we know God through our sexuality and sex lives. “Seeking” here must include action, not simply thinking or talking. We can say what we like about sex but our actions show our true

theology. In examining faith/theology, we often look to scripture and tradition along with our experience and “reason.” Helpful questions and analyses emerge from many theologies, particularly liberationist theologies: queer, feminist, womanist, black, economic, political, ecological, and so on. I’ll explain a few of these here.

Latin American liberation theology emerged in the 1960s within Catholic communities of poor people. These poor Christians began to articulate that God was on the side of the poor. From these communities emerged a theology that expanded across the globe. Liberation theology prioritizes the marginalized, people usually excluded from the conversation, and it prioritizes action. Most importantly, liberationists subject everything to suspicion, rethinking and reflecting on faith and action. In this book, I prioritize people most excluded from the conversation.

Liberation theologies argue that Christianity should free people to be full human beings. Our sexual theology needs liberation. Liberationists argue that we should work toward God’s kingdom, the new heaven and new earth where justice will rule. Liberation theology asks who should we partner with, can we sell and buy sex, who can have children, and so forth, and combines aspects of race, economics, politics, gender, sexuality, religion, and so on.

Feminist theology resists the marginalization of women, calling for equality in practices and structures. Rather than assuming theology is neutral, feminist theology realizes that patriarchy, which places men at the top of the power spectrum, has influenced theology. Feminist theology aims to rethink Christianity, rescuing it from patriarchal assumptions. Ecofeminist liberation theology resists the marginalization of the environment as well, articulating that all of nature is sacred. The environment affects us all, whether poor or rich, black or white, male, female, and everything in between.² Ecofeminist theology urges us to consider the inescapable fact that we are intertwined with our environment. Women are often the caretakers of children and are often the ones surviving in hostile and damaging environments. There are also womanist, Latina, and other theologies from women of color, excluded from the original feminist theologies, which tended to reflect the themes of white middle-class women.

Finally, sexual theology begins with the notion that we are sexual beings. This theology assumes sexuality is part of our lives. This is the newest strand of liberation theology and the emphasis of this book.

HOW WILL I TACKLE THIS TOPIC? (METHOD)

Traditionally, the areas influencing theology are divided into a quadrilateral: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.³ Scripture is the sacred text of any religious tradition. In this book, we use the Christian Bible. Tradition is the history of one's religion, theologians and ethicists, and religious doctrines or dogma (right rules). Reason is thinking rationally or academically; hence it includes academic subjects from psychology to economics. Experience is what we learn through our daily lives.

Liberation theology follows a slightly different method known as the hermeneutical (interpretive) circle. This circle blends action and reflection together in community. As a liberation theologian, I try to draw together threads of theology emerging from these communities. Its simplest form is "See-Judge-Act."

The first step in the circle is a process of self-awareness, called conscientization. It is becoming aware of our situation and how that situation sits in history and culture: See. We do this work in community; it relates to the concept of experience mentioned earlier. Differently though, it is not the experience of one person but a community together. Recognizing our own situation is the first step to analyzing and improving it. Why and how are we sexually impoverished?

The next step is to analyze the situation with all the academic tools at our disposal: Judge. We can analyze using the academic tools of economics, politics, sociology, race studies, sex and gender studies, and so on. This step is similar to "reason" described earlier.

The third step is to analyze the situation with all the theological tools at our disposal, while at the same time analyzing the theology itself: Judge. We can analyze our faiths, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and so forth, to find the underlying theologies of sex and sexuality. This piece is similar to aspects of text and tradition.

Finally, we act. We can assess what practice we should encourage, support, or choose. Action is absent from the quadrilateral but it is critical to liberation theology.

Here, two pieces are emphasized. First, I am not looking for the right rules (dogma). I am looking for better practices that will be reflected upon and lead to even better practices. Second, I begin by doubting all that has come before. Who said what? Why did they say it? For whose benefit? Then I turn to the experiences of people in the community.

I acknowledge this circle or spiral is messy. I try to separate out the pieces throughout this book simply to provide areas for further reflection. Working through the hermeneutical circle, we can assess our sexual poverty⁴ and redress it.

WHAT OTHER ACADEMIC SUBJECTS WILL I INCLUDE?

Liberation theologies encourage academic analysis of each situation. In particular, I consider global feminisms, intersectionality, and critical race theory. While feminism articulates how our society is patriarchal (male-dominated) and how society could shift toward equality for women, global feminism means thinking about women cannot be limited to white, US, middle-class women. An economically and socially just feminism recognizes that women are affected by injustice due to gender, economics, race, and so forth. With wealthier white men often making decisions, women are harmed and marginalized.

Often gender, race, and class are treated separately. However, such a separation is unhelpful as the overlaps nuance the discussion. Feminism needs to consider class, race, religion, and so forth because we do not exist in a vacuum. All is interconnected. We need to listen to the voices of a variety of women of color and poor women around the globe. People encounter both privilege and oppression, depending on their particular situations. One may be oppressed as a woman but privileged in her whiteness. One may be privileged in his wealth but oppressed due to his skin color. This is intersectionality. Privilege and oppression intersect in complicated ways that we will tease out as we address issues of sex.

With regard to race, critical race theory is important. As Europeans (whites) encountered people of different colors, “whites” tended to view “non-whites” as less than human. Hence, marriage between white and others was denigrated or banned, though people of color were often taken as sex slaves or mistresses by light-skinned men. Reproduction between the races was also frowned upon. During slavery, in the USA, for example, black slaves were to reproduce to provide further free labor for the masters. Yet, slaves could not marry. The male masters often had sex with the black slave women. After slavery ended, racism continued, as did the perceptions of black bodies as only for sex. Black women could be used by white men; black men were feared as it was assumed they would rape white women. This history lingers in the USA even today. Interracial marriage